

# HOW CAN WE EXPERIENCE OUR FULL POTENTIAL?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

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A few days ago I was jogging by a house construction site and a man who was hard at work greeted me as I went by. I stopped and introduced myself, and he told me he used to attend a class which I taught a number of years ago. He was building a house on a vacant lot next to his own home, where once he had a beautiful garden. I remembered seeing his wife and children on occasion, but recently I had not seen them. When I asked him about them, he told me that his wife had left him a few years ago because, he said, "she needed to experience her full potential." She apparently felt that living with him and the children was no longer fulfilling to her, so she left him and went off with a friend.

I am sure we all have felt this pressure, as we are urged, "to experience our full potential," to set goals, to taste all that life has for us physically, emotionally, intellectually, and at times, spiritually. To help us do this, in our area we have all kinds of offers from the "human potential movement." A visit to any bookstore will convince you of this. Here are just a few of the popular titles on view today: "Go For It!", "Own Your Own Life", "How To Take Charge Of Your Life", "The Sky Is The Limit." Then there is the book I almost bought, "How To Cope With Difficult People"! If reading is not your thing, you can always go to an evening seminar, a weekend retreat, or purchase a slickly-packaged video or audio cassette and find your full potential that way.

The ultimate aim of all of this, of course, is ego massage, as the book titles demonstrate. The book that best explains ego massage is the recent publication, *How To Be A Winner*. Self-achievement, self-motivation, self-image, self-control and self-esteem are the themes of this best seller. Self is the name of the game. This, of course, is the philosophy of every generation since man first heard the voice of the tempter in the Garden of Eden, "Indeed has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden,' for God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen.3).

It is true that we all have been given one life on this earth, and it is true that most of us desire to discover and enjoy our full potential. But the question a follower of Jesus Christ needs to ask is, "How can I experience my full potential if, as the Scriptures say, 'my life is no longer my own but has been brought with a price'?" We can get much help in this matter by studying the life of Jesus as he first calls the first disciples to follow him, in Luke 5:1-12.

How can we experience our full potential? Here is the first part of a two-part answer to this question, found in Luke's gospel.

## **I. Evaluate Our Self-Confidence, Luke 5:1-7**

Now it came about that while the multitude were pressing around Him and listening to the word of God, He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret; and He saw two boats lying at the edge of the lake; but the fishermen had gotten out of them, and were washing their nets. And He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little way from the land. And He sat down and began teaching the multitudes from the boat. And when He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered and said, "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but at Your bidding I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish; and their nets began to break; and they signaled to their partners in the other boat, for them to come and help them. And they came, and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink.

In our last message we found Jesus and his disciples ministering in the town of Capernaum, located on the

north shore of the sea of Galilee. There Jesus taught in the synagogue, healed the demon-possessed man, healed Peter's mother-in-law, as well as all those who were sick and demon-possessed. Our Lord then left the city, saying to the disciples and others who wanted him to stay and continue his healing ministry, "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent out for that purpose." "And He kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea and Galilee" (4:43-4:45). And he said to his disciples, "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, in order that I may preach there also; for that is what I came out for." The Lord continued his Galilean ministry in the nearby villages and then returned to Capernaum.

There were many Romans, Greeks and Jews living in and around the Lake of Galilee, but only the Jews at this time were interested in hearing what Jesus had to say from the Word of God. After all, everyone knew that he was the man who had healed many people earlier in the year. Not only was he a healer, it was obvious that he was also a prophet of God, and Israel had not heard directly from a prophet in some 400 years, until John the Baptist came along. Now here was another prophet who healed the sick and taught God's word, not like the scribes, but with graciousness, authority and wisdom.

As our Lord walked along the shores of the Sea of Galilee he began preaching the Word of God. Why did his message attract so many people? His main theme concerned the Kingdom of God. I have found Ray Stedman's book *The Servant Who Rules*, very insightful regarding this message of Jesus. Here is a quote from that book that has helped me greatly:

The fact is that we are surrounded by an invisible spiritual kingdom with great forces, both of evil and of good, playing upon us. In that kingdom, Jesus is Lord; Jesus reigns supreme. And that kingdom governs all the events of history--all the events in our daily lives and circumstances. So that when we are related to the kingdom of God, we are related to the ultimate force which governs everything we are and have, and thus we are related to reality. Jesus came with the good news that all the power of God is now available to break the helpless deadlock into which man has fallen. ... Jesus came to announce that the King is at hand, the One who can master a life, put it in order, bring peace and harmony into it, and supply a power which will produce a character no one else can rival. That is the kingdom of God. It is not meat and drink, says Paul, but righteousness and joy and peace in the Holy Spirit.

