

TAKE THE LORD AT HIS WORD

I. When he offers “foolish” instruction

II. When he makes “ridiculous” promises

Generally speaking, the students in our school receive a top-notch education. Dedicated and talented teachers help to bring the very best out of our students. That’s why I was shocked at what one of the students told me last week. He emphatically insisted that the word “gullible” was not in the dictionary. I didn’t want to embarrass him in front of his class, but I was determined to prove him wrong. So I went to my office to grab a copy of Webster’s dictionary given to me as a Christmas gift a few years ago. I took it off my shelf and began searching for “gullible.” You know what I found? It went “gull, gull-catcher, gulled, guller, gullery, gullet, gullied.” The word “gullible” is not in the dictionary. I should have taken him at his word. He was right.

Do you believe me? You’re in a tough spot, aren’t you? I could be trying to pull a fast one on you, so that I wouldn’t have to be alone in my foolishness in believing that “gullible” is not in the dictionary. Are you willing to take me at my word? Or would I have to show you? My guess is that, if I were to ask all of you who believe me to raise your hands, the only one who would raise his hand is Vicar. (He has to or else it will show up on his vicar report at the end of the year.) You may not believe me, you may not be willing to take me at my word, but the truth of the matter is that you will not find the word gullible in this dictionary.

There’s no real harm done if you fail to take me at my word. That’s not at all the case when it comes to our relationship with the Lord. Fail to take him at his word and there are sad and serious consequences, ultimately leading to separation from him forever. This morning, as we study this portion of the Gospel according to St. Luke, we will hear this encouragement: **TAKE THE LORD AT HIS WORD.** Take the Lord at his Word, *even when he offers “foolish” instruction.* Take the Lord at his Word, *even when he makes “ridiculous” promises.*

Last Sunday we heard how the people of Nazareth refused to take Jesus at his word. Because they knew him as Joseph’s son, because he was too familiar, they wouldn’t believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Lord’s Anointed. Refusing to accept the truth, they drove him out of town and even tried to throw him off a cliff. But Jesus miraculously walked right

through the crowd and went on his way. He didn’t let their rejection stop him; he went on to Capernaum where he preached the good news that he was the Savior of the world, the One who had come in fulfillment of prophecy. If you happen to have your Bible open, you might just look back at the final verse of chapter 4, where we read this summary statement of Jesus’ work: *“And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea.”*

Jesus wouldn’t let the natural hard-heartedness of human beings stop him from his work as the Prophet. He just kept on preaching; he kept on teaching. That’s what we find in the opening verses of this section of Scripture, too. *“One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the Word of God, he saw at the water’s edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.”* There are several things to note in those verses. First this, the people were crowding around him – there was certainly, at this stage of his ministry, great interest in him. Because of the miracles he had performed, and because of the authority with which he spoke, many eagerly gathered around him. He neither hated the popularity (“Get away from me”) nor reveled in it (“Give me a little more attention”). Jesus remained focused on the task of announcing himself as the fulfillment of prophecy and the Savior of the world.

That’s clear from what he did. Out of love for souls and wanting them to be able to hear his teaching, Jesus climbed into one of the boats on shore and went out a bit onto the lake. Using the amphitheater that he himself had created, he was able to teach them.

After teaching the crowds, Jesus turned to the teaching of Simon Peter, whom the Lord had previously called to what we might label “part-time” discipleship. He told Peter: *“Put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch.”* This was, to state it most simply, foolish instruction. Foolish first, because it was the middle of the day – it’s a great time to catch rays, but not such a great time to catch

fish. Foolish secondly, because the deep water was not the place to catch fish. Foolish third, because Peter had been trained as a fisherman and had significantly more experience on the lake of Gennesaret than the carpenter Jesus did. Those were three good reasons for Peter to say, "Thanks, but no thanks. I have better things to do than waste my time on some wild fish chase."

Peter actually had a fourth (and perhaps fifth) good reason to say no. *"Simon answered, 'Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything.'"* Reason number four to say no? His immediate experience. They had just tried, with no success. To go ahead and do the same thing and expect different results would be insane. Reason five to say no was simply this: "We've worked hard all night." He and his men were tired.

Peter had every reason to say no to the foolish instruction Jesus offered. He had every reason to say, "I'm not as gullible as you think I am." But instead he says, *"Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."* What led Peter to follow instructions that could only be described as foolish? One answer is found in the title he uses to address Jesus. He called him "Master;" that is, the one who is in charge, in control, the one who makes things happen. Peter had certainly witnessed some of the miracles Jesus performed and recognized that he was God in the flesh, ultimately in control of absolutely everything – so there could be a catch of fish even when it seemed impossible. Peter also followed Jesus' instruction because he knew that Jesus always had a good reason for what he said. Jesus hadn't been in the practice of giving instructions to make people look gullible – he wasn't going to say, "I can't believe you fell for that!" "At your word," Peter said literally, "I will let down the nets."

Peter took Jesus at his word, even when Jesus offered "foolish" instruction. He did just what he ought to have done. That's amazing! That is exactly what the Lord wants us to do. He wants you to take him at his word, even when he offers foolish instruction. The problem is that you and I have overactive "foolish" meters that sound off at any foolish instruction. We hear again and again, from the culture around us, that we have the right to do what makes us happy. If that means overindulging in alcohol on a Friday night to forget about the stresses of the week, then we should do that. The Lord's instruction about remaining sober and drinking only in moderation makes the "foolish" meter go off. If happiness comes from engaging in sexual relations outside of marriage, then we should do that. The idea that those relations are only to be in the confines of marriage

causes the foolish meter to go "ding, ding, ding." The list could go on and on. Consider where in your life that "foolish meter" carries more weight than the Lord's instruction.

