

# VIRTUE THAT COUNTS

## Pursuing That Which Touches The Heart Of God

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~~Chapter 13~~

## TENDING THE LITTLE THINGS: God Of The Magnificent Yet Keen On The Insignificant

*The quality of pastoral work is not judged by the size of the flock, but by the commitment to go after one straying sheep (see Matt. 18:10-14).*

### Secret of Getting Deeper With God

Enjoying a deeper fellowship with God now and the ultimate reward awaiting us is not based on the magnitude of our assignment but on the measure of our faithfulness. When the Bible says that each will be rewarded according to *what* he has done (Matt. 16:27), it shouldn't be understood to mean that the *what* is necessarily the magnificence of the work.

We are aware that big surprises are awaiting us in heaven. There is going to be someone *there* whom we thought ought not to be there and someone is going to be absent whom we thought ought to be there. But there is another axis of surprise not so much thought of. We may find someone who was sweeping the church getting a bigger prize than the pastor of the same church. It is not the visibility of the work we do that determines our reward, it is, however, the credibility, diligence and faithfulness with which we do our assignment.

The secret of getting deeper in our relationship with God does not depend on minding the attention-commanding things around us. If we want to get deeper in our relationship with God, we need to get zealously involved with the little things: attending to the unattractive; minding the minors; tending the tender; minding the minority; enlisting the least; listening to the languished; lending a voice to the voiceless; paying attention to the detained; travailing for the trivial; keeping it simple. It is out of the simple little things that magnificence grow—remember the parable of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31-32).

I know someone who felt that it was time for him to get a car. He had reached a point that he felt overwhelmed by the need for a car. He and his family were living at a place where commuting by public means had continuously become arduous. The bus intervals were wide and the distance to the bus stop was taxing, especially during winter.

Though he had been asking God for a car basically for himself and his family, he equally “heard” a whisper asking, ‘Is that all you need a car for—for you and your family?’ He then felt that however much he was prompted to ask for a car because of his family needs, asking God for it just for his use wasn't “enough”. One day as he was praying, he felt he had pressed his way to the throne of provision.

He strongly felt and believed that if he asked “right”, he would most likely get what he needed. He didn’t squander this chance. He took advantage and made a plea for a car, but this time he found an “adequate reason” for needing a car. He told God, ‘If You give me a car, I promise to give someone a lift—You can count on me to do that’. That was simple, apparently *not enough* reason, or so you might think.

This man did not make it big. It was so small, so trivial that if it were a human being he was seeking favour from, he would have wasted his chance by claiming that he needed a car because he would give someone a lift. In fact for man, his “selfish” reason would have been far much better than a promise of giving someone a lift. He would probably end up being scoffed at and asked to find a better (bigger) reason.

What matters, as we have already implied, is not necessarily the size of the assignment we are committing ourselves to do for God. It is rather the faithfulness in an assignment. This man told God that He could count on him to give a lift to anyone who asked for one—unless there was a “genuine” reason to hinder this.

So, did he get the car he asked for? He did—in a very remarkable way. This man asked for a car when he didn’t even have money to buy one. The same week after telling God that he would give someone a lift (and he meant anyone who asks for one), one of the leaders in his local church called him and told him that there was a car for him. He told him that one of the members in the church had two cars and she saw no purpose of keeping both. Since she had use only for one, she asked the church if they needed a car. The car was then passed on to this man and the lady wasn’t in a hurry to get payment for it. She gave a grace period of up to one year to be paid. And the money she asked for was unbelievably low.

So, did he give the lift he promised to give? He did, in a remarkable way. It wasn’t long after getting the car. He had to live up to his promise. He gave a dramatic and “historic lift” that caught the attention of the media.

*It is not the visibility of the work we do that determines our reward, it is, however, the credibility, diligence and faithfulness with which we do our assignment.*

A neighbour in labour asked him to take her to the hospital. The labour had begun in earnest. She could neither wait for an ambulance nor call a taxi. She had to get to the hospital immediately. Due to the morning traffic throng, they were not able to reach the hospital. The lady delivered in the car along the way but he was able to get the mother and the new-born-baby safely to the hospital for medical attention. Even as he was cleaning up the car after the delivery, he took it gracefully since he was well aware that it was part of the bargain for which he got the car.

