

FISHERS OF MEN.

– LUKE 5:1-11. – JAN. 31. –

Golden Text: – "If ye continue in my Word, then are ye my disciples indeed." – JOHN 8:31.

CAPERNAUM lay near the shore of the Sea of Galilee, a beautiful little lake of world-wide honor and distinction because of our Lord's association with it, and well stocked with fish, as we may judge from this lesson. It was to this lake shore near Capernaum that Jesus came after his rejection at Nazareth. He had a different reception here: the people pressed upon him to hear of the word of the Lord, and for convenience to himself and to them Jesus got into the fishing boat belonging to Simon Peter, that he might from the boat more effectually address the people, who doubtless sat or stood on the shore.

We are inclined to wonder frequently that more of our Lord's discourses have not been preserved for us in the Gospel accounts. What we have are fragmentary, the sermon on the Mount being the principal one. As for the other references to Jesus' preaching, they are merely brief extracts – his parables and dark sayings. As an illustration of the latter, note his declaration that he was the bread that came down from heaven, of which if a man eat he should never die. Many of those who heard said, This is a hard saying, and walked no more with him. Our chief instruction in the great doctrines of the Gospel – respecting the ransom, our justification through faith in the precious blood, our adoption, begetting, resurrection, and the difference between the First Resurrection and that of others subsequently, etc., – comes to us through the epistles of the apostles and through the record of their discourses as given in the book of Acts.

At first we would be inclined to wonder why this should be so, why we should not get our chief instruction on matters pertaining to the future life and godliness from the words of our Lord. But we

understand the matter clearly since we discern that it was necessary that our Lord should pay the ransom price before any of our race could be adopted by the Father and receive the spirit of adoption. This explains the whole situation; for without the spirit of adoption we could not understand spiritual things, and consequently the things of a heavenly character which Jesus declared were parables and dark sayings to those of his time who heard them; for instance, his discourse on the new birth to Nicodemus, who could not understand. Our Lord remarked in this connection the fact that he taught merely earthly things and not heavenly things, saying, "If I have told you earthly things and you understood not, how would you understand if I should tell you of heavenly things?" (John 3:12.) Seeing that his hearers were not prepared to understand the heavenly things, our Lord gave his attention chiefly to discourses on earthly things, and to parables and dark sayings, which the Spirit would subsequently make known to his faithful ones.

THE NATURAL MAN APPRECIATES NOT SPIRITUAL THINGS.

This gives us a larger view of our Lord's ministry: **[R3307 : page 26]** first, teaching the natural man such things as the natural man could understand; secondly, healing the natural man's ailments, and thus laying a broad foundation for the spiritual work which he would begin at Pentecost and carry out during this Gospel age through his representatives the apostles, and those who should believe on him through their word. Throughout this Gospel age the Lord himself has been the teacher of the Church, which is "his body" – "his brethren": he has been attending to every feature of our instruction, feeding us upon the Truth – "things new and old." He is still the instructor, and whatever we receive through the apostles is merely his message through them and not their own messages. And whoever now speaks in the Lord's name is authorized to speak merely as a representative and ambassador, who must refer for his authority back to the words of the Lord himself, or to the words of those whom he inspired or directed

in a plenary manner – the twelve apostles, Paul taking the place of Judas.

Our Lord had been probably a year engaged in preaching, first in Judea, and latterly in Galilee, at the time this lesson opens. He was evidently already acquainted with these fishermen mentioned in our lesson, Peter, Andrew, James and John. It was probably at an earlier interview that our Lord gave Simon his surname of Peter, as it occurs in this lesson. These fishermen had probably met with Jesus and heard his preaching on other occasions, and were his disciples in a general sense of the word – that is, followers of him, believers on him, advocates of his teachings. Now, however, the time had come for our Lord's selection of the twelve apostles who should be with him continually and see his miracles and hear his teachings and be witnesses of all things said and done: and they in turn might in due time serve as his special representatives and be able to give to us, and to all of his subsequent followers accurate and truthful records of the principal events of his ministry.