The Lord's foolish instruction extends past the conduct he expects. It goes to the central teachings of Scripture. That eternal life is entirely and exclusively a gift, that cannot and need not and must not be earned, causes the foolish meter to go off. That every one of our sins has been forgiven, not just the minor ones like using bad language or speeding, but the big ones of broken promises and selfish, self-centered actions, sounds the foolish meter. How many times have you listened to that foolish meter instead of taking the Lord at his Word? When you refuse to let your sins be forgiven by the grace of God and insist on earning your forgiveness by your changed behavior and new approach to life, when you refuse to see yourself as a fully redeemed child of God, you've let the foolish meter win the day. You've made your opinion the truth and the Word of Christ a lie.

That rebellion brings down God's wrath and separates us from him. Yet the Lord in his mercy took on flesh for you. Though Jesus had the right to do whatever he wanted to do, he placed his will under the Father's. He submitted to the Father's plan and served those who deserved to be destroyed. On Calvary's cross he endured what we had earned – the punishment of God, the very pain of hell. He has given us his righteousness. There is nothing we must add to that righteousness, no "flair" to make it complete. It's true. Take the Lord at his Word, even when he offers "foolish" instruction.

You heard what happened when Peter took the Lord at his word. *"When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink."* This shouldn't really have shocked Peter or the others. After all, they had seen him perform miracles before. In addition, Jesus had really made a promise with his instruction to Peter. He hadn't said, "Let's go out and see if there are might be some fish out in the deep." He said, *"Let down the nets for a catch."* They would definitely catch fish. Any number of fish at all would have been a miracle, given the time and place of the fishing. But this wasn't just "any number" of fish. This was a huge catch, perhaps the greatest they had ever experienced. When the Lord promises a catch, there will be a catch. He is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.

Jesus performed this miracle for a reason. It wasn't to show off; it wasn't to guarantee that he and the disciples would be able to have a feast for supper that evening. He wanted instead to demonstrate the power of his Word and the faithfulness of his promise. He wanted to lead Peter and the others to know that there was no promise that he could make that he lacked the power to fulfill.

Simon Peter drew some conclusions from the miracle that he had witnessed. See if you can pick them out from what he did and said: *"When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!' For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners."* Simon concluded that Jesus was God. Good conclusion. He concluded that Jesus was holy and he was not. Good conclusion. He concluded that he could not stand in the presence of the holy God. Good conclusion. He concluded that the Lord could have nothing to do with him because of his sin, leading him to plead, *"Go away from me, Lord."* Not a good conclusion, for Peter failed to recognize that the Lord's greatest glory is in his love for undeserving sinners.

That Peter's conclusion about himself was legitimate is obvious from what Jesus said to Simon in verse 10: *"Don't be afraid."* Jesus didn't say, "No, Peter, you're not that bad; deep down you're a good guy. I don't really expect you to be perfect and you're better than most." He said, *"Stop being afraid."* Really, he's saying, *"Your sins are forgiven. You need not worry that I am going to destroy you. You are free from that punishment because I will endure your punishment in your place."*

Jesus even went beyond that promise of forgiveness in his dealing with Simon Peter. He said, *"Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men."* With those words, the Lord was promising that he had great work for Simon to do.

Call it a ridiculous promise. It's ridiculous that the holy Lord, who has holy angels at his beck and call, would use a fisherman, a sinner, one who would even deny knowing him, to proclaim his message to the world. It's ridiculous that he would use such a person to accomplish such great things, not only proclaiming the message, but gathering his people. Peter had to have seen it as ridiculous, particularly in light of his confession – "I'm a man; I'm a sinner. I don't know how you could stand me, let alone use me for anything in your kingdom."

Peter took the Lord at his word; he trusted the Lord's ridiculous promise. You heard the closing words of

this account: *"So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him."* They left behind their careers for the sake of following Jesus full-time, of learning at his feet and being prepared for service. They took the Lord at his word, even when he made a "ridiculous" promise.

Does it seem ridiculous to you that the Lord would fully and freely forgive your sins and wouldn't at all demand a repayment? It should, because that's not at all the way things operate in this world. But the Lord's kingdom does not operate the way the world operates. No price is charged to us because Jesus paid the price for every one of our sins through his life and death. Does it seem ridiculous that Jesus would use sinners to announce his message, when what sinners do best is sin? It should, because that's not at all the way things operate in the world. We hire the best person for the job; not people who are going to make mistake after mistake. But the Lord's kingdom does not operate the way the world operates. He graciously uses sinners for his important work.

Perhaps most ridiculous of all, it seems to us, is that he would use us. We know what our hands have done, what our tongues have said, what our minds have thought. We ought not be involved. Not only are we sinful, we're not particularly gifted for participating in the spread of the gospel and the expansion of the kingdom. Pastors – maybe they're cut out for telling others what God says in his Word, not us. But the Lord promises to equip all of his people to carry out important roles in his kingdom. It may seem ridiculous to you that the Lord is going to use you to help catch people for the kingdom. But it doesn't matter what you think – the Lord will do what he says. He will keep his promises, no matter how ridiculous they may seem to us.

So take the Lord at his Word and present yourself to him. Say with Isaiah, "Here am I; send me!" Don't worry about what you have to offer; don't think about the gifts you have or don't have. Focus only on his promise. He will give you the words to say and the strength to say it. If he did it for Peter, he can and will do it for you. He will give you the privilege of participating in the work of his kingdom, whatever role that may be.

Take the Lord at his Word. Do what he commands and believe what he says, no matter how foolish the instruction may seem. With Peter, learn to say, "Because you say so, Master. At your word." When the Lord promises to use you, sinner though you are, to assist in the spread of the kingdom, then do what Peter did. Take the Lord at his Word and follow him.