MENDING THE NETS.

Dr. Talmage Preaches a Sermon on the Story of the Fishermen.

Christ's Disciples as Fishers of Men —The Gospel Net and How It Should Be Kept in Repair.

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In this discourse Dr. Talmage describes the Gospel net and how it is to be repaired after being damaged; text, Matthew 4:21, "James, the son of Zebedee, and John, his brother, in a ship with Zebedee, their father, mending their nets."

"I go a-fishing!" cried Simon Peter to his comrades, and the most of the apostles had hands hard from fishing tackle. The fisheries of the world have always attracted attention. In the third century the queen of Egypt had for pin money $470,000, received from the fisheries of Lake Moeris. And, if the time should ever come when the immensity of the world's population could not be fed by the vegetables and meats of the land, the sea has an amount of animal life that would feed all the population of the earth and fatten them with a food that by its phosphorus would make a generation brainy and intellectual beyond anything that the world has ever imagined. My text takes us among the Galilean fishermen. One day Walter Scott, while hunting in an old drawer found among some old fishing tackle the manuscript of his immortal book, "Waverley," which he had put away there as of no worth, and who knows but that to-day we may find some unknown wealth of thought while looking at the fishing tackle in the text.

It is not a good day for fishing, and three men are in the boat repairing the broken fishing nets. If you are fishing with a hook and line, and the fish will not bite, it is a good time to put the angler's apparatus into better condition. Perhaps the last fish you hauled in was so large that something snapped, or, if you were fishing with a net, there was a mighty floundering of the scales or an exposed nail on the side of the boat which broke some of the threads and let part or all of the captives of the deep escape into their natural element. And hardly anything is more provoking than to nearly land a score or a hundred trophies from the deep, and when you are in the full glee of hauling in the spotted treasures, through some imperfection of the net they splash back into the wave. That is too much of a trial of patience for most fishermen to endure, and many a man ordinarily correct of speech in such circumstances comes to an intensity of utterance unfitting. Therefore no good fisherman enters the time wasted that is spent in mending his net. Now, the fishermen and again represents Christian workers as fishers of men, and we are all sweeping through the sea of humanity some kind of a net. Indeed there have been enough nets out and enough fishermen busy to have landed the whole human race in the kingdom of God long before this. What is the matter? The Gospel is all right, and it has been a good time for catching souls for thousands of years. Why, then, the failures? The trouble is with the nets, as most of them need to be mended. I propose to show you what is the matter with most of the nets and how to mend them. [illegible] and his two boys, James and John, were doing a good thing when they sat in the boat mending their nets.

The trouble with many of our nets is that the meshes are too large. If a fish can get his gills and half his body through the network, he tears and rends and works his way out, and leaves the place through which he squirmed a tangle of broken threads. In our desire to make everything so easy we relax, we loosen, we widen. We let men after they are once in the Gospel net escape into the world, and go into indulgences and sin and around Gallies, from north side to south side, and from east side to west side, expecting that they will come back again. We ought to make it easy for them to get into the kingdom of God [illegible] as far as we can, make it impossible for them to get out. The poor advice nowadays is, "Go and do just as you did before you were captured for God and Heaven. The net was not intended to be a restraint or any hindrance. What you did before you were a Christian do now. Go to all styles of amusement, read all the styles of books, engage in all styles of behavior as before you were converted." And so, through these meshes of permission and license they wriggle out through this opening and that opening, leaving the net as they go, and soon all the souls that we expected to land in Heaven, before we know it, are back in the deep sea of the world. Oh, when we go a-Gospel fishing, let us make it as easy as possible for souls to get in and as hard as possible to get out.

In the Bible language we are sometimes verbings when it talks about self-denial, and keeping the body under, and about walking the narrow way and entering the strait gate and about carrying the cross? Is there to be no way of telling whether a man is a Christian except by his taking the communion chalice on sacrament day? May a man be as reckless about his thoughts, about his words, about his temper, about his amusements after conversion as before? Alas, the words of Christ are as little heeded when He said: "Whosoever doth not bear his cross and come after me can not be my disciple." The church is fast becoming as bad as the world, and when it gets as bad as the world it will be worse than the world by so much, as it will and expectedly of a most appalling kind to its other defects.