This man believes that it was because he was going to give a lift that he was given a car. What a simple reason to get a big blessing? His story shows that we can get big things if we promise to be faithful in small matters. We can actually get to pastor big churches by just asking God for a soul and faithfully committing ourselves to effectively disciple that one soul. Out of a diligent discipling of one soul, God can raise a church. In this way, God can reward us by making us an overseer of a big congregation that would basically “pastor” itself.

This is why Jesus talked about leaving ninety-nine sheep while chasing one straying sheep. If only we can commit ourselves completely and faithfully to seek just one sheep, God would keep the ninety-nine for us. Things would have been different if the Lord Jesus said that while the man had gone after the one sheep, wolves came and scattered the ninety-nine. And that when the shepherd came back, it wasn't a big deal for him since he valued the one sheep over the ninety-nine. He didn't say that. It was God who kept the ninety-nine in order to reward the diligence of the shepherd. It is like telling God, 'Lord, I am taking care of one, please take care of the rest'.

Finding himself in a precarious situation, a bus-driver had to turn to God to help him. An accident was imminent. A man on a bicycle had just entered the road. There was completely no chance of avoiding an accident. The driver had only two options: hit the man and struggle to keep the bus in control. This way, he could save the lives of the 58 passengers he had on board. The second option was to veer the bus to avoid hitting the man. This, however, meant that the bus would get into the deep ditch that was on the side he would swerve to. Chances of losing the lives of the 59 people including himself were obvious—except there be a miracle.

The bus-driver didn't have the whole day to think of what to do, in fact, the option was obvious. But the divine grace fell upon him and it looked like he had enough time to think things out. He never took the obvious option. He took advantage of the grace. Holding the steering wheel with one hand, he pointed his thumb backwards and shouted, "Dear Lord Jesus! Take care of the multitude behind me as I take care of the one person in front of me". With that he swerved the bus and landed in the ditch. It was a miracle of sorts. People sustained minor injuries. No one died including the person who rode into the road.

God's part is to take care of the *whole* for us but we have to show our gesture by a zealous attendance to the *part*. Another important thing to remember is that we must consider the individuals in the congregation in order to guard against being carried away by the multitude. This is what Jesus' parable teaches. Look at how Jesus emphasised an "insignificant" assignment:

I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.  
—Mark 9:41-42

Think about it, just a "cup of water"—not a house; not a car, not a big deal. This cup of water may be symbolic but it is first and foremost literal. You may be one of those people who have chosen to give cups of water to people in the name of the Lord Jesus. You will certainly not lose your reward. If it is all you can afford, do not shy from it, keep it simple but be faithful at it.

### The Wisdom of Forsaking Ninety-Nine While Going for One

The world's yardstick for measuring success is more often quantitative. We judge, elevate and position people by considering the amount of their possession. The more they have the higher we place them in the society and the lesser they have, the lower we press them. This is why people who have a lot of money, for example, are glorified even if that money is just for themselves—that is to say, they are esteemed even by those who don't benefit at all from their wealth.

There is nothing wrong with abundance but the Lord does not test the value by looking at the abundance. Abundance has an impulsive appeal for our natural attention. God wants us to defy the impulses and pay attention to His discretion. He looks at the quality. Abundance and quality, more often

than not, do not seem to be associates. The quality that God looks at, as I mentioned earlier, is not popular with men's standards. It would require a powerful magnifying spiritual device to see the value God attaches to things or people that normally don't get our attention. The "Magnifying Device" is the Spirit of God in us.

The problem is that the world's popular standards are creeping into the Church. Many people see success in terms of *quantity*—the abundance. It is not uncommon to hear a servant of God being introduced as, "He pastors the *largest* church in town"; "He has eight thousand members", or "He has the second largest church in town", *etc.* This comparing spirit can easily take off our eyes from that which matters. We rarely hear an introduction like this: "We have a privilege of introducing a servant of God who is going to speak to us today. He pastors one of the upcoming churches in town. Currently he has a membership of five people". Without a mention of a large congregation, we almost think that he has "nothing to show" or "offer".

In Luke 15, the Bible records the parable of the Lost Sheep. In this story, the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus' teaching. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." This prompted Jesus to respond:

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep *until he finds it*? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep'.

—verse 4-6 (italics, author's emphasis).

*A neighbour in labour asked him to take her to the hospital.  
The labour had begun in earnest. She could neither wait for  
an ambulance nor call a taxi.*

Jesus then emphasised to them that in the same way, there will be more rejoicing in heaven *over one sinner* who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who don't need to repent

From the above teaching, the multitude that seems to catch the attention of man's evaluation and qualification is not what the Lord considers. He considers the determination we have to restore one straying sheep.

