

- ***READ John 21:1-11*** Like many of you at the onset of this COVID-19 crisis, it didn't take long for social distancing within our homes to get old. Eating out, going to the movies, shopping, going to sporting events, and many other activities that would normally get us out of the house were no longer on the table, so people had to figure out what they could do outside of the house that didn't involve any of these activities. In speaking with some folks here, I found out that the Cagle's pond was a hotspot for catching some little panfish. I, myself, wasn't too super excited right off the bat because in all honesty...I was convinced that I was cursed when it came to fishing. For the previous ten years I had not caught a single fish though I had tried on a number of occasions.
- Yet, I was told that I would almost be guaranteed to catch fish, so I went to get some supplies I would need to fish, I loaded up the girls, and we went out to the Cagle's to enjoy God's wonderful creation while trying to keep some semblance of social distancing in place. Thankfully, it didn't take too long for me to catch a fish, and by the end of the time spent pond-side, I was not convinced that I was no longer cursed. Or at least I was willing to give some more fishing a try since catching fish at the Cagle's seemed like shooting fish in a barrel. Since that day, I have fished more than I did in the previous ten years and easily caught more fish than I have in my entire life. As with anyone who fishes even semi-regularly, there have been frustrations and learning experiences. There have been days when I have been skunked, days when I know I lost a big one, and then I have even broken my personal best bass in regards to weight a couple of times.
- As with many hobbies and activities, all it takes is that one taste of success to keep you coming back. Kinda like how a decent drive that stays in the fairway somehow is all I need to play golf every now and then. But what I really enjoy about fishing are the opportunity it provides for me to think without being distracted by a host of other things. When I get the chance to fish by myself, I am actually usually listening to a podcast. Often I listen to the podcast that Alan and I use to prepare for our Walking Through HIStory classes. I also enjoy listening to the Robertson's Unashamed podcast. And I also listen to any podcast or sermons that I use for preparation for my own teaching. Though fishing is somewhat my activity where I get to getaway and unwind, I do try to make use of the time as best I can.
- And it was during one of those days that I was listening to some spiritual teaching and the connection between Jesus and fishing hit me. I began thinking about all of the stories in the Gospels where fishing is mentioned. I thought about this story here in Luke concerning the miraculous catch of fish. I thought about the parable teaching of Jesus in **Matthew 13:47-50** where He uses fishing to describe the kingdom of heaven. I think about Peter being questioned as to whether or not Jesus would pay the temple tax. Jesus speaks to Peter about this and the story ends with Jesus telling him to go fish with hook and how the first fish he pulls in would have the coin that would pay the temple tax. (**Matthew 17:22-27**) I also think about the disciples fishing after the death of Jesus and how Jesus told them to cast in their nets after not catching anything, and they end up catching 153 fish, to be exact, which began to sink their boat. (**John 21:1-11**)
- However, I would feel confident in say that the most well known Gospel text concerning fishing would be found in Matthew & Mark's account of the story of Jesus. These texts are extremely similar, but reading from **Matthew 4:18-22** in the NASB we find, *"Now as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. Going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him."* I would say that most of us get the general gist of what Jesus is saying to His soon-to-be disciples, but I also believe that our understanding of what Jesus is getting across in this text might not be a full understanding based upon

our 21st century western eyes and understanding of what fishing constitutes in our day and culture. I want to take a few moments to talk about the need for us to make a habit of trying to read Scripture through 1st century near eastern eyes, how that applies to the subject of fishing, and then take a look at 1st century fishing and some implications Jesus wanted His disciples to get based upon His statement that they would now be fishers of men.

