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## Net Fishing: "And I Will Make you Fishers of Men. . ."

Milton Jones

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# NET FISHING

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*"And I will make  
you Fishers of Men. . ."*

Milton Jones

Fishing has never been a passion of mine. The reason is simple— I never catch anything when I go fishing. Now my wife, on the other hand, is the true fisherperson in our family. She not only loves it, but she is always bringing back a big salmon when she goes out. Yet, I suspect that what she does and what I used to try to do (except for the lack of catching fish) is very different from the visual picture Jesus was trying to create on that day when he said that his disciples would be fishing for men.

My first experience with fishing involved the purchase of a Zebco rod and reel.

Similarly when I have been out at sea in the Pacific Northwest, rod and reels were still the method. That is fishing to me. And perhaps because that is the only way I perceive fishing, I tend to translate fishing for men as going out individually with my spiritual rod and reel after some unsuspecting soul.

However, I doubt if any fisherman on the Sea of Galilee thought of a rod and reel when Jesus spoke of being "fishers of men." On the Sea of Galilee, they used nets. When Jesus told them that they would become fishers of men, they saw themselves throwing out nets.

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*Milton Jones preaches for the Northwest Church of Christ in Seattle, Washington.*

The kind of fishing that I am accustomed to is technically called "angling" as opposed to net fishing. Most of my life, I have been an angler for men and never realized it. Art McPhee in his book, **Friendship Evangelism**, describes the differences between an angler and a net fishermen.<sup>1</sup> Upon reading McPhee's analysis, I could never view evangelism as I had in the past. Let me share with you his comparison and make some comments.

**An angler can fish by himself. Net fishermen need other people.**

In Luke 5, Jesus told Peter to throw out his nets for a catch after a whole evening of not catching a thing. Upon Peter's miraculous catch of fish, what was the first thing he did? He signaled for his partners to help in order that the boat would not sink.

Evangelism, or fishing for men, also involves partnership. It is not the preacher doing it all. It is not simply the gifted in evangelism doing it all. Net fishing involves everyone in the body of Christ working together as partners to lead people to the Lord.

God can use everyone as net fishermen. And the church needs everyone net fishing if it is to grow. When we are net fishermen, evangelism is not relegated to the few who have been trained in in-depth methods of one-on-one personal evangelism. Too often that type of evangelism is merely angling. That is all I knew for years. The only way I could do evangelism was to do it one-on-one according to the prescribed method I had been taught. If someone had



not received that training and did not know the method, he was pretty well left out of the evangelistic process. And that was usually most of the congregation.

But when we are net fishermen, we all need each other. A person does not have to be specially trained to lend a hand. Even new christians have an important part in net fishing. Most older christians do not have many non-christian friends.

***Our approach to evangelism at Northwest is simply to tell people about Jesus.***

That is all most new christians have. However, most new christians do not know how to study the Bible with someone. Most older christians do. When you get the two net fishing together, a lot of non-christians can find out what the Bible says.

The very fact that the body loves each other and is harmonious is an aspect of net fishing. Jesus states the mark of his disciples are that they "love one another" (John 13:34). But the effect of this love is an evangelistic one—"by this the world will know that you are my disciples". In other words, when Christians work together in loving each other, their very relationship becomes an apologetic to the non-Christian. Angling can never demonstrate the body loving each other.

I am often asked the question, "How many people did you win to the Lord last year?" Let me answer that question emphatically—"I don't know!" In fact, I do not know how to measure it. Maybe I could tell you how many baptisms there were at the Northwest Church of Christ in Seattle, but how many I am responsible for is quite another matter that would only concern an angler.

Let me explain this using as an example the small group Bible Study that meets at my house. Every Wednesday evening at 7:00 p.m. a group of people come to my house to examine the Bible and it is relevance to our lives today. One of the purposes of the study is evangelism. Therefore, there are always a number of non-christians who come to the group.

One Wednesday evening a new Christian brings his unchurched friend to the group. As soon as his friend walks in the door, he is greeted by one of the more outgoing members of the group who has the gift of hospitality and the knack of making people feel welcome. Another group member takes the newcomer into the meeting room and once again shows him the

love of Christ as he introduces him, shows him a seat, and gives him a Bible. Soon, the group leader opens the study in an interesting way and leads the group into discovering what the Bible says and means. One of the group members helps the the visitor find the verse in the Bible which is being discussed. At one point, a testimony is given as an application to the text. When the visitor hears the testimony he realizes that he is now where this person used to be. He begins to wonder if Jesus could do for him what he has done for this christian. After the study there is a meal. One of the group members makes sure the visitor is first in line and gets a generous helping of her special dish. Another person invites the guest to church. Upon coming back the next week, someone asked him if he wants personally to look at the Bible and find out how to become a Christian. The guest comes to me, and I happen to know the answer to his question. After my explanation, he decides to become a Christian, and I baptize him.

Now who gets the credit for this conversion? Do I because I baptized him? Or does the new christian who first brought him? Or perhaps it is the group leader? Maybe it is the one who had the one-on-one study? Or is it the giver of the testimony? Or could it be the one who gave him the food?