The Jews had been looking for the coming of the Messiah, one who would liberate them from the Roman oppressor, but instead Jesus made the announcement, "I am he, the Messiah of Israel, but my kingdom is not of this world. I want to set up my kingdom in your hearts and reign there."

Word that Jesus was back in Capernaum spread like wildfire around the villages on the north shore of the lake. The crowds pressed in upon him so much that he was forced to look around for a safer place to address them. Spotting two boats lying by the edge of the lake (the fishermen were washing their nets nearby), Jesus stepped into one of them.

I love watching fishermen at work. Last fall, my wife, Anne Marie, and I were vacationing on the Greek Island of Ios. Each morning we left our little villa and went down to the docks for breakfast. Afterwards we liked to watch the fishermen, who had been out fishing all night, dock their boats and wash their nets in the sun. When the nets had dried, they would fold them and place them back in the boats, ready for that night's fishing. We could not help but notice their weather-beaten hands and faces, their strong bodies. At times they would sing, tease, and laugh at some private joke. They were the salt of the Greek earth, without a university education, yet were filled with the wisdom of this world, and matured by the storms and rough seas of life.

As I watched this scene played out before us each morning my mind drifted to that scene on the lake of Galilee, when our Lord escaped from the press of the crowd on to the safety of a fisherman's boat, while the owners, the very salt of the earth of Israel, washed their nets nearby.

The boat which Jesus boarded was Simon's, and he asked him to put out a little way from the land, "And He sat down and began teaching the multitudes from the boat." One commentator has written, "The Lord used Peter's boat as a floating pulpit as he cast out the gospel nets." Some of the crowd sat on the rocks to listen, some stood up to their knees in the water. The Lord's boat was anchored just a short distance from the shore, and his voice carried well over the water so all could hear his message of hope and salvation.

"And when He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Here is one of those classical "teachable moments." Picture in your mind Peter and his crew a few yards offshore, with Jesus as his guest on board his boat. By the shore lay the boat of his partners James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Keep in mind that Peter had spent most of his life on this lake and apparently was good at his trade. When he heard Jesus say, "Let down your nets for a catch," he could hardly believe his ears. Was it possible that this former carpenter, this prophet, teacher and healer, was telling him how to catch fish? I don't know about you, but when someone comes to me offering advice on a subject that I feel competent in, I have a hard time concentrating on what he has to say. These men had spent all night on the water and had returned with empty nets.

Peter's response reflects a little impatience with the Lord's suggestion that he go out again into the deep and let down his nets: "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing." Peter is saying, "I appreciate your interest in my life and occupation, but you have to understand that I am a fisherman. I really don't know much else, but fishing I know. And the schools of fish are not running. We worked all last night and came up with nothing. And believe me, you don't catch fish in this lake in the middle of the day. I sure wish you would stick to your business of preaching, teaching and healing, and let me and my mates here do the fishing."

You can almost hear the boastful pride of life, the self-confidence in his response. But there was something in the Lord's voice in that moment that caused some self-doubt in Peter. This is why he added, "But at your bidding I will let down the nets." "Lord, if it will make you happy, even though it is a waste of time, I'll let down the nets." And when he did, so many things happened so quickly he must have been in a daze: They caught a great quantity of fish; their nets began to break; they signaled to their other crew to come and help; they put the catch in both boats; and both boats began to sink!

How many times have you and I faced a situation where our Lord asked us to step out in some new adventure, something beyond what we thought was our full potential, and our immediate reaction, based on our self-confidence, pride, and past experience, was to come up with all kinds of reasons why we should not attempt to do what he had asked? We know better than to drop our nets when the fish are not running, don't we?