- I. **It is important for us to see 1st century fishing through 1st century eyes...not our 21st century western eyes.**
 - A. **There are a number of topics and issues of Scripture of which our understanding can be hindered when we don't look at these topics and issues through the proper lenses.**
 1. As I just mentioned a few moments ago, fishing was often used to illustrate teaching points because it was something that was so familiar to the people of Jesus's day. It was an easy object lesson for them to use to make spiritual connections. However, we must recognize that we no longer live in that time period or in that culture, and those things that made sense to them might no longer make as much sense to us because of our differing times and cultures. For example, Jesus's teaching in **Mark 2:18-22** about weddings, bridegrooms, fasting, cloths stretching, and wineskins bursting probably doesn't make too much sense to us initially because we don't understand those events and materials like they did.
 2. Therefore, we have to read and do research into how they conducted weddings and used cloths and wineskins. Our 21st century western eyes can hinder us from understanding various portions of Scripture if we don't seek to understand them in their own immediate and proper contexts. I don't believe that any of us try to do this purposefully, but it is simply how we will naturally approach Scripture. We will see things that are unspoken in Scripture and almost subconsciously we will fill in the gaps through our own understanding and modern view. Again, this isn't inherently nefarious, but it will hinder us from gaining the true point of a particular teaching in Scripture or even simply understanding a story to its fullest extent.
 - B. **Our understanding of fishing in the 21st century vastly differs from the way people fished in the 1st century in a number of ways.**
 1. Before we get to the fishing we are not so familiar with, let's think about the fishing we are familiar with. Unless you're a commercial fisherman, the fishing we are most familiar with is that which involves a rod, a reel with line attached to it, and a bait of some sort that is attached to it. Those are the basics, but just about all of it has a number of variations.
 2. Rods come in all different styles. There are spinning rods, bait casting rods, fly fishing rods, and some people even go old school and use a cane pole from time to time. Reels also come in various shapes and sizes. You can use a small spinning reel or a big spinning reel. There are bait casting reels and spin-caster reels. There are crappie reels and fly-fishing reels. Fishing line comes in three basic types. Monofilament, Fluorocarbon, & braid. And we certainly don't have time to dive into all of the different types of baits. There are soft plastic baits, top water baits, spinning baits, buzz baits, chatter baits, square-nosed baits, crank baits, jigs, and then there is the old faithful worm on a hook with a bobber. Hooks even have great variation, but again we simply don't have the time.
 3. You can fish from the shore, wade in the water, or fish from some sort of water vessel. You can do so with just you and your rod, reel, line, and baits, or if you are really serious about catching some fish then you might have some type of electronics on your boat that gives you a real time diagram and readout of what is currently around your boat. And then you have to consider what type of fish you're aiming to catch. The type of fish influences your type of baits. Without saying too much more, I think we're getting a decent idea of what fishing is like for us in the 21st century here in the USA. Catching a fish is by no means a guarantee, but we have to be honest and recognize that we have a number of things going for us that can help us get a fish in the boat or on the

shore. Now, think about that type of fishing, all of the options you have, and the relative ease with which you can land at least one fish. Let's take all of those thoughts and compare them to what fishing was like in the 1st century.

II. 1st century fishing...

A. Involved a single method for catching fish.

1. While there was such a thing as catching a fish with a hook (**Matthew 17:22-27**), the fishing that Peter and Andrew were doing in **Matthew 4** was commercial fishing that employed the use of nets. This was the type of fishing that would have been in the minds of Jesus and these men as Jesus tells them that they were now to be fishers of men.
2. These men, along with the other fishing duo of James and John (**Matthew 4:21,22**), were very quick to drop their work as fishermen and follow Jesus. This might not seem all that drastic to us until we realized that the majority of first century fishermen were family bonded subsistence fishermen. They would go out day by day and fish for their livelihoods. It was not like we often do today where we fish for fun or as a pastime. It is quite possible that these men leaving their families put a strain on their family's livelihoods or even the future of their family's business in jeopardy. Again, this was important work and not a pastime.