Who gets the credit? It is obvious isn't it? No one gets the credit—God gets the glory. We were all just a bunch of net fishermen working together. Everyone knew the purpose—we wanted to lead the lost to Christ. As a result, everybody just did what they could do to help whether it was leading a group, greeting at the door, asking him to church, or passing out the food. All of us work together in net fishing to the glory of God.

**Angling Depends on Gimmicks and Techniques. Net Fishing is More Natural.**

Have you ever noticed that anglers use those shiny, little lures to attract the fish? Then once they have hooked that unsuspecting fish, they violently pull it out of its environment. Angling is rather deceitful, isn't it? And some of our methods of evangelism are too. After preaching my favorite sermon, "Put in A Good Word for Jesus," where I tell the stories of many of the people who have found the Lord in Seattle a woman came up to me and asked, "What do you use over there at Northwest?" It was like she was checking out our bait. What are the people biting on over there in Seattle? I knew what she wanted. She wanted to know our particular approach to evangelism. Was it something you could buy in a box? Was it something that she could take and plug in at her church and magically have conversions?

"What do you use there at Northwest?" she asked. After thinking about the question, I responded,



"Jesus." It was not what she wanted, but it was true. Our approach to evangelism at Northwest is simply to tell people about Jesus. We do not have a canned approach, we simply tell the story of Jesus and see people fall in love with him all the time. When they do, we tell them how they can follow him. Too many methods of evangelism are like the anglers who through trickery try to make a catch. They remind me of salesmen who deceitfully lure customers into making a decision that they will regret someday. They remind me of those late night television commercials selling gadgets that "slice, dice, and makes julienne fries." "Wait do not ask how much it costs! Because if you order before midnight tonight, we will throw in. . ."

Like people with buyer's remorse, converts responding to a gimmick guilt ridden manipulation don't stick. Paul says, "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God" (I Cor 2:17).

On the other hand, net fishing is much more natural. A net is thrown into the water and fish swim into it. Effective evangelism to net fishermen is based on the Lord are first introduced to him through a friend or relative. Net fishermen are simply putting in a good word for Jesus in the natural situations of their life—whether it be with their friends, relatives, fellow workers, or neighbors. They believe that God has put them into their particular environments to be witnesses of the glory of God.

### **Anglers Fish for Sport. Net Fishermen Fish for a Living.**

The only reason that I would go fishing is for the fun of it. I am not a fisherman. It is not my vocation. And even though my wife loves to fish and would go as often as she could, I have never heard her respond to the question, "What do you do?" with "I fish." To her fishing is a sport. It is a diversion. It is fun .

That certainly was not the case with Peter and John. They were fishermen. It was not their favorite sport. It was not a pastime. It was not something they did. It was who they were.

When Jesus called us to be fishers of men, it is what he wanted us to be more than what he wanted us to do. A lot of people tell me that they do their evangelism on Tuesday nights. Then what do they do on Monday nights? Do they quit talking about Jesus? An angler might, but not a net fisherman. Fishing for men is not something we do periodically. It's who we are. We are fishermen, there is no time that we are not. I like what Francis of Assisi said: "Unless you preach everywhere you go there's no use to go anywhere to preach."

*Anglers are interested in the catching. Net fishermen are interested in the keeping.*

If I went fishing, it would not be because I need fish. There is plenty of food in my refrigerator. Besides, fish isn't even one of my favorite foods. I would fish for the thrill of the catch. Not so with a net fishermen. He needs the fish. It is his business. His family could not survive without the fish.

The same is true of the church. We do not fish just for the catch. Without evangelism, we would wither away and die. We fish for survival. Without fruit we have no future.

If I caught a big fish, I would want to hold him up and have my picture taken with it. That is typical of an angler, isn't it? He is looking for a trophy. Net fishermen need the fish. They do not care about the records or plaques on a wall—they simply know that they need fish.

When I am angling, I also do not care that much about cleaning the fish. Once the catch is over. I have done my deal. Many are that way with fishing for men. Once the person becomes a christian, they are not concerned with the keeping. If we did with our physical children what we often do with our spiritual children, many of us would be arrested for only to pursue having another one. Yet we do it with the people we lead to Christ. Our goal in the great commission is not baptisms but disciples—learners for life.

My favorite part of the classic book, **The Complete Angler** by Izaak Walton, is when he explains how to use a frog as bait.

Thus use your frog: put your hook...through his mouth and out at his gills, and then with a fine needle and silk sew the upper part of his leg with only one stitch to the arming-wire of your hook, or tie the frog's leg above the upper joint to the armed wire; and in so doing, use him as though you loved him.

Do you think that frog feels loved? Use him as though you loved him. That is the way many of our approaches have been in evangelism. We use people "as though" we loved them. They think they are loved. But in reality they are merely objects of our evangelistic efforts. They are just another number, a notch on our evangelistic gun.

We can never use people "as though we loved" them and be about the mission of Christ. We must love people—period. We love them whether or not they ever want to become christians. We love them unconditionally. Our evangelism must never use people.

Net fishing needs to be a top priority in the church. It must be our vocation. Angling will never haul in many fish. To have a great catch we will have to use nets. There are many fish (or people) out there. I need some help. How about you?