

# The Capture of Souls

Proverbs 11:30 | Bryce Beale | July 2, 2017

The disciple's great duty is this: to make disciples.

Not simply disciples to some cause; we are not winning fans or customers. The throbbing desire of our hearts is not a longer list of names to claim for Faith Bible Church. What is Faith Bible Church? Were you baptized in her name?

No, our one aim is to capture souls for Christ.

And how could we occupy ourselves with less than this, when it is the very goal our Savior took upon himself when he stooped into his incarnation. "For the Son of Man," he said, "came to seek and to save the lost."

"Why is heaven without her Prince?" we imagine the angels asked. He who sat as king at the flood, yes, who sits as king forever, why this temporary vacancy? Is he quelling a rebellion? Is he ratifying a new universal covenant? Has he left to lead the hosts of heaven in battle?

And the angels, longing to look into these things, gaze down at their now mortal Maker, not at the head of an army, not in the palaces of kings. He is in a nameless house, surrounded by men of dubious reputation, and he is having lunch with them!

Is this the great task that summoned the Almighty to earth? Yes. Yes, it is. He came to seek and to save the lost. He came as a physician to the sick. He seeks those broken, even most broken, by their own sins and the sins of others.

Bless the name of him who refused to refuse us, even when we were the most refusable. Sinners never had a better friend, and the same stands this day.

Christian, do you remember when Christ first knocked upon your door, first sat with you at table. You were dressed in black, mourning the loss of your hope; massive chains latched you to the floor, to the baseboards of your sin, which you could not shake off. And you knew that the wrath of God was the only sure promise you had.

But then, a knock. The door opened, and there, a humble carpenter from Nazareth. You could not have gone to him; he came to you. The tears welled in your desperate eyes as the chains slinked from off your hands, and you were clothed in a glorious white robe. The clouds of God's wrath dispersed, and in its place the sun shone pleasantly.

This was why heaven lacked its prince for a time.

Brothers and sisters, if this is so, how could we content ourselves with less than the same for our own lives? We are ambassadors for the Potentate of heaven, commissioned by him directly to continue this work of Christ—to seek and to save the lost.

We are called to carry news of the great salvation he has worked, extended now to all men everywhere.

We are called to capture souls for Christ.

We find this fact foreshadowed long before Christ's coming, in our text today, Proverbs 11:30.

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,  
and whoever captures souls is wise.

Sticking closely to the words in these two lines, I wish this morning to consider two things. First, what does it mean to capture souls? Secondly, why should we make the capture of souls our business, even our chief business among men?

## Capturing souls

First then, we look to the second line, which reads, “whoever captures souls is wise,” and we ask, “What does this mean, to capture souls?”

In Proverbs, it appears to be speaking of our influence over others. The righteous by his righteous life is a tree of life, that blesses others by its fruit. And the main way he blesses others is by turning them to righteousness. How? By his own influence over them, as they behold his conduct and his speech.

I can think then of no better application of this principle than that with which we began our message: the capturing of souls for Christ.

There is besides a striking similarity between these words of Solomon and those of the one greater than Solomon, spoken long afterward along the shore of Galilee: “Follow me,” Christ said, “and I will make you fishers of men.”<sup>1</sup>

As fishermen capture fish, so Peter and the apostles would capture men and women—which is what Solomon means by “souls” in our text.

But again, what does it mean to capture a soul for Christ? There is a great deal of confusion on this point, so it is worth a segment of our

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. 4:19 (ESV).

time to clear up, especially since it is the very thing we are summoned by our Savior to be doing in this world.

To capture a soul for Christ is not merely to win someone over to your way of thinking. You may make a Republican out of Democrat that way, but you cannot make a Christian out of the lost. We should be bold about our ethical stances, but we should not think that getting someone to stand like us on a point of ethics is to win them to Christ. You may have won them to your view on gun control, but you have not won them to Christ.

Neither is capturing a soul for Christ done by pressuring someone to recite a set prayer. How many in our country today are trusting in a prayer they said once, at a camp or a conference or an altar call, but are not trusting in Christ? If the altar call has not altered you, then it was a nice show but nothing more.

It is an easy thing, with some practice, to move the emotions of others—it takes a certain kind of word, spoken to the accompaniment of a certain kind of music, with a certain kind of lighting. And this may bring tears to the eyes, and in this vulnerable moment you could be made to recite a prayer to your own shoe, if the preacher so wanted. But when the lighting changes again, the emotion is gone, and no real change has occurred. This is not a soul captured for Christ.

And lastly, to capture a soul for Christ is not to make a new church attender out of someone. We have nothing magic infused into the air of this room, and there is no magic potion poured into the waters of our baptismal. The building is built of brick, just like many others are, and brick has never yet saved a soul.

There are many reasons to come to church, and not all of them are about Jesus. I have heard one pastor tell of a young man attending his church who was quite lost and readily admitted it. “Then why do you come?” asked the pastor. “Because I think a Christian woman would make a good wife.” That pastor made sure he never found what he was looking for.

