

# The Disciple's Watching for Souls

by John Henry Jowett

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of watching for souls, suppressing one's own ego, and cultivating a mood of cheeriness and praise in order to be effective in ministry.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 126:5, Proverbs 11:30, Isaiah 40:31, Matthew 4:19, 1 Corinthians 9:22, Ephesians 4:11, Philippians 4:4, 2 Timothy 2:15, 1 Peter 5:2

**Topics:** "Soul Winning", "Christian Ministry"

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## Description

John Henry Jowett emphasizes the serious work of watching for souls, acknowledging the inadequacy of preachers and the need for continuous improvement in their ministry. Reflecting on Thomas Boston's earnest desire to be a fisher of men, Jowett highlights the importance of being Christ-formed and Christ-given in our ministry. He urges preachers to keep themselves out of sight, cultivate cheeriness and praise, study the individuals they are trying to reach, learn from experienced fishers like John Wesley and the Salvation Army, and focus on the joy of winning souls to maintain passion and drive in their ministry.

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## Transcript

"I will make you fishers of men." Matthew 4:19

I wish to devote this chapter to the consideration of the serious work of watching for souls. I do not presume to be a teacher who has secrets to unfold; still less can I claim to be an expert in the great vocation. I suppose it is true of all preachers that as we grow older our sense of the inefficiency of our work becomes intensified. The wonder grows that God can accomplish so much with such inadequate instruments. One's satisfaction with the evangel deepens with the years; but one is increasingly discontented with the imperfect way in which we present it. No, I do not write as one who is proficient; I am only a blunderer at best; but I write as one who is honestly desirous of better and more useful equipment. I have often been amused by the headline to the preface in Isaac Walton's "Compleat Angler." Here is the quaint sentence: "To the reader of this discourse, but especially to the Honest Angler." And in this chapter I conceive myself as writing, not to expert anglers, or even to successful anglers, but to those who are "honest," and who are sincerely desirous to become proficient in their ministry. More than two hundred years ago there was a young probationer in the Church of Scotland named Thomas Boston. He was about to preach before the parish of Simprin. in contemplation of the eventful visit he sat down to meditate and pray. "Reading in secret, my heart was touched with Matthew 4:19: 'Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.' My soul cried out for the accomplishing of that to me, and I was very desirous to know how I might

follow Christ so as to be a fisher of men, and for my own instruction in that point I addressed myself to the consideration of it in that manner." Out of that honest and serious consideration there came that quaint and spiritually profound and suggestive book: "A Soliloquy on the Art of Man-Fishing." All through Thomas Boston's book one feels the fervent intensity of a spirit eager to know the mind of God in the great matter of fishing for souls. Without that passion our enquiry is worthless. "The all-important matter in fishing is to have the desire to learn."

"Now for the art of catching fish, that is to say, how to make a man - that was not - to be an angler by a book; he that undertakes it shall undertake a harder task than Mr. Hales, a most valiant and excellent fencer, who in the printed book called 'A Private School of Defense,' undertook to teach that art or science, and was laughed at for his labour - not that but many useful things might be learned by that book, but he was laughed at because that art was not to be taught by words." So says Isaac Walton in his famous book on Angling. It is painfully true. If books would make an angler, I should be the most expert fisher in this neighborhood. On one of my shelves there is quite a little collection of fishing books, out of which I have been able to borrow many hints and suggestions for my own particular labour. I think I know them fairly well, and in many of their chapters could pass an examination with honours. But in the practical handling of the rod I should come in the rear of the most incompetent. In angling I am a splendid theorist, but useless in practice. Is it not here that we must begin our consideration of the matter of the ministry of Christ? Books cannot make a preacher; he may find them full of helps, but they are not creators of gifts. They may teach how to make sermons, but they have nothing to do with the creation of prophets. We are made by Christ. "I will make you." We are fashioned in His presence. Every wealthy and fruitful gift for our work is born directly of His own grace and love. Ring out the music of the changing emphasis in this phrase! The promise reveals its treasure as each word is taken in turn and given distinct prominence. "I will make you" He will make us just in that secret and mysterious way in which true poetry comes into being. The gift will come as a breath, as an inspiration, as a new creation. "When He ascended on high . . . He gave gifts unto men." He dropped one gift here, and a commonplace man became a pastor. He dropped another gift here, and the undistinguished became a prophet. He dropped a third gift yonder, and an impotent man became a powerful evangelist. "I will make you fishers of men." But even though the germinal gifts of the preacher are Christ-born and Christ-given, our Lord expects us to reverently and diligently use our minds. He will further fashion and enrich His gifts through our own alertness. The incipient capacity will be developed by our own intelligent observation and experience. What can we learn which will foster our heaven-born gift? Let us turn to the fisher in natural waters, and see what hints he may give us for the labours in our own sphere. What, then, does the angler say to fishers of men?