B. Was very demanding work.

1. On top of it being very important work, it was also very laborious and strenuous work. I'll be honest, there is not a ton of physical strain that is needed in the type of fishing we do outside of maybe using core strength to keep your balance while standing in open water on a kayak or maybe fight a really big fish, but there was certainly a great amount of physical demand upon first century fisherman. While we do have people who fish with nets today, those people often have electronic devices that help to bring in the nets to sort, but that was not something available for the first century fisherman.
2. The casting out of the nets and the hauling in of the nets full of fish was all done with raw man power. On top of that these men were not working with trolling motors or full-sized motors that took them where they needed to go. While some of the men might have been tending to the netting, other men would have been rowing, or those on the boat might have simply submitted themselves to the mercy of the winds.
3. Then there was the work that took place when they were not even out on the water. The materials used for this process were by no means state-of-the-art or cutting-edge. The boats would often take a beating and be in need of patching up. The same would be true for the nets. Lots of time was given to repairing and cleaning the nets so they would perform to the highest degree possible. How frustrating it would be to have a large catch of fish only for the nets to fail and all of the fish be lost!

C. Often didn't produce great results.

1. You might have heard me speak of the series called "The Chosen." It is a series of shows that depict the life of Jesus just prior to the start of His ministry, into the choosing of His disciples, and some of their time in the ministry of the kingdom of heaven. This show looks at Peter and Andrew and their fishing business. The first few episodes portray Peter and Andrew as not having much current success in their fishing business, and this common reality is seen within the text of Scripture. We must remember, these men didn't have electronic sonar with which they could measure depth, topography, and the presence of schools of fish. Success was truly hard to find at times.
2. In **Luke 5:5**, following Jesus telling Peter to put down their nets, the soon-to-be disciple bemoans that they had been working "*hard all night and caught nothing.*" This same lack of luck is seen at the end of **John's Gospel in 21:1-11**. Peter is with a number of other disciples, and he

tells them that he is going fishing. They all decided to go together, but all night long they caught nothing. At morning, an unrecognized Jesus is on the shore and asks if they had any luck. They respond with no luck, and He tells them to put down their nets on the right side of the boat in order to find some fish. It wasn't until that moment that they found the success they were looking for, to the count of 153 fish to be exact. The nets were so full that they could not pull the net into the boat, so they had to make their way back to shore which thankfully for them was not that far. I share these stories to simply show that the work of fishing wasn't a guaranteed success. Even professional fishermen like these men were didn't always catch fish. Sure we might get skunked every now and then, but we have so many tools available to us that this usually doesn't happen.

With hopefully a better understanding of what fishing looked like in the first century, let's draw some conclusion and insights into what Jesus was telling the disciples when He told them to follow Him so that they could now become fishers of men.

III. Our work in fishing for men...

A. Must involve the sharing of the pure Gospel.

1. We often think of fishing from the modern viewpoint of having a ton of options, but just as the options for first century fishing were pretty limited...so are our options when it comes to what we need to do in order to be busy about the business of catching men. Our "net" you might call it is the sharing of the message of the simple and pure Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the Gospel of God that Paul says has the power to save the whole of mankind. Yet, we might be left asking what exactly is the Gospel message? What is this all-important message?
2. To me, the most succinct description of the Gospel message is found in **I Corinthians 15:1-8**. The crux of the Gospel is that Jesus came down to earth as God in the flesh, lived and died for our sins, was buried, but then rose from the grave and showed Himself to a number of witnesses. Therefore the components of the Gospel are: our sin, Jesus's death, His resurrection, and our need to acknowledge and respond to it. This can be seen in even greater detail in **Acts 2** as Peter would expound upon Paul's later message to the Corinthians. Peter speaks of Jesus's coming being prophesied, the Jews rejecting Him, their crucifying of Him, His resurrection, His ascent to the right hand of God, Him receiving the name of Lord, Christ, and Messiah, and the people's need to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins as the beginning of a new life for them. Again, this is the "net" that we are to throw out and share with others if we hope for them to get in the boat for Jesus.
3. I believe this to be an important distinction because we see in the New Testament letters that there were some who were already perverting the Gospel into something different. Paul writes in **Galatians 1:6-9**, *"I am amazed that you are so quickly turning away from him who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are troubling you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, a curse be on him! As we have said before, I now say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, a curse be on him!"*
4. This means that a presentation of the Gospel that doesn't fit the Gospel given by Paul or Peter is *"a different Gospel."* We can't bring people into the boat with a Gospel that promises health and wealth. We can't spread a net of the Gospel that doesn't lead people to repentance. Our Gospel message must only be what is revealed within the message of the Apostles of Jesus.