All of these things fall short of our goal, of capturing a soul for Christ. And the reason they fall short lies mainly in this: none of them touches the inner man.

A soul is only captured for Christ when he or she is remade on the inside. A heart transplant is required in every case; a complete renewal of the essential self, a fundamental alteration—in Jesus’ words, a rebirth. Conversion is necessary, and anything short of conversion is short of the glory of God.

But how does this happen? How do we make this happen in others, and so win a soul?

Well, in brief, you cannot. You cannot save another, you cannot reach into the chest of another and turn the heart. That is a work that the Holy Spirit of God alone can do, and must, if we are to see any saved. That is why so many alternatives to conversion present themselves, like those mentioned above. We may wish salvation to rest in winning arguments—because that is something we can do. Or we may like it to be the consequence of a recited prayer—for again, we can pressure another under the right circumstances to pray. And we can certainly concoct stratagems to get bodies through our church doors.

But if winning a soul must be the utter renewal of the inner man, then we are powerless at this point. Only the breath of God blown over dead bones can make them live; only the Spirit of God can inspire life in those cold with spiritual death.

And that might conclude our sermon today, since we would seem to have nothing we can do to capture souls—except that God in his wisdom and kindness has deemed fit to use us, us mere mortals, as the means by which the Spirit regenerates the lost.

Here is the heavenly pattern: we proclaim the gospel, the Spirit of God applies that gospel to the heart, and a person is saved. That is the formula given us in Scripture, and there is no other.

So then what falls to us in capturing souls is to proclaim the gospel, and to attend that proclamation with appeals to God that he should, by his Spirit, make it effective in the conversion of the hearers. The gospel is the bait, if you will, and the Spirit the hook. Our job is to put the worm in the water.

“Evangelism,” writes Mack Stiles, “is teaching the gospel with the aim to persuade.”<sup>2</sup>

Spurgeon asks, “What is the real winning of a soul for God?” That is, what are we to do if we would see souls won? He begins his answer with this point: “Instruction by the Gospel.”<sup>3</sup>

Brothers and sisters, we will not pull up net-fulls of fish until we have cast our nets into the water. Jesus bids us by his word that we “Cast the net on the right side of the boat”—and the appended promise is ours as well: “and you will find some.” When we begin to speak of Christ and

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<sup>2</sup> Mack Stiles, *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus*, 9marks: Building Healthy Churches (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 26.

<sup>3</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *The Soul Winner* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1995), 12.

him crucified, when we talk of his perfect life, his death in the place of sinners, his resurrection, and when we speak it so as to persuade, then we will begin to capture souls.

We pray to the Lord of the harvest, that he would send out workers into the fields; we are the workers, so let's not tarry in our safe Jerusalem. If we will go out into the field with the sickle of the gospel in our hand, I doubt we will come back without a sheaf.

This it is to capture a soul: we share the gospel, and the Spirit by that gospel renews the heart.

## Why capture souls

There is much more to say on this point, but for the sake of time we must proceed to our second and final point.

We see what it is to capture souls, but this is not enough. You must by God's word convince others of God's truth; but I must now by God's truth convince you of it. That is, I must appeal to you to be doers of the word, and not hearers only. I must implore you not to let your nets sit in the boat, but to cast them on many waters.

So then, we ask, "Why should we make it our goal, even our highest goal among men, to capture souls?"

Look again at our text, in its second line: "whoever captures souls *is wise*." But why? Why is it wise to capture souls?

For the answer, we consider now the first line of our text: "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life."

## For life

That is, your righteous labors, which include capturing souls for Christ, will extend to others the fruit of the tree of life. By your work, others will live.

In Eden the tree of life was blocked by an angelic being and a flaming sword; but after the death of Christ, we might say that the angel withdrew into heaven. The path into the garden, that ends at the tree, is open! It yields twelve kinds of fruit, one for each month, and its leaves are for the healing of the nations. And when you urge men to believe the gospel, you are trying to convince them that the way to the tree of life is no longer blocked.

"Go," you cry, "and eat! You who have no money, go and eat fruit without price."

You object: “But when I share the gospel with others, it doesn’t seem like a noble task. It feels awkward, and often it is met by disinterest, sometimes by hostility.”

Well, let me ask you this. When Hitler and his Nazism attempted to take over the world, and our grandfathers stormed the beaches of France to meet him, do you think they were met by hugs and roses?

No! By bullets, rather. It was a miserable reception. But why did they do it? For life! To save the lives of their wives and children.

When you bring up Christ in conversation, and find your attempt met by awkwardness, remember, it is awkward to be shot at as well—but it is worth it, for life’s sake.

We must embrace what I have heard one counselor note: “Hard is not bad. Hard is just hard.”

If you are employed in sales, you know what it is to be rejected, and to be rejected cruelly. But I would guess you did not turn in your two weeks the first time you met rejection. Why? Because you are providing for your family; you are giving life to others.

And, if I may add my own opinion, no matter what you do in this life, you will be met with criticism, and probably with hatred. All of us are this morning hated by extremist groups in the Middle East for the simple fact of our blood, that we are Americans. Do not think you can escape criticism by keeping silent. I say if you are going to be hated anyways, you might as well save the lives of others in the process.

