

INTRODUCTION

This is not a message for unmarried females. It is a message about personal evangelism. Fishing for men means to catch them for Jesus. It’s called evangelism, which means to tell the good news. When most people hear the word evangelism they think of Billy Graham. Their next thought is, “I’m certainly no Billy Graham!” For decades, God has used Billy Graham in mass evangelism. Dr. Graham uses a huge net and has “caught” millions of people. He is like one of those commercial fishing trawlers that land tons of fish on every voyage. But God has called each of us to be involved in personal evangelism. Instead of a huge commercial fishing operation, we are like the person sitting on the bank with a cane pole. That’s still fishing but it’s one person trying to catch one fish at a time. Like the song says, “Each one reach one.”

Our problem is that we do a lot of talking about winning people to Christ but we just never seem to get around to it. One of the funniest stories about fishing was told by Jerry Clower. He talked about a guy in Mississippi we’ll call Bubba. Bubba was catching a boatload of fish every time he went out. Nobody else was catching any fish, so a game warden suspected that Bubba was doing something illegal. He disguised himself as a regular fisherman and asked Bubba to take him fishing. After arriving out in the middle of the lake, Bubba reached under the seat, pulled out a stick of dynamite, lit it and tossed it into the water. KABOOM! Dead fish came floating to the surface all around the boat. Bubba started retrieving the dead fish with a dip net. The game warden was enraged. He flashed his badge and said, “Bubba, that is illegal, and I’m going to arrest you and put you under the jail! You can’t fish with dynamite!” Old Bubba didn’t say a word. He just lit another stick of dynamite and thrust it into the game warden’s hand. While the fuse was sizzling Bubba said, “Are you gonna sit there and talk – or are you gonna fish?” That’s what I want to ask you: Are you just going to talk about fishing for people or are you willing to do it? Let’s look at our text again.

Luke 5:8-11: When Peter saw this, [a great catch of fish] he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon’s partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch men.” So they pulled their boats up to shore, left everything and followed him.

The word “catch” (*zograeo*) means to catch alive or to catch for life. The idea is that Peter was no longer to catch fish for death, but he was to catch men for life. Jesus uses this analogy because Peter was a professional fisherman; he knew how to fish. Jesus always starts us from where we are at the moment. Peter knew fishing, so that’s the analogy Jesus employed. Today it would be like Jesus calling a college football coach and saying, “Follow me and I will make you a spiritual recruiter.” Or like saying to an accountant, “Follow me and I’ll make you balance people’s lives, not just their finances.” Get the picture? But even if you aren’t a professional fisherman, we can learn something about personal evangelism by thinking about fishing.

To be effective at personal evangelism, you must have:

I. A PASSION FOR FISHING

All successful fishermen love to fish – it’s their passion. When I lived near Lake Martin in Alabama, I went fly fishing just about every Saturday morning with Cindy’s dad. He was the expert and he taught me how to put that popping bug right where some big bream or bass would tear into it. I loved going fishing with him. I would think nothing of getting up long before daylight, just so we could already be out on the lake at exactly the moment the sky started to get light. We’d fish for three or four hours and even if we didn’t catch anything, I loved doing it. One reason is because I love Cindy’s dad, and I loved spending time with him. The reason I don’t fish much anymore is because I lost the passion to fish. I’d rather use my leisure time to play golf. But I haven’t lost my passion for fishing for people.

You see, it’s really not a matter of loving fish; it’s a matter of loving the Master Fisherman. Peter loved to fish but when Jesus said, “Follow me and you will catch men,” Peter left it all. He decided then and there that he loved Jesus more than fishing. The passion of Jesus was to see lost men and women be saved. I told you at the beginning of this series that the theme of this Gospel is found in Luke 19:10 where Jesus said, “The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which is lost.”

It was the Apostle Paul’s passion to see people saved as well. He wrote in Romans 9:2-3; 10:1 “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, . . . Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.”

Do have the same passion for reaching people for Christ? I believe that most churches have forgotten the importance of evangelism. There are over 47,000 Southern Baptist Churches, and last year 8,000 of our churches didn’t baptize a single person.

