

FROM FAILURE TO SUCCESS

"And he said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find" (John 21:6).

As the scene opens in the twenty-first chapter of John, we find ourselves in a hallowed place, beside the Sea of Galilee. Here Christ had walked; here He had talked; here He had stilled the violent winds. Here He had walked on the surface of the water as if it had been a hard pavement. Here at the command of Christ Peter had caught the fish that had in its mouth the money with which to pay the tax.

Among the personalities who were present were Peter and Thomas. They had sinned greatly and had been forgiven much, so they loved much. Peter was aggressive and full of adventure. Thomas had been doubtful, but he now believed.

Nathanael was a good man. He had never sowed wild oats. He was a praying man. Christ called him an Israelite in whom there was no guile. He was a man of unusual reputation. Only good reports were heard about him.

James and John were naturally bigoted and ambitious, but grace had changed them. What a team they made!

There were two other disciples whose names were not recorded. There was a place for them.

On this occasion Christ had come in a surprise appearance to these followers of His on the shore. In this incident we find a message about the secret of success in Christian service. All of us who have found cleansing from sin through the precious blood of Christ long to be true servants of our Saviour and Lord. We have seen a glorious face which the world has never seen. We have heard a thrilling voice which the world has never heard. We have received a Saviour and have a Friend Whom the world has never known. We have enlisted in a service which the world does not understand. We have become the willing bondslaves of God's dear Son. It is inevitable, therefore, that we find ourselves asking such questions as: Where would Christ have me go? What would Christ have me do? How would Christ have me serve? What would Christ have me give? In which way can I best serve my heavenly Master?

With these questions in mind, let us look again at John 21:1-6, where we read of a fishing expedition which ended in dismal failure but was afterward turned into the most surprising success. In this paragraph we see a sad but true illustration of self-conducted or self-managed service. It portrays what always happens when people try to achieve spiritual results by their own cleverness, not their own strength or according to their own supposed wisdom. It gives us a striking contrast between self-directed service, to which all Christians are prone, and Christ-directed service, the secret of which all Christians need to learn and to practice constantly.

I. Self-Directed Service.

There were four features of their self-directed service.

1. It was in self-will.

Peter said, "I go a fishing." The water and the ship were nearby, so why not go? The words, "I go a fishing," look innocent enough in themselves, yet somehow there is a ring of the old Simon Peter ego about them. The

very way in which the words were recorded, taken with what follows, suggests self-sure and self-determined tones.

Pause and reflect. Peter and his companions previously had left their nets and boats at the call of Christ, to become fishers of men.

For two years or more they had been going where He sent them, and doing what He directed. He had already met them twice since His astonishing re-appearance from the grave, but there was nothing from Him about their going back to the old fishing business. When Peter said, "I go a fishing," did he mean simply for one night? -- or was he opening a door to return to the past? We cannot conclusively answer these questions; but one thing is clear: it was a purely self-originated excursion, and one which unsuspectedly involved momentous issues, as we shall see.

If service is to be truly Christian and spiritually successful, then besides human willingness there must be divine guidedness. Peter had plenty of human willingness, but did not tarry to make sure that we are not serving our Lord in self-will, or according to our own poor, self-wisdom. Outside the will of Christ there may be much that is called Christian service, but there is no real Christian service; for real Christian service is the obedient fulfillment of His will, and nothing else, regardless of how well-meaning it may be. There is such a thing as prayerless keenness to serve Him. It often looks fine; it makes tarrying for prayer seem to be a waste of valuable time; but oh, what blunderings! What rush instead of rest! What noise instead of depth! What doubtful spiritual results compared with what might have been!

2. It was under merely human leadership.

Peter did not go alone. The other six men immediately responded, "We also go with thee." So here is not only a picture of service in self-will, but also of service under human leadership. The other disciples followed Peter's example. By a sort of common consent Peter's leadership was taken for granted. He dominated. He was made that way. Such human leadership can be of fine strategic advantage, but it becomes a snare when it veers away from the control of the heavenly Commander-in-Chief.

We must ever be careful not to follow human leaders in any way which would lead us away from the will of Christ for ourselves individually. God has His human champions to lead His people. Our Lord Jesus Christ has His subordinate officers, like Peter, John, and Paul. We must rally to their standards and clarions, follow them, and support them, yet never in a way which is inconsistent with the will of Christ as revealed to us individually; and never in a way which infringes on our individual obedience to Christ.

3. It was dangerously impulsive.

"They went forth, and entered into a ship immediately." The idea caught on like fire in dry timber. Never were a chairman and a committee more unanimous. They did not consider that there was any need or time for prayer. They never raised the question, "Is it wise?" or "Ought we act so hastily?" or "Do you

think He might not want us to spend the night out on the water?" or "Is the weather likely to be dangerous?" No; they went "immediately." From experience they had to learn that in service for Christ prayerless rush is foolish risk. There is always peril of one kind or another in self-willed service, whether at the time we realize it or not. Often we can do more harm than good by being impulsive. The secret of "safety, certainty, and enjoyment" in our Christian service is to wait to know the Lord's will.