Furthermore, many of our nets are torn to pieces by being entangled with other nets. It is a sad sight to see fishermen fighting about sea room and pulling in opposite directions, each to get his net, both nets damaged by the struggle and losing all the fish. In this land, where there are more than 70,000,000 people, there are at least 30,000,000 not in the Sunday schools and churches. In such an Atlantic ocean of opportunity there is room for all the nets and all the boats and all the fishermen and for millions more. There should be no rivalry between churches. Each one does a work peculiar to itself. But there are cities in this country where there is now going on an awful ripping and rending and tearing of fishing nets. Indeed all over Christendom at this time there is a great war going on between fishermen, ministers against ministers.

Now, I have noticed a man cannot fish and fight at the same time. He either neglects his net or his musket. It is amazing how much time some of the fishermen have to look after other fishermen. It is more than I can do to take care of my own net. You see the wind is just right, and it is such a good time for fishing, and the fish are coming in so rapidly that I have to keep my eyes and hand busy. There are about 200,000,000 souls wanting to get into the kingdom of God, and it will require all the nets and all the fishermen of Christendom to safely land them. Oh, brethren of the ministry, let us spend our time in fishing, instead of fighting. But if I angrily jerk my net across your net, and you jerk your net angrily across mine, we will soon have two broken nets and no fish. The Lord's vineyard is nearly destroyed by the French infidelity, and ecclesiastical war is the worst thing possible while hauling souls into the kingdom. My friends, I notice in the text that James, the son of Zebedee, and John, his brother, were busy at mending somebody else's nets and I rather think that we who are engaged in Christian work in this opening century will require all our spare time to mend our own nets. God help us in the important duty!

In this work of repair we need to put into the net some threads of common sense. When we can present religion as a great practicality we will catch a hundred souls where now we catch one. Present religion as an intellectuality and we will fail. Out in the fisheries there are set across the waters what are called gill nets, and the fish put their heads through the meshes and then cannot withdraw them, because they are caught by the gills. But gill nets cannot be of any service in religious work. When we are caught for the truth by their heads, it is by the head we get out of it. No argument ever moved a man and no sermon ever brought a man into the kingdom of God. Heart work, not head work. Away with your gill nets! Sympathy, helpfulness, consolation, love are the warp of some of the threads that we need in abundance in our gospel nets when we are mending them.

When you are mending your net for this wide, deep sea of humanity take out that wiry thread of criticism and that horsehair thread of harshness and put in a soft silken thread of Christian sympathy. Yes, when you are mending your nets tear out those old twines of gloomy and weary piety, a few threads of politeness, hospitality, in the house of God. Let all Christian faces beam with a look that means welcome. Say "good morning" to the stranger who enters your pew and at the close shake hands with him and say, "How did you like the music? Why, you would be to that man a panel of the door of Heaven; you would be to him a note of the doxology that seraphs sing when a new soul arrives in Heaven. I have in other days entered a pew in church, and the woman at the other end of the pew looked at me as much as to say, "How dare you? This is my pew, and I pay the rent for it!" Would I crowded to the other corner and made myself as small as possible and felt as though I had been strangely rebuked. So there are people who have a sharp edge to their religion, and they cut with it enough. But the most of people had been cheated to be Christians if they were glad of it. Oh, let us forget to square our corners and appear in gentlemanliness or lady-hood.

As in mending our nets we need a little put on the different threads that go to make up the magnificent fabric of our faith. Our work is especially among the poor in our faith. The man who believes only half a Bible or the Bible in spots, the man who holds the cause and promises of God, the man who hesitates in talking about this and doubting about that, will be a failure in Christian work. Show me the man who rather thinks that the garden of Eden may have had no sin in it and is not quite certain that the Flood may have been chance after all, and who does not know whether or not the Bible is inspired, and I tell you that man for soul saving is a poor stick. Faith in God and in Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost and the absolute necessity of a regenerated heart in order to see God is a thread in one thread you must have in your mended net, or you will never be successful fisher for men. Why, how can you doubt? The refreshment thread to tear out of your net is unbelief, and the most important thread that you are to put in it is faith—faith in God, triumphant faith, everlasting faith.