I will always remember an incident some 20 years ago when Ray Stedman asked me to join a teaching team to minister for a week on the college campus on the East Coast. Once we arrived, based on my past experiences of ministering on college campuses, I set about discovering where the students liked to hang out. Then, acting on that information, I got back to the ministry team and told them where the best "fishing" was to be found on that campus. I remember Ray's quiet reaction to my suggestion: "Thanks, Ron, but let's just walk around and allow the Lord to direct our ministry among the students." I submitted to that, but in my heart it made no sense at all. After all, I knew about this kind of ministry. I had the credentials and the experience.

Shortly after we had spoken in chapel, however, we met one student and he introduced us to another. Later, we were welcomed into a co-ed dorm meeting (this was not in my plans!). We arrived around 7 o'clock, and after some singing, teaching and sharing, a young man announced that he would like to become a Christian but did not know how. He wondered if one of us could help him. Then a young woman shared the same need, and another student asked us to talk to his roommate down the hall. After a long and wonderful evening's fishing, when we emptied our nets next morning at breakfast we discovered that the Lord had caused some 25 students to receive him as their Lord and Savior. Thank God my self-confident fishing plans did not prevail.

How can we experience our full potential if our life is not our own and we have been bought with a price? First, we must evaluate our self-confident life style. Peter looked at himself, at his vast experience, his family and friends, his business, boats, crews and nets. He seemed secure, confident and knowledgeable-but he had not caught any fish; his nets were empty. Secondly, we need to call our self-confidence what it really is: it is living in the flesh, which is sin in the sight of God. Our only hope in finding, experiencing and enjoying our full potential, as our Lord Jesus defines full potential, is to drop our nets and follow him. This can happen when we allow him to,

## **II. Evaluate Our Christ-Confidence, Luke 5:8-11**

But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the catch of fish they had taken; and so also James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men." And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

The Lord responded to Peter's self-confidence and pride by leading him into a situation where he had to take his eyes off himself and instead place his confidence in his Lord. It was a time for reevaluation. Peter said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man." He was faced with several realities in spite of his former self-confidence. First, you might say, he came to realize that seeing is believing. He not only saw the great catch of fish, enough to take both boats almost sink, but he saw himself in light of the presence of the Lord. That is when he realized that he was a prideful, self-centered and sinful man.

Peter also realized that the One who had joined him in the boat was much more than a prophet, teacher, miracle worker and healer. True, he was the One who had changed the water into wine; he had power over demons and diseases of all kinds; he had healed his mother-in-law; but now Jesus had demonstrated that he was Lord over nature as well. All the other miracles had occurred outside Peter's realm of experience, but this miracle took place in his own backyard, as it were, on the familiar Lake of Galilee, and it forced him to evaluate his prideful heart. All this was a gradual revelation of the person and power of our Lord Jesus Christ. The more we associate with him, listen to him, walk with him and fish with him, the more we begin to see he is so much more than we originally thought. Peter saw that as a sinful man he had no right to be in the presence of a holy God.

Peter's words sound like the words of others in Scripture: "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes," said Abraham (Gen.18:27); "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my eyes sees Thee; therefore I retract and I repent in dust and ashes," said Job (42:5-7); "Woe is me for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips...for my eyes have seen the King of the Lord of Hosts," said Isaiah (6:5); and finally, the words of the apostle John, "When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man" (Rev.1:17). It's one thing to have confidence in yourself, but quite another to be standing in the presence of the living God. That is when your view of your own potential comes under scrutiny and you find yourself woefully short of the mark-the mark of the potential which he wants you to have in him. That is what will lift you into a greater, more adventurous, more glorified arena that has Jesus at its center and you in the wings. This is where Peter finds himself now following the miraculous catch of fish.

"For amazement had seized him and all his companions," says our text. All four men were held captive by the huge catch of fish as they stood ankle deep in water and fish, their boats sinking before their eyes, their hearts gripped with fear. Then the Lord moved in with his second "teachable moment." This time he had words of encouragement, words beyond their experiences, words that would affect generations of men and women, boys and girls from every nation, tribe and family from that day forward. These were words of hope, words of salvation, words that would bring out the true potential of everyone who chose to follow Jesus.