Green Acres is a great, wonderful, growing, loving church. But if you were to ask me what I think our greatest deficiency is, I would say that I don’t think we have a real passion to see people saved. It’s so easy to become complacent when people are joining our church every week and attendance and giving is great. I’m preaching to myself today. God has convicted me that I need to have a greater passion to fish for people. Do you have a real passion to see people saved and baptized? The reason we aren’t seeing more people caught for life is because we have lost our passion for fishing for men.

Leonard Ravenhill writes about an English criminal named Charlie Peace. When England still executed prisoners, Charlie Peace was on death row in Armly Prison, in Leeds, England. On the morning of his execution, a prison chaplain was dutifully reading a passage of scripture to Charlie. The passage spoke of heaven and hell. Charlie Peace said to the indifferent chaplain, “Sir, if I believed what you and the Church of England *say* that you believe about heaven and hell – even if England were covered with broken glass from coast to coast – I would walk over it, if need be on my hands and knees, and think it a worthwhile living just to save one soul from an eternal hell like that.”

II. A PLAN FOR FISHING

You’d never go fishing without first developing a plan. You don’t just show up at the lake with no fishing gear or boat and say, “I’m going to catch fish.” It takes careful planning.

Many of you know we have a professional bass fisherman in our church named Jay Yelas. He travels all over the country and competes against other professional bass fishermen. Jay is one of the most respected guys on the tour because he is not afraid to let people know that he loves Jesus. In a sport that has had its share of cheating, Jay is known as an honest competitor, full of integrity.

A few months ago, I had the opportunity to go fishing with Jay on Lake Tyler. It was pretty embarrassing. I haven’t done much fishing since I traded my rod and reels for golf clubs about 20 years ago but I still enjoy going when I can. It’s just that I was a little rusty. He launched his bass boat and we found a promising spot. He handed me one of his open-faced casting reels. On my first cast, I got a terrible backlash. The line got so tangled it looked like a nylon explosion. Jay smiled and said he could untangle *any* mess. He worked on it for a couple of minutes and said, “I think that one’s terminal!” He shoved it down in the bottom of the boat and handed me a simpler spinning reel. I was amazed at how accurate Jay was with his casts. He could thread a lure through six or seven dock piers to his intended target.

The fish really weren’t biting that day, but Jay still managed to land a few. Toward the end of the day, I snagged something really heavy – I just knew it was a whopper. When I reeled it up to the boat I had a huge...turtle. It must have weighed six or eight pounds. Somehow I managed to hook the poor turtle on the neck of his shell. Jay did a good job hiding his laughter and declared that I was the champion turtle catcher! He said if a pro turtle circuit ever started up, I would certainly qualify! I was thoroughly humbled but I learned a lot by watching a bass master fish.

This week I asked Jay to tell me what the three most important elements are in catching fish. He called me from a tournament in Alabama and said: (1) Study the water conditions, because fish behave differently according to the water temperature, current, and clarity. (2) Select the right lure (based on those water conditions); and (3) Present that lure to the fish in the right way. I want to take his ideas and add a few of my own and give you a plan for fishing for men:

1. Go to where the fish are

You will never catch fish until you are willing to leave your house and go to where the fish are. I heard about a lady who went to see a psychiatrist. She said, “Doctor, my husband fishes everyday in our bathtub!” The psychiatrist said, “Well, just tell him to stop.” She replied, “I’d like to – but we really need the fish!” You can’t catch fish in a bathtub or a swimming pool. You have to *go* to where the fish are.

Few people are going to come to you and ask you how to be saved. There are very few people without Christ who wander into a church service on their own. That’s why the Great Commission of Jesus begins with the word, “GO.” You can’t spell “God” without “go;” you can’t spell “good news” without “go.” Jesus said to “go out into the highways and hedges and compel people to come in.” (Luke 14:23)

Jay Yelas will tell you that once you get on a lake, then you have to know where the fish are and go to them before you can be successful. Where are the people you need to catch for Jesus? They are in your neighborhood, your office, your school. That’s where you ought to doing your fishing.

Max Lucado writes:

“Jesus wasn’t crucified in a church building over a baptistry between an organ and a piano – in front of a bunch of coats and ties. He was crucified on a cruel cross between two hardened criminals. He wasn’t crucified in a nice neighborhood, but at a crossroads of the world so cosmopolitan that his title had to be written in three languages. He died at the kind of place where thieves cursed and soldiers gambled – and that’s where we need to take the gospel.”

