

True Freedom and Fullness of Joy: Interested?

There's an amazing biblical truth that Christians can find hard to grasp at times. It's only when we do things God's way that we're truly free; and it's the only way that we'll experience true and lasting joy. Earlier in John's gospel Jesus spoke to a group of the Jewish people who had believed in him: "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32). Later he speaks of the reality that keeping the commandments is directly connected to the fact that our "joy may be full." (John 15:10-11). In this new series, primarily from John 21, we're looking at lessons on discipleship that Jesus taught after his resurrection from the grave. We've already seen two important lessons that he taught his disciples. First of all, Jesus claims our total allegiance. Genuine disciples of Jesus are devoted to living our lives for his glory. Second, and this follows on the heels of the first, Jesus commands our dependent obedience. This is a lesson that Jesus' disciples—even in the 21st century—can find difficult to learn.

We saw last time that Jesus commanded the disciples to "cast the net on the right side of the boat" in order that they would catch some fish (21:6). Jesus once likened the catching of fish to "catching men." (Luke 5:10) That being true, in the context of *spiritual* lessons to learn, whether in our "catching of men," i.e., evangelism, or in anything in the Christian life, we must always obey *exactly* as Jesus calls us to obey. There are always blessings—in one form or another—connected to our obedience. Keep in mind that the blessings may not necessarily be lots of fish or lots of conversions. The blessing may be our ongoing spiritual growth (1 Peter 2:2; Hebrews 5:9). What matters is our faithful commitment to obeying God's Word. We can't save anyone, but we do have a responsibility to reach out with the gospel in word and life. *Secondly*, we must continue to learn the lesson of *dependence on Jesus* for everything good in our lives. For example, let's think about the church. Are Christians simply staying busy with programs and *busy ministries* or are we seeking to follow the instructions of scripture while depending on the Holy Spirit's power? Are we giving our all to the places in which we're called to serve or are we simply saying, in effect, "What is the least I have to do?" We must be those who give our lives for Jesus and for others, but we must depend on Jesus for all that we do. In addition to this, are we just going through the motions of living with our spouses and raising our children in whatever way that suits us or are we looking to God's instructions from his word?

Thirdly, it's been suggested that the failure of these experienced fishermen to catch any fish that night should be seen as the providence of God to teach them to *remember that God is good to his people even in difficult times*. John Calvin says that God allows for trials to come into the lives of his people in order that "...he may lead them to more highly value his blessing. If we were

always prosperous, whenever we put our hand to labor, scarcely any man would contribute to the blessing of God the success of his exertions, all would boast of their industry, and would kiss their hands.”

Bible teacher and professor, Kent Hughes, tells of a young man who went through many trials in his life. For example, he once ran for the legislature in a large state and was badly defeated. He next entered business, failed, and spent seventeen years of his life paying off the debts of an unscrupulous business partner. He was in love with a beautiful woman to whom he later became engaged—but she died. Reentering politics, he ran for Congress but was badly defeated. He then tried to get an appointment to the United States Land Office but failed. He became a candidate for the United States Senate and was badly defeated. Two years later he was defeated again. It was one failure after another. And yet, this man eventually became President of the United States, and many say he was one of our greatest presidents ever. His name was Abraham Lincoln. I’ve heard contradicting stories as to whether Lincoln was actually a Christian. But regardless, the illustration is true of the Christian life. God will often bring trials into our lives in order that we might learn to trust him more. No matter what we face, God is good to his people always, including giving us the blessings of true freedom and fullness of joy.

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.