The one soul restored is not insignificant measured against the ninety-nine. Jesus didn't say that heaven rejoiced because even though one wandered off, there were still ninety-nine remaining. In other words, heaven didn't rejoice over the ninety-nine retained but over the one restored. This is one point many congregations have ignored. In most cases, the more the number rises in a congregation, the lesser the attention is given to an individual that seems to be "up and down", and more so, if this individual happened to be of the "least type".

It can go even deeper. What if a shepherd leaves behind ninety-nine *healthy* sheep at stake and goes for *a sick little sheep* that doesn't seem to have much "value"? I hope this is not abstract that its implication and reality cannot be readily understood in everyday life. Suppose, for instance, the person who is straying was not benefiting the congregation any more than he was being a "burden" of some sort, would his departure bring a sigh of relief to the congregation, especially the leadership or a

beginning of a desperate search to restore him? Would anyone care to plead with God for the sake of that soul? These are the people that if we minister to, we will be sure to get “nothing back” but to give “something more”. It then remains with God to reward us—in this life or hereafter.

Naturally, if the sheep that strays is of a “remarkable value”, it wouldn’t be difficult going after it. According to the principles of God, virtue of restoration would count more if we went and brought back the straying sheep not because we missed his services (since he had none) but because every soul counts to God. Knowing this, what we do for the “superior” we would also do for the “inferior”—in fact, it would be wise to do more to the “inferior” than to the “superior”.

The context of the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18:10-14 is about the “little ones”. Jesus introduced this parable by cautioning His disciples against looking down upon the little ones. This means that the more we get to attend to the little ones, the more we are engaged with what touches the heart of God. Going after a straying sheep would be more important if that sheep happened to be *one of the little ones*. Though in this context the Lord Jesus was talking about children, but it would be wise to generalise this so that it doesn’t only refer to the little in stature but also the little in status. Does it mean that God cares less about them that are of high standing? Not really! What it means is that we naturally attend to those of high status without a struggle or a second thought. This is not so with the least—we need to be challenged to pay attention to the least around us.

Though the popular way is to evaluate success in terms of the numbers, the reality is that the larger the number, the lower the quality of individual pastoral and discipleship alertness. It is easy for a sheep to stray and not be noticed, leave alone being missed. It is only by having the attitude and wisdom of Christ that one can get passionate with a straying soul when he, at the same time, has big congregation.

The wisdom of the world would question the sanity of “leaving” a big congregation chasing after one person. Nevertheless, it is not surprising, that the normal practice of which the Lord invoked is that a shepherd can leave ninety-nine sheep and go looking for one. In Matthew 12:9-12, we have the following story:

Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” He said to them, If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

If we compare Jesus’ tribute to a shepherd’s zeal to pull out a sheep from a pit with the challenge He threw to the Pharisees who questioned His working on the Sabbath, we would understand what Jesus was highlighting: people can readily attend to animals *more* than they do to human beings.

The significance of the little things is also stressed in Luke 15. Jesus told the parable of the Lost Coin. He said that if a woman has ten silver coins and loses one, she would light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it. That when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin”. He told them that in the same way, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents (vs 8-10). The wisdom here is that it is by taking care of the little that she would have cumulative effect to build into a big number. If we become careless with one, the big number will either dwindle or fail to grow to its full potentiality. Every individual regardless of how “insignificant” they look

### Who Actually is the Lost Sheep?

I have on many occasions thought that the lost sheep in our context are the backsliders. That is, those who were once saved but are now straying. This is just part of the lost sheep. In fact, the context in which Christ gave this parable was not in reference to backsliders but people who had never recognised the Shepherd). In our context, the lost sheep include those that have never been saved before. How much do we care about them? We must understand the idea of being a lost sheep from the very beginning of our existence. We were created to have a fellowship with God but mankind strayed when Adam and Eve rebelled against God. From that time, anyone who has not been reconciled to God through Christ is a lost sheep—not just backsliders. The following story is worth pondering.

A pastor was on his way to a Sunday Service. He had the largest congregation in town. He had an interesting revelation that he couldn't wait to share with his flock. On his way, he was stopped by a person—a stranger. He almost drove past because time was catching up with him, but he decided to stop. In fact, he rarely allowed himself to be entangled with impromptus when he had an important assignment like the one he was headed for that Sunday morning.