2. Understand how a fish acts

Jay told me fish behave in different ways, according to the conditions. He has studied fish enough to know where the fish are and what they are doing in different water conditions. That’s how he knows where to cast his bait.

In order to be effective in personal evangelism, you have to know something about how people without Christ live. One of our biggest challenges for “fishing for men” is that the longer we are Christians, the less time we spend with non-believers. Jesus understood sinners because he spent time with them, to win them. He didn’t become a sinner; He just understood them. You don’t have to jump into the water and swim underneath the surface to be a good fisherman. You don’t have to become a fish to catch fish. But you can evaluate the “water conditions” at your job or at school. We need to become students of our culture for the simple reason that we want to “catch people” out of it into life. For some of you that means you need to cultivate a genuine friendship with someone who isn’t a Christian. You must avoid the ulterior motive of wanting to carve another notch on your gospel gun. Instead, the reason you go fishing for them is because you care for them as a person and you are sincerely concerned about their eternal destiny.

3. Put your hook in the water

Jay says you’ll never catch fish until you present your lure to the fish in the right way. One of my favorite episodes of the “Andy Griffith Show” was about fishing. Opie was little and Aunt Bee came to visit on a trial basis. She was trying desperately to fit in so Opie would like her. She agreed to go fishing with Andy and Opie. She didn’t know much about fishing because she was holding her bait a few feet above the surface of the water. When Opie pointed it out, Andy was quick to give an answer that saved Aunt Bee any embarrassment. He explained to Opie that Aunt Bee was such a good fisherman that she was fishing for “flying fish.” That satisfied Opie.

That’s a picture of a lot of Christians. They go to where the fish are, they have the right equipment, there are hungry fish to be caught but they never get around to putting their hooks in the water. That is, they spend so much time studying the conditions and trying to understand fish that they never get around to sharing the gospel. They talk about the importance of fishing

(personal evangelism) they just never do it. It would be like a fisherman who spends all his time riding around in his high-powered bass boat, but he never stops and wets his hook.

Personal evangelism is more than just getting to know people who aren't saved, although that is the first step. You must be willing to build a bridge of friendship with a person without Christ, but then you must walk across that bridge and tell them about the good news of Jesus. Give them a chance to trust Christ, that's putting your hook in the water. A good salesman calls this “closing the deal.” But what you are doing is “closing the door of hell” for that person and opening the door of heaven.

4. Use a variety of strategies and bait

Now Jay says this is really important: A good fisherman must use the right lure for the right conditions. He told me he has or at least says he has about 50 different kinds of bait he can use. When he is tournament fishing, he usually has eight rods and reels with different bait already on them so that he doesn't have to take the time to cut off one lure and tie on another one. He just picks up a different rod and reel and casts the new bait. He says sometimes it's a matter of trial and error to find which bait the fish are hitting. If one bait doesn't work, he just tries another one.

That ought to be obvious to us. Different fish need different bait. You wouldn't use a tiny bream hook to catch big bass. And you wouldn't use a huge Sailfish hook to try to catch crappie. Good fishermen are always looking for new kinds of bait, too. They aren't afraid to try new approaches.

A good fisherman doesn't quit after one cast or even a dozen casts; he just tries a different bait – a different strategy. That's a great lesson for us. No two people are alike so there is no single approach to person evangelism that will work. Different people need different approaches. The same strategy won't work for everyone. That's exactly what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:22, “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means, I might save some.” He used one approach when he was with Jews and used a different approach when he was with Gentiles.

We can't reach people for Christ the same way we used to in the 60's, 70's and 80's. The fish haven't changed, but the water conditions have. You used to be able to walk down a street and knock on the doors of strangers. Thirty years ago, even unchurched people would invite you into their homes, give you glass of lemonade and carry on a conversation with you. That kind of “cold turkey” evangelism isn't as effective anymore. Today, more and more people are suspicious; they consider an unscheduled visit as an intrusion. More and more people are living in gated communities. We need to try a different bait.

I've had Christians complain to me that people in the 21st century aren't as “receptive” to the gospel as they used to be. I disagree. People are receptive to the gospel, it's just going to take a different strategy to catch them than we used 30 years ago.

Today, we need to build relationships of trust with them before we catch them for Jesus. We've got to be willing to try a lot of different methods. Judgement House is a good example of a

different approach to evangelism. Everyone who is working in Judgement House 2000 is fishing for people. It's a different kind of bait but it works, so let's toss it in the water. In fact, we need to be tossing hooks, trotlines and nets at the same time.

