

That's a Good Question – 30
John 21:1-8
“Lessons at the Lake”

1. The most important lessons in life are not learned in a classroom. For instance, they teach you addition in elementary school, but a bounced check will teach you more about math.
2. They teach you biology in middle school, but you will truly appreciate life the first time you hold your new-born child. In high school you took world history, but it's not until your life is full of memories that you truly appreciate the past.
3. In college they study business, but a broom teaches you more about work than a desk and a book. The most important lessons in life are not learned in a classroom.
4. In the closing chapter of John's gospel, we find the greatest Teacher of all giving a lesson on the shore line of the sea of Tiberias. It was a lesson taught using a long, wasted night, and a miraculous morning.
5. John's gospel seems to close at the end of chapter 20. However, John felt it necessary to pick up his quill again, and leave us with one final story.
6. The chapter opens by saying, “After these things Jesus shewed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias...” The word that John used, translated as “shewed”, is an interesting word.
7. The word indicates more than just being seen. It is the same word that is found in John 2:11, where it says, “This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and *manifested* forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him (emphasis added).”
8. The idea behind the word in John 21 is that on that morning by the lake, the Lord Jesus showed His disciples some things *about* Himself as much as He showed them Himself.
9. In this text, Jesus teaches His disciples, both then and now, some important lessons about living for Him. For those who wish to serve the Lord Jesus with their lives, these lessons at the lake are of great importance.
10. Jesus asks His disciples in verse 5, “Children, have ye any meat?” That's a good question, and it is one from which we can learn some important truths.
10. Notice with me three lessons that we draw from this text that speak to us about our life and service for Jesus. First of all, we learn that:

I. APART FROM JESUS WE ARE POWERLESS

1. Josephus, a Jewish historian, says that in the first century there was a thriving fishing business going on at the sea of Tiberias, also known as the Sea of Galilee. The fishing was so good, that Josephus records that there were 230 boats working the lake at one time.ⁱ

2. Understanding there were plenty of fish in the lake, it is surprising when we read in verse 3, that a group of professional fisherman spent an entire night on the lake, and caught nothing.

3. The reality is that their empty nets were a part of a lesson the Lord Jesus was going to teach them the next morning. Their inability to catch any fish spoke to them about a deeper weakness in their lives.

4. In John 15:5, Jesus said to His disciples, "...without me ye can do nothing." Their empty nets served to remind them that they were powerless apart from the help of Jesus.

5. One of the hardest, and yet most important lessons for the believer to learn is the lesson of our own weakness. Notice a couple of things that apart from Jesus, we are powerless to do. First of all, apart from Jesus, we cannot:

A. Discern the way

1. This particular incident in Scripture falls during a unique time in the life of the disciples. Jesus had risen from the dead, and had appeared to them on a couple of occasions, that are recorded in John 20.

2. Very soon, He would be ascending back into heaven, and the Holy Spirit would be coming down at Pentecost. In John 21, the disciples are in a sort of limbo, waiting to find out what Jesus was going to do with them.

3. In Matthew 26:32, Jesus told his followers, "But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee." Following those instructions, Peter and the others left the business of Jerusalem for the familiar haunts of Galilee.

4. While they were there waiting, Peter apparently got bored, or possibly even frustrated and said in verse 3, "I go a fishing." Now it is important to note that for Peter, fishing was not recreation, it was a vocation.

5. Peter had been a professional fisherman before the Lord called Him to be a disciple. One writer translates Peter's statement in verse 3 as, "I'm going off...to my former fishing business."ⁱⁱ

6. Frustrated, impatient, and perhaps a little doubtful of the future, Peter made a decision to go back to the life he had known before the Lord. At the time, it seemed like the way to go, because the others said, "We also go with thee."

7. How often is it that though we haven't talked to the Lord, and we haven't asked His will, we still think we know the best way to go, and we make decisions that prove to be the wrong ones?

8. Can you hear Thomas at about 3 AM, after catching nothing? "Great idea Peter, 'Let's all go fishing!?'..." The failed fishermen remind us that apart from Jesus, we can't discern the best moves to make in life.

9. We are powerless without His direction. Notice not only that apart from Jesus we are powerless to discern the way, but notice also further that apart from Jesus, we also cannot:

B. Do the work

1. Look again at verse 3. John says, "...They went forth, and entered into a ship immediately; and that night they caught nothing." These were professional fisherman, and yet each time they drew in their nets, they came up empty.

2. I don't believe their failed fishing excursion was an accident. I believe Jesus was just as involved in their empty nets as He was in their full ones the next morning.

3. An old writer named Geoffrey King says, "Unless I am utterly mistaken, the first miracle was that Jesus Christ all night long deliberately kept every fish in Galilee out of their nets."ⁱⁱⁱ

4. The next morning, Jesus appears on the shore, and He calls out to the fishing party, "Boys, did you catch any fish?" The truth is; He knew very well that they had caught nothing.

5. They answered back with a simple, blunt, "No." That was all He needed to hear. His point had been made.

6. Throughout your Christian life, one of the things that Jesus will constantly try to teach you is that apart from Him, you cannot do the work you are called to do.