B. Will demand hard work and great perseverance.

1. The Apostles might not have thought this right off the bat following Jesus's ascent into the heavens to the right hand of God. With the first sharing of the Gospel message, the Apostles

were able to bring in a net full of 3,000 people who had turned to Jesus. However, as they continued to throw out the Gospel net, they ran into more and more difficulties and had to work harder and harder. **Acts 4,5** tell us of the persecution that arose as the Gospel was being shared, and the rest of the book of Acts shares accounts of the Gospel message being rejected from place to place which also meant the Apostles and others were really putting forth some effort to get that message spread out the only way possible at that point...word of mouth and/or written letters.

2. Just as the first century Christians had difficulties in their own fishing experiences, we need to recognize that Jesus's call for His disciples to be fishers of men is a call to do work that is often not very easy. To begin with, it is not easy telling people that their sins have separated them from God (**Isaiah 59:2**) and they are in need of repentance. (**Acts 2:38**) Many people are completely content with their current lives and see no need for change. Additionally, we are having to work against an every growing secular society that doesn't live in view of the spiritual and eternal. We're having to reshape the way people see the world. On top of this work is having to deal with the disappointment of people rejecting the call of the Gospel. It can be extremely discouraging to put time and effort into people and then they either reject initially or eventually fall away. However, there is a need on our end for the same type of perseverance we see in the Apostles and brethren of the first century. One of my favorite texts is that of **Acts 6:40-42** where we read of our spiritual forefathers trailblazers, *"After they called in the apostles and had them flogged, they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them. Then they went out from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be treated shamefully on behalf of the Name. Every day in the temple, and in various homes, they continued teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah."* May God bless us with this same resolve to persevere.

C. Should lead us to greater dependance upon God and the strength He provides.

1. The thing that can help us to persevere is to make sure that our focus remains entirely on God. Yes, the first century fisherman often had difficult days, but they knew they still had work to do for those who depended on them. We must recognize that we still have good work to be done and that our Lord is counting on us to be His workers in this life. Would you also consider the lesson we learn from those times where the soon-to-be disciples couldn't catch fish and then with Jesus they caught nearly too many?
2. This firmly tells me that we must keep God in mind and as our focus as we seek to be busy as fishers of men. It can be easy for us to either get discouraged by what we see as failure or that we get puffed up and arrogant by what we see as success, but we must remember that all of this is only made possible by God. There was an opportunity for Paul to become puffed up by those who mind claim him as their teacher, but he says in his first letter to the Corinthians, *"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So, then, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's coworkers. You are God's field, God's building."* (**I Corinthians 3:6-9**)
3. Notice Paul's view of it all. Even though he was busy and throwing out the net...he saw God as the one who was truly putting the fish in the boat. Yet, even if the net comes back empty, we ought not take that personally because it isn't us who are being rejected. People are rejecting God and that was a message Jesus wanted His disciples to learn very quickly even all the way back to His ministry. (**Luke 10:16**) There will be ups and there will be downs in fishing for men just like there was fishing for fish in the first century, but we must not give up. We must persevere and continue stayed reliance upon God.

Tim Challies wrote on this idea and said he couldn't remember how many times he had heard lesson based upon the idea of fishing for men and them going something like this. *"We need to be fishers of men. To be effective fishermen we need to have a good fishing rod, we need to use the right kind of bait and we need to reel those unbelievers in!"* If Jesus was speaking to us today then that might be the meaning behind a similar message, but He said those words to a people long ago and in a very different world in many ways. I hope these words this morning have caused you to think differently through different but more appropriate lenses, and I hope that we have also been reminded of the every important need to be throwing that Gospel net every chance we get and trusting that the Lord will give the increase. May the words of Jesus from **Matthew 28:19,20** ever be on our minds as we go about this life striving to live up to Jesus's calling.

"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."