Keep out of sight! Mark Guy Pearse is an expert fisher, and rarely does a year pass without his paying a visit to the rivers of Northumberland. And he has more than once laid down what he considers to be the three essential rules for all successful fishing, and concerning which he says, "It is no good trying if you don't mind them. The rule is this: Keep yourself out of sight. And secondly, keep yourself further out of sight. And thirdly, keep yourself further out of sight!" Mr. Pearse's counsel is confirmed by every fisher. A notable angler, writing recently in one of our daily papers, summed up all his advice in what he proclaims the golden maxim: "Let the trout see the angler and the angler will catch no trout." Now this is a first essential in the art of man-fishing: the suppression and eclipse of the preacher. How easily we become obtrusive! How easily we are tempted into self-aggressive prominence! How prone we are to push ourselves to the front of our work in quest of fame and praise and glory! The temptation comes in a hundred different ways. It steals upon us in our study and spoils our secret labour. It destroys the efficacy even of the bait we prepare. It comes upon us in the pulpit and perverts our workmanship even when we

are in the very midst of our work. The devil secretly whispers to us in most unctuous flattery: "That was a fine point you made." And we readily respond to the suggestion. And so the insidious destruction is wrought. We don't stand aside. If I may vary my figure, let me say that our function is to draw aside the curtain and hide ourselves somewhere in its robes. Let us remember that so soon as our people see the preacher they will not take his bait. As soon as we become prominent our Lord is never seen. Keep out of sight!

Cultivate a mood of cheeriness and praise. Here is a bit of counsel from an old book whose phraseology and spelling have quite an old-world flavour about them. It is a book on fishing. The writer is recording the requisite virtues of the angler: "He should not be unskillful in music, that whensoever either melancholy, heaviness of his thoughts, or the perturbations of his own fancies, stirreth up sadness in him, he may remove the same with some godly hymn or anthem, of which David gives him ample examples." Is that not rather a far-fetched notion of an angler's equipment? Why should he require the gift of music? Because, says my author, when the angler is depressed he cannot throw a light line. When a man is melancholy his throw will be heavy. When his spirits are light and exuberant, he will be able to touch the surface of the water with the exquisite delicacy of a passing feather. Can we not apply the counsel to the ministry of preaching? If we come into our pulpits in a depressed and complaining frame of mind, we shall lack the requisite throw. If we are possessed by melancholy we shall catch no fish. And therefore it is well that we, too, should resort to the service of song. We must sing away our depressions and melancholies before we preach the evangel of grace. We must put on "the garment of praise." I frequently consult a book given to me many years ago, and now out of print: "Earnest Christianity," and account of the life and journal of the Rev. James Caughey. There is much in that journal that reminds me of David Brainard and John Wesley. One day James Caughey was depressed and melancholy, full of lamentation and complaint. There was no music in his spirit and there was no power upon his tongue. He preached, but ineffectively, because his words were not pervaded by the spirit of praise. And then he took to the corrective of prayer and singing. He adopted William Law's counsel, and chanted himself into lightness and buoyancy of heart. He exchanged the "spirit of heaviness for the garment of praise." And now mark the change in the diary: "Easy preaching now. The sword has more edge, more apt to penetrate; more strength in my soul's arm to lay it around me fearlessly." That is the spirit. We must address ourselves to the great act of preaching in the exuberance which belongs to a thankful and praiseful heart.