Oh, this important work of mending our nets! If we could get our nets right, we would accomplish more in soul saving in the next year than we have in the last. Is there should we get them mended? Just where and for what end are the two boys mending their nets—where you see James and John had no time to go ashore. They were not fishing for fun, as you and I do in summer time. It was their livelihood and that of their families. They mended their nets where they were in the ship. "Oh," says some one, "I mean to get my net mended, and I will go down to the public library and I will see what the scientists say about evolution and about the 'survival of the fittest,' and I will read up what the theologians say about 'advanced thought.' I will leave the ship awhile, and I will go ashore and stay there till my net is mended." Do that, my brother, and you will have no net left. Instead of their helping you mend your net, they will steal the pieces that remain. Better stay in the Gospel boat, where you have all the means for mending your net. What are they? do you ask? I answer, all you need you have where you are—namely, a Bible and a place to pray. The more you study evolution and adopt what is called advanced thought, the more useless you will be. Stay in the ship and mend your net. That is where James, the son of Zebedee, and John, his brother, staid. That is where all who get their nets mended stay.

I notice that all who leave the Gospel boat and go ashore to mend their nets stay there. Or if they try again to fish they do not catch anything. Get out of the Gospel boat and go up into the world to get your net mended, and you will live to see the day when you will feel like the man who, lay forsaken Christmas, sighed: "I would give a thousand pounds to feel as I did in 1800." The time will come when you would be willing to give a thousand pounds to feel as you did in 1861. These men who have given up their religion cannot help you a bit.

These deep brethren of the denominations, afflicted with theological nets, had better go to mending nets instead of breaking them. Perhaps they break up the old nets and try to foist on us a new religion for them enough some great sensation day that will prove them wrong. A few years ago, taking the address delivered to a man who wanted to upset the religion of Jesus Christ and start a new one, he said: "Go and be crucified and then raise yourself from the grave the third day!" Those who propose to mend their nets by secular and skeptical books are like the man who has just one week for fishing, and six of the days he spends in reading Izaak Walton's "Complete Angler" and Wheatley's "Fish and Line" and Scott's "Fishing in Northern Waters" and Pullman's "Lake Nipigon of Fly Fishing for Trout," and then on Saturday morning his last day out, goes to the river to try his skill. But that day the fish will not bite, and late on Saturday night he goes to his home with empty baskets. Alas, alas! If when the Saturday night of our life drops on us it shall be found that we have spent our time in the libraries of worldly philosophy, trying to mend our nets, and we have only a few scales to report we brought to land through our instrumentality while some young fisherman, his library made up of a Bible and an almanac, shall come home laden with the spoils, his trophies all the souls within 18 miles of his log cabin meeting house.

In the time of great disturbance in Naples in 1840 Masaniello a barefoot fishing boy, dropped his fishing rod and by strange magnetism took command of that city of [illegible] souls. He took off his fishing jacket and put on a robe of state in the presence of howling mobs. He put his hand on his lip as a signal, and they were silent. He waved his hand away from him, and they retired to their homes. Armies passed in review before him. He became the nation's idol. The rapid rise and complete supremacy of that young fisherman, Massaniello, has no parallel in all history. But something equal to that and better than that is an everyday occurrence in Heaven. God takes some of those who in this world were fishers of men and who toiled very humbly, but because of the way they mended their nets and employed their nets after they were mended He suddenly hoists them and robes them and scepters them and crowns them and makes them rulers over many cities and He marches armies of saved ones before them in review.

But do not spend your time in fishing with hook and line. Why did not James, the son of Zebedee, sit on the wharf at Capernaum and dangle over the side, and with a hook and line and a worm on the hook dipped in the water wait for some goldfish to come up and be caught? Why did not Zebedee spend his time in trolling to catch the early? Because there were other things more pressing on a boat and line, they were mending their nets. So let the church of God not be content with having here and there a net mended another soul brought into the kingdom. We want all the sons with nets—deep nets, wide nets, magnificent cross-passing nets, and take the treasures in by hundreds and thousands and millions. Are we always willing to be in a day and the Democratic party shake with the dread of a disappointed ballot. Do you know what will be the two most tremendous forces in our Heaven's centennial? Among the quadrillions of ages which shall roll on what two occasions will be to us the greatest? The day of our coronation when we shall be one of the two greatest. The second greatest, I think, will be the day when we shall have put in paradise before us those Christ calls for us and what we did for Christ, the one so great, the other so little. That will be the only embarrassment in Heaven. My Lord and my God! When will we be able to tell you how we love you? Our life are full of the sacrifices great sacrifices for you and our sins innumerable for Heaven. Oh, the ecstatic moment! Hallelujahs! Hallelujahs! Hallelujahs