7. You will fail - utterly and completely fail, apart from Him. You can't be the parent you're called to be apart from Jesus. Independent of Jesus, you can't be the spouse you're supposed to be.

8. You cannot be the employee, neighbor, church member, friend, or person God has called you to be apart from Jesus. Without Him, you are powerless to do the work that life requires.

9. On the last weekend of January, a severe ice storm hit the upper portions of the Southeastern United States. Kentucky was hit the hardest, with over 700,000 people losing power, and 24 deaths.

10. As of Friday, there were still 150,000 residents of Kentucky without any electricity. One article described the scene as “Katrina in Kentucky”, saying that, “...these residents have been reduced to a Third-world style subsistence living.”^{iv}

11. Having no electrical power makes life inconvenient and hard. In John 21, we are reminded that having no spiritual power makes life impossible.

12. Notice another lesson that was taught at the lake that morning. Notice not only that *apart from Jesus we are powerless*, but notice also secondly that:

II. AIDED BY JESUS WE ARE PRODUCTIVE

1. Year’s ago, as a fairly new preacher, I preached a sermon from this text, and I don’t remember much of anything about the sermon (which is probably a good thing), but I do remember the title. I entitled the message, “How Business Picks Up When Jesus Shows Up.”

2. The sermon may not have been much to listen to, but the title is still fitting. John tells us in verse 6, that Jesus said to the weary band of fishermen, “Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find...” They obeyed, and the Bible says, “...they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes.”

3. What had been a futile fishing trip turned into a fruitful haul of fish after Jesus got involved in the labor. Again, is there not a lesson here for the disciple of Jesus?

4. The lesson is that while we can do nothing without the Lord Jesus, there is essentially nothing we *cannot* do when He is helping us. Notice a couple of ways we can be productive, through our Lord’s help. First of all:

A. We must respond to His instruction

1. Imagine the scene in your mind. Jesus is standing on the shore, calling out to a boat on the water. He says, “If you will move your nets over to the other side of the boat, you will find some fish.”

2. The idea of switching sides of the boat sounds a little silly. If the fish were swimming on the right, would they not be swimming on the left as well?

Nevertheless, the disciples had nothing to lose. Their fishing methods hadn't done so well.

3. Obeying the word from the shore, the disciples found that the Master did in fact know what was going on under the surface of the water. He could see what they could not.

4. Oh, how vital it is that you and I respond to the Word of Christ! If you want to see His blessings on your life, then respond to His instruction, and obey His Word!

5. I recently read the biography of one of my favorite authors, J. Sidlow Baxter. Baxter was an unusually gifted preacher and writer, who viewed the Word of God with a unique reverence.

6. Baxter lived to be almost 97 years-old, and one of the chapters in the book dealt with his diet. Baxter tried to eat what he called a "biblical diet", staying away from foods that were prohibited in the Old Testament. The Biographer says of him, "J. Sidlow Baxter lived by the Bible. He lived by its spiritual laws...For him the Bible was a handbook on all aspects of life and how to live that life more abundantly."^v

7. While we may not eat Baxter's "biblical diet", like him, we too should live by the Bible. Responding to the instructions our Lord gives us through the pages of His word is the key to being productive in your spiritual life.

8. If we are to draw from the aid of Christ, we must not only respond to His instruction, but notice also that:

B. We must rely on His influence

1. Hours had been spent pulling that net across the bottom of that Galilean lake, and not a single fish had been caught. Suddenly, one final throw fills the net to capacity.

2. John says that the net was so full they could not even pull it back into the boat. In verse 11, we are told the total catch from that one cast was 153 fish. They went from no fish, to over 150 with just one cast.

3. Now surely you can see that this is no coincidence. Jesus was trying to teach His disciples that their efforts are not what is truly important. It is the influence of Christ upon their work that makes all the difference.

4. Likewise, we must remember that while we are called to serve the Lord with all of our hearts, and with all of our lives, it is not our efforts and energies that bring about the eternal and abundant results.

5. It is the anointing, enabling power of Christ, and His influence upon and through us that fills the nets, and makes the work successful.

6. Someone has described the church or the believer that operates without the influence of Christ's power as someone who goes around "beating on trees with bare axe handles." That is a pretty good analogy.

7. While we must cast the net, the fish respond to the Master of the Sea. He draws them in. He is the power behind the work. We may assist, but the credit goes to Him.

8. Without Him, nothing is possible. With Him, nothing is impossible. Notice a third and final lesson we learn from this meeting at the lake. Notice not only that *apart from Jesus we are powerless*, and *aided by Jesus we are productive*, but notice also finally that:

III. AWARE OF JESUS WE ARE PASSIONATE

1. Look at the text again, and notice what happened when the net filled up. In verse 7 we read, "Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, It is the Lord. Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher's coat unto him, (for he was naked,) and did cast himself into the sea."

2. For the record, Peter was not literally naked. He was not wearing his outer robe. The ESV says that "he was stripped for work."

