

LITTLE THINGS COUNT

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Little things count, don't they? The Godiva chocolate on the pillow in the hotel, the church volunteer who always has a smile for you, a 13th muffin from the baker when you buy a dozen, and a doctor who listens. Not big things but they make a big difference, don't they? Of course, you can go the other way, the bank teller who sighs when you make one more request, the apple that goes bad the day after you bought it, the typo in the middle of the business sign. These are not big on any scale but they are able to make a big difference and so we say, "Little things count."

We're going to look at a Bible passage today in which little things count but not in the way I have just described. We are going to one of Jesus' most enigmatic parables. For the Lenten season we are looking at parables, earthly stories with a spiritual point that Jesus commonly used in his teaching.

Matthew 20:1-16

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. [2] He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

[3] "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. [4] He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' [5] So they went.

"He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. [6] About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

[7] " 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

[8] "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

[9] "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. [10] So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. [11] When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. [12] 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

[13] "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? [14] Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. [15] Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

[16] "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

What we have here is businessman who has gone to the local labor pool. This owner apparently has plenty of room, work, and resources because he hires everyone and then goes back again and again for more. I've been on work sites where it was too crowded and you couldn't work effectively. Maybe you've experienced it in a small kitchen preparing Thanksgiving. "Just get out of here so I can get something done." I've been to the work site where there was not enough work to do. Too many people and I felt like the highway crew supervisor to the supervisor of the guy who holds the slow/stop sign. I've been to the work site where the employer is griping, "This is costing too much," and you felt like you couldn't do the job right for begging on the materials. Or you were there and the materials just weren't there. But all that's not here. This is especially plain when you consider that he visits the labor pool several times over.

I don't know why he went several times. Maybe he knew others would come later. I don't know why the others came late. Maybe they were sickly. They had a fever but still needed to feed the family today so they got there but had a hard time doing so. Or they were old and with no social security they still had to take care of themselves. We know when we're older we don't get going as fast as we used to. Or perhaps they were handicapped. Getting to the labor pool with a gimp leg was a chore and not done quickly. Or perhaps they were just poor and lived the furthest away (that happens with the poor; they dwell in the outskirts). **Thank God for this business owner and that there was plenty of room, work, and resources for all. Thank God for God who has arms big enough to embrace the whole lot of us.**

But then as it always is when hiring and workers are involved, there comes the pay day moment. The paymaster is directed to settle up wages with everyone and to do it in a slightly different way. He was to handle it as last in first out. "Last in, first out" is the way I remember something in weddings. In that ceremony the last one in before the service starts, the bride's mother, is the first one out after it ends. Here at the paymaster's table the last shall be first and the first last.

And what ends up happening at the work site is like me seeing a little toddler with a nice piece of cherry pie. She's little and I'm big. I'm twice her size so my piece should be roughly twice as much. Everyone knows this. She's a kid, she'll just eat it. I'm an adult, I'll appreciate it. And she's a girl! Everyone knows guys eat more than girls! Therefore, my piece, we all know, should be bigger. And then in the dessert buffet line they give me a piece the same size and I say, "Hey, wait a minute! This piece isn't bigger!" The first workers watch the last get a day's wage and they say, "Hey, wait a minute! Mine's the same." Then we add, "That's not fair."

Now think about this, if the owner had done it first in, first out, there wouldn't have been any grumbling. The first would have gotten their money and been on their way home never knowing what was going on behind them. But he does it another way and there is consternation.

To that consternation comes the reply from the businessman. Let me just pull aside to ask you: With what tone does the owner basically reply, "You don't like my generosity"? Maybe it is just descriptive as with a person's whose neck vessels are bulging and he's snapping pencils, you say, "You're angry." Here the businessman says, "You don't like my generosity." Just a statement of what's going on. Hardly would it be with an edge like, "If you don't like my generosity, go to hell." But it could be a statement again of what is going on. "If you do not like my generosity you are going to hell"? Such a paraphrase literally taken might get at the meaning here. Really, if you don't like the generosity of God, where are you going to be?

But the problem is a little more than generosity per se. The problem was that he was *more* generous *with them*. We don't have nearly the problem time with someone being *more* generous ... *with us*. We have a problem with *more* generous *with them*.

It's like the time a couple I knew, Brian and Barbara, bought this great house, in this great neighborhood, for this great price, and the sellers threw in all this great furniture for nothing. I smiled and said, "Greattttt." But inside I was going, "You're killing me. I am so bothered by this." I should be thrilled for them but I am not. I am jealous of them and I am sad for me.

What's *that* about? It's what the parable is about and that is two things. One is what I'll call, "Me-less." A terrific, real-life story is the Shaantung Compound by Langdon Gilkey. He was in China in an internment camp set up for foreigners when the Jap-

anese overran that country in WWII. With scarcity and survival *the* issue in the camp, he tells about ladling out food and all at the beginning saying I got less because you were trying to save enough for those at the end or all at the end saying I got less because you gave too much at the beginning. He talks about that they couldn't bake potatoes ... because potatoes came in different sizes and people said, 'I got less.' Inside of us human beings, when the chips are down and even when the chips aren't down, we are worried about me getting less.¹

But the struggle is also about "Me-more." It's the other side of the coin. It isn't just about me-less, it is also about me-more. The wonderful New Testament professor, Dale Bruner, with laughter related at a dinner party how in a workshop he and his wife had been to couples were asked to come up a color, an object, and an animal to describe their mate. He said of Cathy his wife, green for freshness, computer operating system for being a manager, and a deer for being soft and sleek. He says she then said of him, pink for exasperated, a conductor's wand for directing and controlling the world, and a little puppy getting front and center constantly saying, "Love me best. Love me most. Love me more." I was thinking that this was perhaps too much information. But they both laughed at their own honesty and foibles. Dale admitted sheepishly a part of his nature ... part of his sin affliction. It's a part of all our natures ... me more, me most.

Somewhere inside our fitful souls is the thought that if he gets more, I'll get less or if he's loved, I'm not. If he's loved a lot, that necessarily means I'm loved less. That if he's loved the same as me, something is wrong! That there's a finite amount of love and that more of a slice of it for him means there's less of a slice of it for me. Even with Jesus, I'm reluctant with the thought that he must increase. It would mean I decrease.²

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1. Even in the garden the temptation is that you have less and God is holding out on you.
 2. Could it ever, in truth, mean that if he increases, we, too, in the right ways will increase? Yes, it could. See James 4:10 as suggesting just this. 5

I have to have more. I cannot have less. So like a junkie I count and compare and calculate and my soul never rests. Here's one time when you could say, "God doesn't count," and it would be true. He doesn't count *that way*. We do. I'm a little thing that counts and counts and counts and counts. It is as draining as a sick Eveready bunny. Comparison is the thief of joy and we get robbed blind.

This scarcity-competition-comparison orientation affects our thinking. It doesn't even cross our minds that in our sharing there is more. If I have three one dollar bills, you have none, and I give one to you, I have less. Oh no! If I have knowledge about how to dice an onion and you don't, and I give you this knowledge, do I have less? No! You have more *and* I have the same. No, more, because I saw and felt you grow. This is the economics of the kingdom. Just like this.

This scarcity-competition-comparison orientation affects our thinking. It doesn't even cross my mind, for example, that it is no fun to be idle and this business owner has been so good to take me and all these others in to be productive for a whole day. I got *more* day being occupied than the others did. I spent more of the day than the others knowing I was going to have money for dinner for me and my family that night. It doesn't even cross my mind that if I got a job early in the morning that it may have had to do with me not being so disabled or so poor. I'm blessed that way. It doesn't even cross my mind that God in his payment arrangement wasn't mischievous, just hopeful. He didn't want to raise their upset-ness. He wanted to raise their joy – by them getting to be spectators of another's good fortune and of his generosity. That's what he always had in mind for the first workers – to be thrilled with seeing grace, to be thrilled seeing grace just the same way we are thrilled watching fireworks. He wanted them to elbow each other and say things like, "Look at that guy's face and how touched he is by God's goodness....What a great thing to get to

see! He thought he was going to get one-twelfth of a day's wages and that wouldn't put bread on the table for his family tonight. He was glad but sad. Now, look at his face filled with wonder and tears of thanks. Aren't we lucky to have such good seats to see this stuff?!"

But it isn't us. We are in a kind of hell. That's one message sitting here in this parable. It lets us know we need to be saved. Can we be saved? Let the parable in. Yea, let the Lord of the parable in.

But there is also another message – you are loved with an *inexhaustible* love. Inexhaustible. Inexhaustible. So there's a message here about you ... and about God. You're special. If our creator made no two snowflakes alike and all are precious to him, how much more so you. Ant this is the God who has plenty of room, plenty of work, and plenty of resources. Inexhaustible is his love.

Let go of needing to be better than others and to have more. What we give up to gain the pearl of great price is not so precious but so draining and small.

Did you see the movie Mr. Holland's Opus? Mr. Holland dreams of composing but by financial necessity he is forced into teaching high school music. One year leads to another and the dream doesn't materialize the way he once thought it would. Then after thirty years comes the day when the music department is cut from the budget and his job is gone. Wondering about his worth he wanders down the hallway a final time only to be diverted into the assembly hall. There he is surprised by the room filled to overflowing with people who have been affected by him. With his wife on one arm and his son on the other, Mr. Holland is escorted in by cheers. Wonderful things are said of him and then the symphony he did write over 30 years is played by the band! And as it closes Mr.

Holland is told that each of these lives is a note and that *they* are his opus. All the love in that scene ... all the love that might make us say, "I really hope in my own way I am so grandly honored and loved," ...all that *is* right now God's heart for you. That auditorium of love is in God's heart when he looks at you and you and you and each and every one of you. In his kingdom there is enough, enough, ... more than enough.

The word of the Lord.

*If you'd like to talk with someone about this message
or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray
with you, the pastors & elders of the church
would welcome your call.
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