4. It was a disappointing failure.

"And that night they caught nothing." What a waste of precious time -- not only of one man's but of seven! And if there is one thing more than another of which I am certain it is this, that their catching nothing was not because they did not try. It was not because they idled away the time or were lackadaisical in their project. There was not a lazy bone in Simon-Peter or in either of his six companions. They "toiled all night." But, as the time wore on, the outlook became darker and darker. As the grey dawn shimmered upon their tired bodies and disappointed minds, they were in a very different mood from when they had jauntily sallied forth in the early watches of the night.

"That night they caught nothing." We do not know what they thought. We do not know what they said. All we know is that "they caught nothing" -- yet they were expert fishermen. Experts in any line may fail. It is possible to do things in the right way, at the right time, in the right place, and still not get the desired results.

Oh, that you might see the spiritual futility of self-willed service. "That night they caught nothing." Those seven men in that nighttime fishing expedition show us the need of tarrying to ascertain the Master's will. The reason for their failure what that Jesus Christ was not with them in their work. Consequently, they were not meant to succeed. Without Him they were bound to fail, and so are we. How could they succeed when they had gone in flat defiance of the word of Christ? It would not have been good for them if they had. It was their failure that opened their eyes to see and their ears to hear Christ in the morning.

"Lord, clear my misted eyes to see
That nothing can avail,
Until I learn, alone with Thee,
Through praying to prevail.

What means my busy work to Thee,
If done in vain self-will?
What power or guidance can there be,
Till Thou Thy servant fill?

Lord, help me learn to wait until
Thy will I clearly see;
Then fill me, guide me, and fulfil
Thy perfect will through me."

II. Christ-Directed Service.

Let us now move on to the ending of the episode. Note the transformation from failure to success, all because self-directed service gave place to Christ-directed service. When the Lord Jesus Christ becomes our Managing Director, the whole concern takes on a new aspect.

"But when the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore; but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus. Then Jesus saith unto them, Children, have ye any meat? They answered him, No. And he said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the ship and ye shall find. They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes" (John 21:4-6).

Christ here teaches us that there is a right way and a wrong way of doing things, when it comes to manner and to method.

It seems that those seven men were within easy calling distance of the shore, yet did not recognize Christ, not even when His well-known and beloved voice rang out to them. Of course, they were tired, but it was service in self-will that dimmed their eyes to the presence of Christ, and dulled their ears to the voice of the Master.

When the disciples acknowledged their failure, Christ gave them the secret of success. He said: "Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find." Christ was telling them that they had tried all night in their way as experienced and expert fishermen and had failed. Now He calls on them to do it in a different way, in the way that He told them. It was the practice of fishermen to cast with the right hand on the left side of the boat. That is what human wisdom and habit had been doing all through the night, but without success. Now Christ said to them: "Do it My way, not as the world does it, but as the Lord directs, not according to human methods, but according to the divine method." And when they did it, a miracle followed.

1. The men received a new assurance.

When they let down the net on the right side of the vessel, they knew that they were doing it simply at the direction of that lone Figure on the beach, and that He had assured them, "Ye shall find." How encouraging it must have been to know that they were doing according to His specific bidding, and to have the assurance that He would certainly crown their efforts with success! That was the kind of assurance which gave them faith to try again even when it had seemed as though there was not a fish in the whole area.

When we yield to the temptation to depend on men, we are often disappointed in the results. But when we follow what the Lord says in His Word and are obedient to scriptural direction in spiritual service, we shall see more of the results of His power to His glory rather than to the praise of men. When the Lord beats the self-confidence out of His followers, and they confess their failures and obey His will, they shall receive more of the joy of His presence and power.

2. The men enjoyed a new success.

The empty meshes were filled with fishes. The men enjoyed a success which had eluded them before. Even so, the Lord Jesus can change your failures to

success. This truth applies to your home life, work-a-day life, and church life. Perhaps you think that you cannot do much, but what you can do you ought to do. You can do it best after tarrying prayerfully and seeking His wisdom, guidance, and enduement of power. He will make His will unmistakably clear if you will give Him the opportunity. This waiting on Christ to discover His will really works. If you will truly wait on Him and discover His will, and then conform to that will, you will advance from failure to success.

3. The men came to a new recognition of Christ.

Suddenly, through the very transformation which He had effected, that mysterious Person on the shore was recognized as the Lord Jesus Christ. All seven of them recognized Christ. It is always like that. When we are serving under self-management we lack a sense of His presence and partnership with us; but when we are really doing His will, at His Word, in His way, then, again and again, He makes His presence wonderfully clear, and near, and dear.

This early-morning episode shows us that Christ-directed service is Christ-sustained service. As those long-ago disciples finished dragging that laden net to shore, they saw a fire kindled, and fish laid thereon, and bread; and a welcoming voice saying to them, "Come and dine." It is ever so. To all of His servants who truly do His bidding Christ says, "Come and dine." He does not need anything that we can bring, for He has ample food prepared already, but He wants to sustain us and let us have fellowship with Him.

Self-directed service is exhausting, physically, mentally, and spiritually, and is therefore wrong, but Christ-directed service always brings the lovely replenishments which are needed for sustenance. We are kept fresh, buoyant, gracious, and gladsome, instead of becoming impatient, downcast, irritable, and difficult to get along with. There is quiet retirement into His presence for renewal through communion and fellowship.

Let our prayer ever be,

"Oh, use me, Lord, use even me
Just as Thou wilt, and when and where;
Until Thy blessed face I see,
Thy rest, Thy joy, Thy glory share!"