5. Expect to catch fish

You've got to be prepared to catch fish. A good fisherman always makes sure he takes a net to help land the big one. If he's in a boat, he's going to have a live well prepared to hold the fish. If he's fishing from the bank, he's going to take a stringer along to string up the fish he catches.

We need to do the same thing as a church as well. I don't know about you but I believe just as Peter landed a huge catch of fish in Luke 5, we are going to see a huge amount of people who are going to be coming into our church over the next few months. We must believe that people are going to be caught for Christ. It will take more than just opening a big building. We must go out and bring people to Christ. Then we must be prepared to do something with the people we catch for Christ. We need to have Sunday School classes ready to receive them. We need to provide parking places, nursery space, and education space. This is not a time to stand back and say, "Look at our beautiful building." The real work begins when we move into it. We must expect to see thousands come to Christ before it happens.

One young preacher once complained to the great pastor Charles Spurgeon that he was disappointed because sometimes he preached and nobody was saved. The wise pastor asked the young preacher, "Well, son, you don't expect someone to be saved every time you preach, do you?" The young preacher replied, "Why no, of course not." Spurgeon said, "And *that* is the very reason why people aren't saved every time you preach – you don't *expect* it."

We must believe there are thousands of people out there who need Jesus and that with the power of the Holy Spirit, we can catch them for Jesus! I'm expecting it to happen, are you?

Now if you want to be a good bass fisherman, you need to follow the plan of Jay Yelas. But if you want to catch people, you need to follow the plan of Jesus. Look at our five fishing tips again: (1) Jesus went to where the people were. He didn't establish a synagogue and make people come to Him. He went forth and preached the good news. (2) Jesus understood what was in the hearts of people. He understood that a person's greatest need is forgiveness. (3) Jesus wet His hook. He often initiated conversations with people about their spiritual condition. (4) He used different methods. He didn't say the same thing to Nicodemus that He said to the woman at the well. He had a different approach to the rich young ruler. He employed different bait. (5) Jesus expected people to follow Him when He said, "Follow me." His plan should our plan for personal evangelism.

You must have a passion for fishing, a plan for fishing, and finally, you must have

III. PATIENCE FOR FISHING

A good fisherman must learn to be patient. The day we went fishing, Jay must have cast in the same spot for the same fish about thirty times and on the thirtieth cast, the bass hit the bait. He didn't give up. As we are fishing for men, we need to remember:

1. Fish don't want to be caught

Not too many fish are going to jump into your boat. A fish is easily spooked and will try to get away. A person without Jesus may often resist and even resent your attempt to share Christ with them. That's okay. Love them, and keep sharing Christ with them. Don't give up after one try or two tries. Stay patient and persistent. Some people are reluctant to share Christ because they think people "don't want to hear it." It makes them feel uncomfortable. That may be true. I would think one of the most difficult conversations a physician ever has is to tell his patient he has discovered cancer. It would be a lot easier just to avoid talking about it. The patient doesn't want to hear it. It makes them feel uncomfortable. But the kindest, most loving thing a physician can do is to tell a patient what their illness is and how they are going to treat it. That's what personal evangelism is all about. People don't want to hear it but the most loving thing you can do is to tactfully share Jesus with them. It takes patience.

George Mueller was a great man of faith who lived in England in the last Century. He had a friend with whom he shared Christ many times. His friend resisted and refused to turn from his sins to Christ. Mueller prayed for him and witnessed to him for 52 years! He never gave up. And on the day of George Mueller's funeral, his friend finally accepted Christ. That's patience! Second, remember:

2. You are called to go fishing – the result is up to God

I know most of us here have been fishing, but there are probably some folks who have never been. Let me ask: If you have never gone fishing, raise your hand. Now, here's the next question: how many of you who just raised your hand have ever caught a fish? You say, "That's a stupid question. If they haven't ever gone fishing, of course they haven't caught a fish." That's my point. I don't have to ask how many of you have ever led a person to Christ. Instead a better question is "How many of you have ever tried?" If you don't ever go fishing, for sure, you'll never catch fish.