After preaching to the company on the shore from his seat in the boat, Jesus proposed to Simon and Andrew, the owners of the boat, that the boat be taken into deeper waters and the nets cast for fish; but Peter informed the Lord that this would be useless as the day was unfavorable, or for some reason the fish were not in that quarter of the lake at that time, for he and his companions had toiled all night and caught nothing. Nevertheless, to please the Lord, they did as he suggested. As they began to gather in the net they found it to be heavily laden with fish, more than their boat could hold. Their partners in the other boat were beckoned to, and gave a helping hand to save some of the fish. The lesson had its designed effect; Simon Peter at once fell on his **[R3308 : page 26]** knees before the Lord, recognizing that no ordinary human being could have produced such results under such circumstances.

THE LORD LOVES ZEAL AND ENERGY.

There is something very noble about Simon Peter: his impulsiveness by itself is an attractive trait. The zeal and energy with which he was disposed to take hold of any matter considered worthy of his attention is admirable. Indeed we know that Peter, James and John were the three whom the Lord specially loved of the twelve – the three who seemed to have the zeal, energy and vim which the Lord appreciates. They were practical illustrations of the admonition, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might." Peter's words to the Lord, "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man," represented his acknowledgment of the great difference between himself and the Master. He caught the true situation, that he was a sinful, imperfect man, while the one before him, the Master, was perfect and in full accord with the Father, and therefore permitted to be the dispenser of the Father's mercies.

Peter's real sentiment was probably the reverse of his expression. He meant, "O Lord, although I am a sinful man, permit me to be near thee, that I may be blessed by contact with thee." This was the proper attitude of heart and the real prayer, which Jesus answered in making him one of his chosen twelve.

The narrative breaks off suddenly and does not tell us whether it was the same hour or the next day that Peter, Andrew, James and John forsook their fishing business – their boats and nets – that they might be specially the companions of our Lord and ultimately his representatives, his apostles. We may reasonably suppose that the partnerships in this fishing business were family affairs, and that Peter left his boat and implements in the hands of brothers or sons or other partners or associates; and that likewise the sons of Zebedee left their paraphernalia in the hands of their father or others who had previously been interested with them in business. Indeed this thought is fully borne out by the fact that after our Lord's death, about two years later, these same men proposed returning to the fishing business, and

apparently had some interest still in the boats, nets, tackle, etc. It was on the last-mentioned occasion that Jesus again gave a great draft of fishes, and that Simon Peter was the first again to recognize that the power to perform such a miracle could belong to no other than the crucified but risen Lord, whom he then recognized as the one upon the shore.

CALLED TO A HIGHER VOCATION.

Our Lord's words to Peter were, "From henceforth thou shalt catch men." These words were applicable also to Peter's associates, and doubtless were applied to them later as an invitation that they should with Peter join the Lord as his disciples or apostles. The account in Mark 1:17 mentions Andrew the brother of Simon Peter, and his partner in business also, and gives the invitation in slightly different language, namely, "Come ye after me and I will make you to become fishers of men." Probably the Lord made use of both expressions, but in any event they are of similar import.

All of life's affairs will teach us lessons profitable throughout its future, if we will receive them. Ordinary affairs and business of every kind, in proportion as it is conducted along honest, proper and reasonable lines, will give valuable instruction and preparation for spiritual usefulness in the Lord's service, if they be properly received and wisely improved. Perhaps, however, there was something peculiarly helpful in the fishing business – something peculiarly like the great work in which the apostles were to engage the remainder of their lives. Our Lord intimates this in his call. Fishing requires energy, tact, proper bait, and that the fisherman keep himself out of sight. And these four things are requisites in the spiritual fishing in which the Lord privileges us to engage. Thus he admonished, "Be ye wise as serpents and harmless as doves." The Apostle Paul, **[R3308 : page 27]** speaking along this same line of the wisdom he used in presenting the Gospel tactfully, says, "Being crafty [wise] I took you with guile" – with bait. The Apostle took advantage of the natural tendencies and