3. What I love about this scene is that when the disciples became aware that their Lord was near, the whole feel of the story changes. Their passion and fervor bleed through the text and you can almost feel their excitement.

4. The lesson we draw from this is that when we become aware of the presence and work of Jesus in our lives, it fills us with a holy passion that brings joy and excitement to all that we do.

5. Too many people drudge their way through their Christian experience, like religious zombies. They obey the Word of God, and they try to live right, but there is no zeal, and no passion about what they do. For those people, this last lesson at the lake is the most important.

6. Notice a couple of things about becoming aware of Jesus, and the passion it will bring. Notice first of all that:

A. His activity in us is exciting

1. While Peter was certainly excited about the fish, he dove into the water and swam to shore because he was even more excited about the One who was behind the miraculous catch of fish.
2. It had been a while since these men had seen Jesus. They were excited to be in His presence again, and to witness His work in and through their lives.
3. If you are a Christian, everyday of your life, the Holy Spirit of God is inside of you working to bring about the will of God in and through you. While that may not sound all that exciting to you, it should!
4. One of my favorite quotes comes from Augustine, who said, "Thou fool; dost thou not know that thou art carrying God around with thee?" Too often we forget the wonder of carrying God around with us.
5. We get accustomed to the rustling of His Spirit within us, and we take for granted the fact that the risen Savior actually lives within our hearts and works through our lives.
6. Not too long ago, I was praying earnestly about a particular matter in my life. I really wanted the Lord to give me permission to do something. One morning I woke up, and I knew as clearly as I possibly could that God had told me, "No".
7. The Spirit of God stirred me, and I knew that what I wanted to do was not the will of God. Now I would like to tell you that I just said, "O.K., Lord, your will be done," but the truth is that I pouted and sulked for a few days because I didn't get my way.
8. I was talking to an older preacher, whom I love and respect, and he said to me, "Hey, don't be upset. Just be glad God is still speaking to you." At the time, I didn't catch that. However, since then, I have realized what He meant.
9. Even though God had said "no", the fact that He would even communicate His will to me, and take the time to speak to me is in itself exciting and wonderful.
10. Don't ever lose the wonder of God working in and through your life. When you open your eyes to the activity of Jesus, it will ignite a passion in your life.
11. Notice not only that His activity in us is exciting, but notice also that:

B. His proximity to us is encouraging

1. For some days now, the disciples were not sure where Jesus was. While they knew He was alive, they didn't see Him for some period of time.

2. Part of Peter's exuberance is because he realized that Jesus was close by. John says in verse 8 that, "...they were not far from land..." That meant that they were not far from Jesus.

3. I believe our Lord was teaching His disciples that even when they cannot see Him, He is still in close proximity to them. He was saying, "I am going away, but I will never be far from you."

4. Hebrews 13:5 reminds us of His promise, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." No matter where you are, He is closer than you think.

5. If we would live each day, aware of His proximity to us, it would bring encouragement and energy to all that we did. Our work for Him would be strengthened by the thought that He was near.

6. Jacqueline was an elderly woman whose life had been given to caring for her daughter who was bound to a wheelchair. When her daughter died, Jacqueline's life became lonely and meaningless. Sitting down with her Bible, she came across Philippians 4:5, and the words, "The Lord is near..."

7. Jacqueline thought to herself, "If that is true, I should be more aware of it." Over the next few days and weeks, Jacqueline to speak to Lord, as if He were in the room with her, and with her as she ate, and slept, and went about every aspect of her day. It was not long until Jacqueline's loneliness left, and she lived every day aware that the Lord is near.

8. What would it do for you if you just realized that in every moment, in every movement of your life, the Lord Jesus is closer than you could imagine? I believe it would bring a new passion to your walk with the Lord.

1. Pastor Allistair Begg's daily radio program, called *Truth for Life*, always closes with the line, "Where the learning is for living."

2. The greatest lessons we can learn are the ones that affect how we live. On a lake outside of Galilee, 2,000 years ago, the Lord Jesus used a long night and a miraculous morning to teach His disciples some important lessons for living.

3. Those lessons are timeless, and they speak to us today. Our Lord, through His Word, says to you and me, "Apart from me, you are powerless. Aided by me, you are productive. Aware of me, and you will become passionate."

4. Have you learned these lessons? Do you need to hear them again? May the Spirit of God write these truths upon our hearts, and may we leave this place seeking His presence and power upon our lives.

-
- ⁱ Sea of Galilee, *Wikipedia Article*, accessed 2/7/09, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_of_Galilee
- ⁱⁱ Wuest, Kenneth, The New Testament – An Expanded Translation, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1961), p. 265
- ⁱⁱⁱ King, Geoffrey R., The Forty Days, (Henry E. Walter Ltd., London, 1948), p. 95
- ^{iv} Taylor, Jeff, Katrina in Kentucky, 2/6/09, *Reasononline*, accessed 2/7/09, <http://reason.com/news/show/131528.html>
- ^v Johnson, E.A., J. Sidlow Baxter – Awake My Heart, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005), p. 195-196