But sometimes you go fishing and you don't catch a thing but it's still called going fishing because you went to where the fish were and you wet your hook. You tried. God doesn't judge us on our results. He won't ask you how many fish you've caught. He will ask you how many times you've gone fishing. He judges us on our obedience. Our job is to just share the gospel, go fishing, whether or not anyone is saved is up to God. I saw a sign in front of Pleasant Hills Baptist Church that said, "Fishers of men. You catch them and Jesus will clean them." I like that.

CONCLUSION

I once read a story by Darrell Robinson, and I have written a modern parable based on that story. Read it and let the Lord use this story to challenge you:

Once there was a group of people called the Fishing Society. They gathered every week to talk about the importance of fishing but they never fished. They said they wanted fish, so they decided to build a big new aquarium. They pooled their money (no pun intended) and built a sparkling new meeting hall they named “The Aquarium Center.” They employed a scholar to teach them from the Fishing Manual. Each week they gathered in their beautiful building and recited portions of the Fishing Manual. Their fishing scholar explained some of the mysteries of the Fishing Manual. The meetings ended with the scholar dramatically casting a net in the large tank in the center of the Aquarium Center. The members were all hopeful that some fish would be caught. None were ever caught, of course, because there were no fish in the tank.

This led to disagreement among the members of the Fishing Society. Why didn’t fish come to their beautiful aquarium center? Some said, specialization was the answer so they built smaller tanks specially designed for fish of all ages and sizes. Still, no fish. Some blamed the problem on the lack of attendance of members of the Fishing Society. So, they conducted week-long fishing crusades. They constantly talked about new and better methods of fishing. They bought some of the finest fishing equipment on the market. The *one* thing they didn’t do, however, was to fish.

They even elected numerous committees to operate the Fishing Society more efficiently. One group kept busy by regulating the water in the Aquarium. Others worked to keep the glass walls polished; others sorted and arranged the expensive fishing gear.

One young man in their group had a radical idea. He said if fish were to be caught, they would have to go out to the ocean and lakes and catch them. Some people were alarmed at such a suggestion. The young man actually went out and tried fishing. To everyone’s amazement, he came back with a couple of fine fish. He was such a sensation he was given the title “Doctor of Fishology” and started a school to teach other aspiring fishermen. All of this consumed so much time he had no time for fishing himself.

Then the Fishing Society sent a few brave professional fishermen to live a few blocks from the water. These were called “fishinaries.” These foreign fishinaries sent back pictures of themselves standing by the water holding their catches. They sometimes returned to the Aquarium Center and showed slides of them actually catching fish. This excited the members but only for a few minutes.

Over the years, some members of the Fishing Society forgot about fishing, there was plenty to do without worrying about that. Some even suggested they change the name of their group from the Fishing Society to just “The Society.” After all, they didn’t want to offend the fish.

One day a bearded stranger appeared at their weekly meeting. This longhaired, sandaled man claimed to be the Master Fisherman. He extended hands to appeal to the fishermen to follow him out to where the fish were. Some noticed there were ugly scars in His palms, probably from fishing. He had the gall to say He was the One who started the Fishing Society. Many angrily disagreed, they had worked hard and given their money to build up their society.

As the Stranger turned to leave, His final comment made some of the respectable members of the Society so angry that they stopped up their ears. He said, “If you never try to catch fish – you

have no right to call yourself a fisherman. If you aren't fishing – you aren't following me.” After their initial shock, the members of the Fishing Society resumed their busy activity of maintaining their beautiful hall. As they polished away and consulted their Fishing Manual, they were glad their beautiful hall had not been built in vain, after all, it made them feel good about themselves.

Jesus has called to be fishers of men, not keepers of the aquarium.

Five people I know who need to be caught for Jesus:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Let's go fishin'!

OUTLINE

To be successful at personal evangelism, you must have:

I. A PASSION FOR FISHING

I have a great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race...Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. *Romans 9:2-3, 10:1*

II. A PLAN FOR FISHING

1. Go to where the fish are
2. Understand how a fish acts
3. Put your hook in the water
4. Use a variety of strategies and bait
5. Expect to catch fish

III. PATIENCE FOR FISHING

Remember:

1. Fish don't want to be caught
2. You are called to go fishing—the result is up to God

FIVE PEOPLE I KNOW WHO NEED TO BE CAUGHT FOR JESUS:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Let's Go Fishin'!



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes