



MAKING GOD'S CLAIM OUR AIM (Sermon)

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**Byard Parks
Personal Ministries Director
Middle East and North Africa Union Mission**

Theme: To reclaim church members who no longer join church gatherings is an essential part of gospel ministry.

Scripture: Luke 15:4

Introduction:

Imagine you hear the loud screeching of a fire alarm. You realize the building you are working in is on fire! You and others around you rush quickly and easily out to safety. You and the others are watching helplessly as flames consume the building. You are thankful you are safe and are standing outside waiting for firetrucks to arrive. Suddenly, among the orange flames you see waving arms from a second-floor window! Without thought to your own safety you dash back into the burning building. Somehow you are able to grab hold of this disoriented, frightened co-worker and lead them out of the building. Imagine the sense of accomplishment you would feel as you dash out of the midst of the smoke and flames having successfully rescued your co-worker!

Now, imagine that at the very next moment, the same person you have just rescued from the flames collapses in front of you on the sidewalk. You notice burns on their face and arms. Imagine what eager emotion and passionate sympathy you likely would feel toward them to see them revived and quickly cared for!

The burning building is an illustration of a ministry at church we call, "Evangelism." It is level-one rescue. Evangelism is helping to save people from a doomed earth. The second phase of helping the collapsed person with burns is just as important. The CPR, oxygen, and emergency help — and TLC (Tender Loving Care) — that the person needs when overcome by smoke is an illustration of a church ministry we call, "FOLLOW-UP." Follow-up is making sure people come fully to life in the body of Christ. Follow-up may include instruction in spiritual, health, family, or emotional needs.

Now here is a challenging question: Which is of more value: Rescue or Follow-up? Obviously, because life in all senses is Christ's goal, we must say both ministries are absolutely vital to our church — one cannot do without the other!

This sermon is about a third ministry which is a combination of rescue and follow up. This third ministry is the work of reclaiming missing members. Reclamation is a ministry of deepest love toward those who for one reason or another have left the church.

To show the honor of reclamation ministry in Christ's eyes, we must consider the true subject of Jesus' parable when He said: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?" (Luke 15:4, NIV). In other words, Jesus was not seeking a new sheep. He was reclaiming that which had already been part of the group! Reclamation is part of the mind of Christ.

How many of you know and care deeply for someone who was once close to Christ, but now is, for one reason or another, apart from Christ? Let me see your hands.

Typically, we minister to people we see. Reclamation ministry, however, is searching for those who we don't see! If there is a seat empty near you, it likely belongs to someone who was here but isn't here anymore. It takes specific intentionality and prayerful thought in order to "see" these invisible people. Reclamation often starts as a solo effort but will never really succeed unless it becomes a team effort. Reclamation may start with one kind, brave person who makes a phone call or several visits. However, the success of the reclamation will hinge on the receptivity and kindness shown by the larger church family, once that person has been re-contacted. Again, reclamation is part rescue and a lot of follow-up.

Lessons From Jesus in Reclaiming a Friend

Let us look at a Bible story which will help us understand how much Christ values the reclamation of people. This is the story of Peter. Though Peter had not "left the church" in the same sense of the people we are thinking of today, his life story serves up a number of very useful lessons for us. His betrayal of Christ left him with a need of reclamation. So, in this story we will also learn about some of Jesus' techniques in reclaiming a dear friend. Let's turn to John 21.

[READ aloud: John 21:1-14]

There are a number of lessons we can learn from this story.

Here we see Peter falling back into his "pre-Jesus" or "pre-disciple" life. He was fishing because it felt like the natural thing for him to do. (vs. 3) Many people who we wish to reclaim are simply doing what they did before they came to church. Their secular lifestyle is not because they don't believe in God, but because it is simply easier to do what they have always done. Their skill at hobbies or work gives them a greater esteem boost than church does. In other words, "church" is not a place that makes them feel like they fit in. For others it is old habits and the places to which those habits draw them. For example, going to the bar feels natural and welcoming; for others it's Saturday sporting events; for others it is Friday night dancing; and for others it's something else. Likely Peter was struggling with self-esteem issues that drove him to do that which he knew he was good at, rather than going whole heartedly into the church work he had been trained and commissioned for by Jesus.

Now notice Jesus' strategy.

1) **First**, notice—Jesus asked a direct and simple question. In vs. 5, He asked, “Friends, haven't you any fish?” Asking people questions in a kind sympathetic way is the single most valuable tool we can use to get people thinking about their life circumstance.

A man who was far from God was asked by a friend, “Are you making money?” The man answered, “Yes, lots of it.” The friend replied, “Well, I just want to let you know, money or no money, I sure miss having you in Sabbath School.” The rich man couldn't get that question and reply out of his mind. “Are you making money? . . . Money or no money... I sure miss you.” Over time this man's values totally shifted and he was reclaimed and joined his friend at Sabbath School.

Simple questions with kind intent will have a winning power.

2) In the **second** lesson, notice — Jesus came to the disciples at an odd hour to have a meal with them (vs. 9, 10). This strategy can be especially effective in “reclaiming” those who are estranged from the church. Go and meet them on their grounds. (Jesus didn't invite the disciples back to a synagogue or the mountain of the beatitudes. Instead, He shared a meal of fish on the beach with men who liked fishing.) How might you find common ground with the person who needs reclaimed?

Recently, a Muslim man married to an Adventist wife was baptized because the local Adventist pastor went out fishing consistently with this Muslim man on Sundays. Truthfully, the pastor did not enjoy fishing, and got seasick on the boat on several occasions! But he was persistent and visionary and after two years of fishing, that Muslim man gave his life to Jesus! Jesus met fishermen who needed reclaiming at the sea — it was their interest, not Jesus'.

One pastor found a member who was no longer attending and learned he had become a taxi driver. The pastor went and asked that cab driver if he could sit in the front seat with him while he drove people for a whole day. The cab driver was surprised and liked the idea. It was a rainy day and there were only a few clients and the two of them had a lot of time to talk. That one day together was all it took for this former member to rekindle his fire, and he rejoined the family of Christ.

Yes, Jesus came to the disciples at an odd hour to have a meal with them. Take Jesus' strategy and have breakfast with a former member. Breakfast is a particularly disarming and enjoyable time. It is early and opportunistic. Find a time when people are relaxed or can relax. Notice too in the passage that Jesus served them! Jesus did the cooking! The fire was prepared, the fish were cooked and ready for tired, hungry men. Notice how warming Jesus' invitation is in verse 12, “Come and have breakfast!”

3) The **third** lesson we find in this story — Jesus asked them for a favor. In verse 10 Jesus asks, “Bring some of your fish.” It is interesting but verse 9 says that Jesus had his own fish. Truthfully, Jesus didn't need their fish to make the meal! Nevertheless, he invited them to

bring fish. Here is a key for reclaiming people: GET THE OTHER PERSON INVOLVED. In so many instances the reason people have left the body of Christ is because they simply didn't feel needed. They disappeared for two months, and no one noticed. They may have said to themselves, "If I can disappear for two months and not be noticed . . . it is frankly because I am like an appendix to this church — I really don't matter." If we wish to be effective in reclaiming, we must look for ways to give meaning to people's existence.

Asking favors was one of Jesus' strategies for winning friends.

A pastor had heard about a woman in the city who had been their member years before. She was bitter and angry and often slandered the church. The pastor had heard she was a master Mexican chef, and so, he asked this woman if she would make hundreds of enchiladas for his son's graduation party. It was just the favor that opened the door for a friendship. Within a year, she was on the fellowship lunch ministry of the church!

As a church, empowering people in ministry and helping people find meaningful roles is the Holy Spirit's way.

Let us continue reading the Bible to learn more of Jesus' strategy for reclaiming Peter.

Read John 21:15-17

4) Lesson **four** — Here we see Jesus again asking a question (vs. 15). "Do you love me more than these?" Dual love was what was drawing Peter away from the disciple appointment he had been given.

This is the kind of question that only Jesus could ask because He already had a strong trust relationship with Peter. That kind of relationship takes time to build. In people who need reclaiming, there is typically some dual love. People have left the church even though they love God, because they love something else more. Unless God specifically instructs you to address this dual love, it is best to love the person without judgement, and let the Holy Spirit sort out the person's issues. As one man has said, "God called us to be fishers of men. It is the Holy Spirit that gut and clean them."

5) Lesson **five** — In essence Jesus says three times, "feed my sheep" or "feed my lambs". As it relates to reclaiming Peter, Jesus was giving him meaningful responsibility. People who are reclaimed are most likely to stay reclaimed if they have responsibility related to the care and "feeding" of others. If reclaimed people sense that they are more than just needed on Sabbath for adding to attendance records but are part of an actual plan for rescuing other people, they will be more eager to stay. We must consider how to build a networked structure that leaves no members vulnerable to falling out! Prayer chains, visitation plans, nurturing through calling and accountability, service teams, fellowship through meals and socials, small group Bible studies, hospital anointing, and various outreach, all of these help lambs feed the other lambs which in turn keeps themselves nourished and thriving in Christ!

CONCLUSION

The United States military makes a vow to one another that teaches a deep lesson about reclamation. It is a slogan that goes like this: *Leave no man behind*. It is part of the Soldier's Creed and is taught in basic training. More than just words, it has meant daring rescues and help for wounded. *Leave no man behind*. The soldier manual goes on to describe what this means: "I will never leave a fallen comrade." Soldiers describe this statement as a contract of honor. A U.S. soldier was asked to describe what this means to him. He said: "The oath to never leave a fallen comrade is a promise made to each other, that even if we die, our brothers in arms will do everything they can to bring us home. It's a mission that hasn't ended, and as long as wars continue, it never will."

We as church members should be no less dedicated to one another. To *Leave no man behind*. Should we see one member who has fallen into enemy hands, see one church member given to addiction, or sin, or simple Laodicean carelessness — we should consider them as family — we should go after them with tenacity and passion and love. "Let no person slip away from church without a sustained effort to bring them back."

God has taken the initiative in Jesus Christ to rescue us from our sins. He claims us as His own! This is the main theme of the Bible. Let us make God's claim our aim.

May we join Christ in this noble work of reclaiming others!

Closing **ILLUSTRATION***: [*May be effectively used as a closing story or as a children's story.*]

A twelve-year-old boy came home one hot afternoon, anxious to take a cool swim in the pond behind his home. He lived in south Florida, USA, so taking a quick swim was a common way to cool off.

He was so anxious to get in the water, he didn't even go inside to change clothes. He just raced for the pond, dropping his shoes, shirt, and socks along the way. His mother spotted him diving off the dock and went outside to check on him.

As she watched her son swim toward the middle of the lake, she also spotted an alligator moving from the far shore toward her son! Alligators are common in Florida — quick swimmers with vicious teeth and a powerful tail — and this one was headed straight for the boy! The mother began screaming warnings to her son, and the boy stopped in mid-swim to listen. He finally understood the danger and began racing back toward the dock swimming as fast as he could. Just as he reached her, the alligator reached him. She leaned off the dock and grabbed his arm.

It was a tug-of-war from a mother's worst nightmare. From the dock, she pulled his arms. From the water, the alligator held his legs. The water was quickly stained with blood.

A farmer driving by heard the screams, grabbed his gun that was in his truck and ran to help. Quickly, he shot the alligator and helped the mother call for help. Thankfully the boy

survived. After several weeks of hospitalization, he was ready to talk with a news reporter about the whole traumatic incident.

The reporter asked the child if he could see where the alligator had bitten him. With the typical pride of a boy who had gotten the best in a fight, he showed off his healing wounds to the interested reporter. The reporter was about to go, and the boy interrupted: “But wait,” said the boy, “Look at these!” With that, he showed the reporter the scars on his arms. “I have great scars on my arms too. I have them because my mom wouldn’t let go.”

How important it is that every lost person knows that someone is pulling for them! What would our churches reclamation program look like if we really saw it as “a rescue plan, with the tenacity of a mother’s love?” Let’s be known as “the church that wouldn’t let go.”

*Adapted from: <https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations-on-rescue/>

