

What is the formula for successful service for Christ? The answer is found in this parable.

SUCCESSFUL SERVICE

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An Exposition of the Miracle of the Miraculous
Draught of Fish (Luke 5:1-11)

OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST was a master in the use of simple object lessons. On two very important occasions He used the act of fishing, so common in the lives of His disciples, to teach vital spiritual lessons (Luke 5:1-11; John 21:1-11). This first instance was evidently the Lord's second call to His disciples, for although He had said before to them, "Follow Me" (Matt. 4:18f.), their response was only temporary, and they had returned to their fishing. Hence this second call, to teach them that successful service for Him is based on certain well-defined principles, was necessary to effect a definite turning-point in their lives.

As for other miracles, the Lake of Galilee was the scene of this one. Our Lord, unwearied in good works, was teaching the people on the shore, using one of the fishing boats as His pulpit. Opportunity, not personal convenience, motivated this ministry, for the people pressed upon Him to hear the Word of God. Bishop Ryle has wisely commented on this scene of hungry souls waiting to be fed from a fisherman's boat:

The servants of Christ should learn a lesson from their Master's conduct on this occasion. We are not to wait till every little difficulty or obstacle is removed, before we put our hand to the plough, or go forth to sow the seed of the word. Convenient buildings may often be wanting for assembling a com-

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pany of hearers. . . . What, then, are we to do? Shall we sit still and do nothing? God forbid! If we cannot do all we want, let us do what we can. Let us work with such tools as we have. While we are lingering and delaying souls are perishing. . . . Where we are and as we are, in season or out of season, by one means or by another, by tongue or by pen, by speaking or by writing, let us strive to be ever working for God. But let us never stand still.¹

In this case a miracle was not performed because there was human need or in response to an appeal for help. Primarily, our Lord wished to teach Peter, the disciples, and us the work we are to do, how to do it, and with what success it would be done. These are lessons in successful service.

1. Obedience to the Spoken Word

The first principle for successful living and service for Christ is that there must be absolute obedience to His spoken Word. Of course, we understand that to mean today the written Word of the Scriptures of truth.

A. The Reason for Obedience, (vss. 4, 5). We obey because Jesus Christ has spoken (cf. vs. 5). It is at His Word and on the basis of it that we launch out and let down the nets, and it is He who accomplishes the results. "The weakness of our believing and of our preaching lies in not taking Jesus altogether at His Word."² This is what does the job, not our attempt to meet men on their own philosophical grounds, or our use of any group's methods or programs.

In addition to this positive statement in the account, there are also a number of pitfalls which the servant of Christ must avoid in relation to his obedience.

First, what our friends think is not necessarily a safe guide. There were no doubt many fishermen in the crowd that day on the shore who were watching Peter to see if he were going to obey this man called Jesus. Public opinion or the pressure of even the best of friends must not interfere with obedience to His Word.

Second, our knowledge of the situation may not necessarily be valid. Christ asked Peter to do two things which were contrary to good fishing—launch out into the deep, and do it in the daytime. The Lord was asking much of a good fisherman, and Peter knew it. He was asking much.

¹ *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels, Luke, I, pp. 131-32.*

² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel*, p. 279.

Third, immediate circumstances may not always be assumed to indicate the path of obedience, for the disciples were asked to do what the circumstances of the preceding night of fruitless fishing would indicate as useless.

Fourth, we must not be governed in our service by being afraid (in the good sense) for our Lord's reputation. Perhaps Peter's words, recorded in verse 5, were an attempt to protect the Lord Jesus from embarrassment in front of the crowd. Likewise, contemporary disciples are sometimes afraid to launch out in faith for fear that the thing will not come to pass and the world will laugh at Him; and yet ultimately is not such fear simply fear that the world will laugh at us? How ludicrous is such thinking! We obey Him because He has spoken, in spite of what friends may think, or what knowledge may indicate, or what circumstances may dictate, or because of fear that causes us to hesitate.

B. The Results of Obedience, (vss. 6, 7). As soon as Peter obeyed, two things happened.

First, there was success, for so great was the catch of fish which they had been after all night that the nets began to tear. Certainly our Lord always gives generously at least in quality if not always in quantity.

Second, there was expansion, for Peter was obliged to call on others to help with the catch (vs. 7); and so it will always be—when the Lord's work is done at the Lord's direction, the Lord will prosper it. God give us grace to share the responsibility with others at such times (cf. Acts 11:25-26).

2. Obeisance to the Living Word

Obedience alone, indispensable as it is, breeds Pharisaic fundamentalism. For successful Christian service it must be coupled with obeisance to the living Lord. This second ingredient makes the difference between a Pharisee and a publican.

A. The Reason for Obeisance (vss. 8-10a). Obeisance results from a good look at one's self and at one's Lord. When a man looks at himself he will see, as Peter did, a sinful man.³ This is the safeguard from being proud of one's obe-

³The use of *aner* in verse 8 shows that the confession is individual, not general.

dience to the Word, for it is never enough to know and hold proper doctrine and proper methods; one must also know and cleave to the Lord of both. When a man looks at Jesus Christ he will see, as Peter did, a sovereign Lord whose very sovereignty not only compels obeisance and the confession of sin but also attracts the sinner to his Lord. This is one of the paradoxes and marvels of the grace of the sovereign Christ.

B. The Results of Obeisance (vss. 10b, 11). When a believer in Christ is willing to take the position described above in the presence of his Lord, inevitable results follow.

First will come serenity, for the Lord will always say: "Stop being afraid." How lacking this element is among Christian workers; yet the formula for obtaining it is simplicity itself.

Second, there will be real service; for He has promised that we shall catch men. No longer will the disciple be occupied only with mundane things, but he will serve in that which is closest to the heart of God, the winning of souls.

Third, there will be success in the service, for the word translated "catch" (vs. 10) means *catch alive*. Fishing for fish means killing them in the process, but fishing for men means life in every case. This is the genius of Christian service.

Fourth, obeisance results in separation (vs. 11), and separation involves a negative aspect (forsaking all) and a positive aspect (following Christ). For the disciples forsaking meant leaving their homes, their families, their boats and tackle, all that they loved to do; for them and for us following meant blessedness, reality, life, peace, hope.

Notice why they were willing to do this. On an earlier occasion (Matt. 4:19) they followed because of a call, and the results were not very permanent. On this occasion they followed because of a Person. Calls may come and their effects may come and go; but when one really sees the Lord Jesus in all of His majesty, forsaking and following are as automatic reflexes. This is the basis of genuine sanctification.

What is the formula for successful service? It is simplicity itself—obedience plus obeisance. God grant that we may be doers as well as hearers of His Word.