Here you object again, “I think it is a wonderful thing to win souls, but my personality forbids it. I am quiet by nature, I am not an extrovert, I am not a leader or an influencer.” But are you righteous? Then your fruit can be a tree of life. Do you think there was no introvert among the twelve disciples?

“But,” you say, “I am a stay-at-home mom. I don’t have the opportunity to share with many people.” Another adds, “My job does not put me in close contact with others, so I lack opportunity as well.”

If I have hit one of your objections, it is only because I am so good at making my own.

But let me give you one insight into the Scriptures that, I think, will be both freeing and empowering to you.

When Jesus gave his final command to his followers, what we call the Great Commission, he said, “Go, therefore, and make disciples.” A careful exegesis of that statement, using all the Greek helps available,

analysis of the words used, and a broad survey of the cultural setting of the statement, would actually give you a translation like this: “Go, therefore, and make disciples.”

I speak half in jest, but fully in earnest. And I do not mean it as a weighty reproof, but as a joy and freedom. Brothers and sisters, no condition was set by our Savior on us capturing souls. He did not say, “Go, you extroverts, and make disciples,” or, “Go, you who find it easy and refreshing, and make disciples.” The privilege of fishing for men was not given to the elite, but to fishermen of Galilee and all their unesteemed descendants. We thank God for those specially gifted for the task, but we thank God also that the task is not for them alone.

Do you have one mina only? Then find your man, or woman. Do you have ten minas? Invest them all, that many might be turned to righteousness. Only, whatever you do, do not bury your net.

### By our lives

But look again at the text: “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life.”

Notice it is the *fruit* of the righteous person’s life that brings life to others. We have said that this must include a proclamation of the gospel, and that is true. But the Proverb seems to extend beyond our words. We will capture souls not by word alone, but by power and the Holy Spirit—that is, as others see what the gospel has done in us, and glorify our Father who is in heaven.

Are you not sometimes taken aback by God’s method of saving souls in the early church? Are you not surprised to find how significant miracles and signs were, both in the ministry of Jesus, and in the ministry of his early followers?

This has led some to believe that our gospel witness will not be effective until we also heal the sick and raise the dead, until our words are accompanied by power from on high.

I agree, if they would take their argument one step further—it is too little a thing to heal the sick and raise the dead. Why not ask for more? Let us pray that God would confirm his gospel by the greatest of all miracles—the complete renewal of the inner man. Let us ask that God should raise those dead in their sins, so that they are infused with a principle of life never found in them before. Let us ask that he heal the spiritually sick, so that they thrive in worship, where once they wallowed in the mire of sin.

The change of the heart is a miracle that none but God can do. And so its presence among us is proof that God is among us, and is the greatest proof of our message that we have.

Just this week I heard about a woman, an adherent to the traditions of Catholicism, who witnessed two of her relatives be born again. Both were changed in a way that nothing on earth can account for. So she went to her priest and asked, "I want to know what happened to these people. What do they mean when they say they were born again?" The priest, this teacher of Israel, had no real knowledge of the subject, and could not give her any suitable answer. She had seen the gospel confirmed by the power of God's Spirit, and this was a stronger argument for her than any of the acute reasonings of the high church.

How many wives have won their husbands without a word, by their respectful and pure conduct?<sup>4</sup>

When those craving community, as human beings were made to crave, come upon a community of men and women like us, who are not the very best or most talented by any means, who have shaded pasts; when they come and see the love we have for one another, a love that none of us can claim as coming from ourselves; and when they hear that this love is the work of the Holy Spirit, confirming the gospel of the Son of God, then they are set to thinking. This is the kind of miracle by which God means to prove his gospel to the world.

## Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, if none of these arguments can induce you to cast your net outside your boat, to capture souls for Christ, then let me use the final and best argument I have, the argument with which I began my message.

Jesus Christ our Savior came to capture us, and the fruit of his righteous labor is our life.

It was as if the tree of life itself was chopped down, and its wood used to form the double beams of Christ's cross. Our Savior shone upon this tree by his glory, and watered it generously with his blood.

It was hard for him to do it! It was awkward! But when he had accomplished that work, he fell like a grain of wheat into the ground and died, and up from that place rose the nutrient necessary to form the fruit of life upon that tree.

And that fruit is the very fruit that Christ brought to you, when you were a slave in your own home. He sought you, he came to your house, he knocked upon your door, he opened and entered in, he sat at your table, he removed your chains, he gave you his own robe of righteousness, he lit a candle in your once darkened heart, and extending his hand he held up to you this fruit, this fruit that was the

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Pet. 3:1-2.

result of all his righteousness, the consequence of his cruel crushing, infused with life by the power of his resurrection.

And taking that fruit, you ate, and now you live.

So when this Savior, whose eyes have known so much pain to get you for himself, now looks you in your eyes and says, "Go, tell others the gospel, that they may live too," the only substantial question which remains is, will you?