Study the fish! George Eliot was once listening to the complaints of some angling friends as they were describing their fruitless day's work. Looking into their empty creels she said. "You should make a deeper study of the subjectivity of the trout." That is a very suggestive word, pregnant with significance for the fishers in the world of men. We must study the fish that we may find out what will win them for the Lord. All fish cannot be caught by the same bait. We must study the individual prejudices, and habits and tastes. We must discover what will catch this man and that man, and address ourselves accordingly. I was once passing through a little village in the Lake district, and there was a card in the shop window which gave me more than a passing thought. On the card were a number of artificial flies with this engaging headline: "Flies with which to catch fish in this locality." The shopkeeper had nothing to say about the requirements of the Midlands. He had studied the characteristics of the fish in his own neighborhood, and he had discovered what bait provided the best allurements. We preachers must do it in our own localities. It was the practice of the Apostle Paul: "To the Jews I became as a Jew that I might gain the Jews." He became "all things to all men that he might gain some." He baited his hook according to the fish he wanted to catch. I don't think we should fish with the same hook for Lydia and the Philippian jailer. It may be that we shall discover that a sermon will never effect the purpose. We may find out that a letter will do infinitely

better work. Or it may be that a direct talk may be the requisite constraint. Or, again it may be that a long conversation, apparently indirect and aimless, but quietly dropping one delicate hint, may win a soul for Christ. Study the fish.

Learn from other fisherman! Other men will never make us fishers, but they may make us better fishers. If we have the rudimentary gift their experience may help to enrich it. Let us turn to the expert fishermen and see if their ways and methods can give us helpful counsel. John Wesley was a great fisher, Alexander Whyte has told us how he has made a patient and laborious study of John Wesley's journals for the purpose of classifying all the texts and upon which the great preacher built his evangel. Is not that a splendid discipline for anyone who wishes to become skilful in the great ministry? What did Wesley preach about? And how did he fit his message to the changing circumstances of his varying spheres? The Salvation Army has a great body of expert fishers. They lack many things, but they catch fish. How do they do it? We may dislike many of their ways, but what is it in their ministry which enables them to win multitudes for the Lord? What was the secret of Finney and Moody? And what is it about Torrey which constrains the people to become disciples of the Christ? Let us set about this investigation like men who wish to do great business for the Lord. Let us eagerly pick up any hints which these highly endowed and experienced men may be able to give us.

"It is a great matter to take a trout early in your trial. It gives one more heart. It seems to keep one about his business. Otherwise you are apt to fall into unproductive reverie." I know no word more closely applicable to the work of the ministry. If we do not catch men we are in great danger of losing even the desire to catch them. Our purposed activity is in peril of becoming a dream. Let me counsel my fellow preachers in the lay ministry to make up their minds to catch one soul, to go about it day and night until the soul is won. And when they have gained one man for the Master I have then no fear as to what will be their resultant mood. The joy of catching a soul is unspeakable! When we have got one soul we become possessed by the passion for souls. Get one and you will want a crowd! And let me say this further word. Keep a list of the names of the souls you win for the King, and if on any day you are apt to be cast down, and the lightness and buoyancy goes out of your spirit, bring out that list and read it over, and let the contemplation of those saved lives set your heart a-singing and inspire you to fresh and more strenuous work. It is a good thing to have lists of the Lord's mercies by which to drive away the clouds in a day of adversity. Let your labour be directed to the immediate catching of men for the Lord. "It is a great matter to take a trout early in your trial."

And now I will close this meditation by offering a suggestion which I obtained from an advertisement in an anglers paper some time ago. "Now is the time for your old favorite rods to be overhauled and treated with a steel tonic that will not fail to work wonders in the way of renewing their strength." And following this advertisement came this confirmatory testimonial: "I am glad to acknowledge that a very whippy gig-whip of a rod has been converted into a powerful weapon." My hearers will immediately perceive the spiritual significance of the words. There are times when we need the "steel tonic" in order that our poor ministries may be converted into powerful weapons. And, blessed be God, we have the promise of this redemptive work in the very names in which the Holy Spirit is revealed to us. He is called the Renewer, the Reviver, the Restorer of souls, and by His baptism the poorest, weakest agent can be turned into a powerful weapon. "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength." Let us turn to our Lord this very night, and seek for that renewal in the strength of which we shall turn to our work with multiplied possibility, and with perfect assurance of success.

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