Here are the words which our Lord uttered: "Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men." Jesus was saying, in effect, "Peter, don't be frightened. I am the Savior of the world, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. I am God incarnate, man's only hope for forgiveness, wholeness, peace joy, eternal life. I am the long-promised and long-awaited Messiah. And I have come to earth with a plan of redemption. You and your brother, James and John and others are going to experience your full spiritual potential. You are going to fit perfectly into my plan. You are vital to the overall plan of redemption. But your full spiritual potential is nothing like the world is telling you is your full potential. You will become a fisher of mankind. For your life will be brought with a price: my life, which I will give on the cross for your sins. If I am your Lord, then your life, time, energy, hopes, dreams, talents and gifts are mine to use in my plan of redemption, to the glory of my Heavenly Father.

"Peter, up to this moment you have been a part-time fisher of men. You and the others left your nets behind

and followed me on my first Galilean ministry, but you returned afterwards to your business of catching fish. But now I want you to leave your nets for good, and follow me. I will make you to become fishers of men. From now on you will be catching men, like you caught fish today. You have been catching fish to kill them, but from now on, Peter, you and the others will be catching men to impart eternal life to them. You will be taking men alive, not to kill them, like Satan catches men and then kills them. You will taking men out of the kingdom of darkness and bringing them alive into the kingdom of light."

I believe Jesus was looking ahead, beyond this time of discipleship, beyond his cross, death, burial, and resurrection, to the Day of Pentecost. That was the day the promised Holy Spirit would come upon the disciples, and Peter would cast his nets over the men in the temple area and find them filled with some 3,000 people who were added to the Kingdom of God. Later, after he and John were arrested for healing a lame man at the gate of the temple, they were given an opportunity to preach to the crowd in the temple area and they saw their nets fill up with some 5,000 believers in the risen Jesus.

"And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him." These men, Peter, Andrew, James and John, had been following Jesus since the days of John the Baptist in the wilderness. But their commitment to our Lord's life and purpose was as yet incomplete. They followed him and served him as it was convenient, as it fit their seasons of fishing. Their hearts up to now were divided between work and following him. But now with this very personal miracle they realized that this Jesus could provide all their physical, emotional and spiritual needs if they would but follow him. Added to this security, however, our Lord was offering them a life of adventure beyond anything they could imagine, beyond boats, beyond nets and fish, beyond earthly security. He was offering them a life far beyond a horizontal level of human potential: They were to become "fishers of men."

In his book, *According to Luke*, David Gooding writes,

For the believer, secular and spiritual work are simply different ends of an undivided spectrum, and the secular work can and must have the same ultimate objectives in view as the spiritual. Since Messiah has come, we in our daily work may no longer be content to aim at less than serving him and his cause.

I wonder how many of us this morning are struggling with the words of the Lord as he works in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. He is saying, "I want you to evaluate all that you hold sacred, all that you think provides you with security. Evaluate your self-confidence and see how shallow it is. I want you to become Christ-confident and allow Jesus to use you to become fishers of men wherever you are on any given day." When that choice is made, your life will become a walk of faith, trusting in the all-sufficient Christ, trusting our Lord to provide all your needs, physically, emotionally and spiritually, with the daily goal in mind that we all have been called and empowered to become fishers of men for the sake of his kingdom.

Several in this congregation are involved in a Bible study for men in downtown Palo Alto. We meet at the Garden Court hotel, called "The Agora" (the Market Place), on Wednesday mornings at 6:30. The study is designed to encourage businessmen through the Word of God that they, too, have been called to follow Jesus and become by his power fishers of men in their business dealings. I have noticed that one man who attends has not committed his time and energy to developing his own potential, but he has given his life and business over to the Lord. He has consistently invited men from his office to join him each week in a time of spiritual encouragement. This man is experiencing the joy of his full spiritual potential because he works each day in the marketplace as a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. He understands that his life is no longer his own, but it has been brought with a price. He knows that even in the marketplace he is part of God's plan of redemption.

Knowing that, as the apostle Paul says, "our lives are no longer our own; they have been bought with a price," how then can we experience our full spiritual potential? We must allow Jesus to be Lord of our whole life, regardless of where we are living or working; we must allow him to challenge our self-confidence; we must allow him to fill us with Christ's confidence; and allow him to change us into becoming "fishers of men."

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