inclinations of his hearers to present the Gospel in the most practical form without, however, shunning or refusing to declare one single feature of it. In this his course is a model for us. We are to remember that as fish are easily alarmed when they find that any one wishes to take them, so humanity is shy of being captured by anything – especially if they have the least suspicion that they may lose their liberties: and thus consecration appears to the world.

The apostles were not, as fishers for men, representing men or human institutions. They were not trying to get disciples into some sectarian bondage. They were fishers of men for the Lord and as the Lord's representatives; as though God did beseech men through them. Their mission was to catch men with the glorious hopes and prospects of the Gospel; to bring them into such relationship with the Lord that they would fully and gladly surrender their all to him. And this is the same course that is properly before the Lord's representatives to-day. We are to catch men for the Lord and for his service, not for our personal profit or gain, – not for sectarian upbuilding. We are not to give our own liberties to men, nor to seek to take away the liberties of others at the behest of men or sects. The message that goes forth from the true fishers of men whom the Lord commissions is nevertheless a message which implies a loss of liberty and a loss of life to those who are successfully caught. However, the fishing business does not fully illustrate the matter, because all who are of the Lord's catch must be willingly his, else they will not remain caught, but be cast forth: and their loss of personal liberty and life means a gain of glory, honor and eternal life.

Our Lord used this fishing business as the basis of one of his parables, saying that the Kingdom of heaven is like unto a net cast into the sea which after gathering fish of every kind will be finally brought to shore. That net undoubtedly represented this Gospel age, and a general catch of all classes of people, suitable and unsuitable for the Lord's purpose as respects the Kingdom. The bringing of the net to the shore properly represents the "harvest" time of this age – the reckoning

time, the time when this catch is concluded. The parable proceeds to say that the suitable fish were gathered into baskets and the unsuitable were cast away, – cast back into the sea. So the Gospel call, the Gospel net, the Gospel fishermen of this Gospel age are gathering out of the world of mankind a peculiar class of people suitable to the Lord's purposes in the Kingdom, and though others may get into it they are not desired and will relapse again to worldly conditions. The fishing of the next age will be different and on a much larger scale.

APOSTLESHIP MORE THAN DISCIPLESHIP.

There is a difference between apostleship and discipleship. There are but "twelve apostles of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:14), but the number of disciples is considerably larger. The word disciple signifies pupil or learner; and all who are now being called of the Lord, all who are now being caught as acceptable fish under the present arrangement are those who desire to be taught of the Lord and willingly respond to his teachings. Our Golden Text sets forth the conditions upon which we may be disciples, namely, that we not only accept the Lord but that we continue in his word – continue to be taught of him – continue to learn in the school of Christ. Before we enter his school we must learn that we are sinners by nature and that we need just the washing or the cleansing that he prescribes as necessary before we can enter his school or become his disciples. After we accept the word of counsel respecting the need of washing in the precious blood, and after by faith accomplishing this cleansing of sins, and after we have started as pupils, we find that there are various lessons to be learned, all necessary to our progress.

It is the Teacher who is to be the decider of what lessons we need, what experiences, what trials, what difficulties, what encouragements, what assistance are necessary to us. The promise is, that no good thing will he withhold. He will give the warnings, the corrections, the encouragements, the blessings and the promises, according as we need them and are in a condition to make profitable use of them. Not

everyone who starts to be a disciple will win the great prize as a graduate from the school of Christ into the Kingdom of glory and joint-heirship with the Master; but he who faithfully and patiently continues in discipleship – continues to learn the lessons which the great Master teaches, until he shall have finished his course, will surely receive his crown at the hands of the Lord.