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When he stopped, the stranger seemed to have a long story to tell. The pastor wasn't sure whether to listen to its full version or excuse himself and drive off to catch up with his assignment. Nevertheless, he could sense that the stranger's story was leading somewhere and he had some genuine issues that he wished he had time to attend to.

He prayed in his heart that the man might summarise so that he would not walk on him. He did—he summarised his story—but it wasn't to let the pastor go but, to the contrary, to claim, the whole of his day. He had an assignment for the pastor. He told him, "I know you must be on your way to church but I have a friend whose life is no longer holding together. He is so dejected with life". He told the pastor that it was a matter of urgency. He needed to come with him immediately so as to minister to the friend. But the stranger added, "There is no guarantee that you are going to change his life though".

At first the pastor thought that it wasn't difficult making a decision in the matter. He would simply excuse himself and drive away. It was already bad enough that he was getting late. But the more he wanted to break and go, the more he realised that it wasn't that simple. He was in a fix. He thought of his congregation against a stranger whom he had been told might not even respond to the Gospel. What was he going to do? I will not tell you what he did and what resulted, however, I wish to ask you a question: if it were you, what could you have done?

You may give an expedient and hypothetical response, the kind of answer a student (looking for marks) would give if he is asked an ethical question like the one below:

*Suppose you are approaching a door and another student coming from the opposite side roughly and carelessly opens the door and you are hit on the face. You are hurt! What would you do?*

The student is given the following alternatives to choose from:

- (a) Revenge by hitting him back;
- (b) Release a verbal barrage on him, rebuking him for his recklessness;
- (c) Report him to the teacher;
- (d) Get yourself in control and advise him that it is good to be careful with the door so that he doesn't hurt others next time.

If this was an examination in ethics or religion, it is not difficult establishing where the reward would be awarded. A student may take alternative (d) not because that is what he would do in the circumstance but because he knows that the answer carries the reward that he is looking for. This is what I would call, 'An expedient response without necessarily committing oneself to carry it out'.

Christianity is practical and our answers are expected to be true also in what we do. Expedient answers or convictions without an equal commitment to stand to the test of practical application would not do us any good. One of the purposes of this book is to resound the way of practice. True Christianity is practical where the Word and the works are in harmony.

Let us go back to the story of the pastor and the stranger and show the odds and conflicts, but before we do that, let me note here that many people would not find this difficult to decide on. And so, the following reasons make it simple to decide in favour of the waiting congregation:

- The congregation is waiting;
- There is an insightful revelation whose freshness and timing seem appropriate for that Sunday;
- What would the church do if the pastor, without a prior warning, just fails to turn up?;
- The pastor tried to call someone in the church to inform them of the impromptu assignment but failed to get anyone. Seems like all phones were already switched off in the church.
- Common sense says that you cannot "sacrifice" a whole congregation for just one soul that you are not even sure would accept the message of salvation.

The above reasons would make it "easy" for anyone to excuse himself and proceed to church. But let us look at it again. There can be a serious dilemma and it may not be that simple? Suppose the pastor just drove off to church but would hear the following day that the person he was being called to attend to committed suicide. At least if he failed to go to church no one would die. The way he was stopped by this stranger looked unique—how did he know that he was a servant of God in the first place? Weren't there possibilities that this might be an angel? Suppose he disobeyed an angel of God, what would become of his preaching that he was really looking forward to? But must the stranger be an angel for the pastor to "obey" him in the circumstances?

We never know whom we are leading to Christ. Suppose the pastor went and ministered to this man a result of which he accepted the message of salvation and turned out to be one of the zealous soul-winners on the planet, how would that feel?

## Big and Small Talents

Jesus told another parable in Luke 19:12-23. Here, among other things and just like in Luke 15, He showed the attitude He has towards the things we more often take for granted because they look insignificant. In this portion of the Scripture, Jesus talks about the minas (money) that were given out to servants by a man of noble birth who went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return. Before he left, he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. "Put this money to work," He told them, "until I come back." (v.13) Though some rejected his kingship, he was made a

king anyway. After having gone away for a period, he returned and sent for the servants to whom he had given the money, in order to find out what they had gained with it.

Because they were ten servants and were given ten minas, I suppose that each servant was given one mina. The first one, having put his one mina to work, gained ten more. He came and said, “Sir, your mina has earned ten more.” The master was impressed. He told him, “Well done, my good servant! ... you have been trustworthy in *a very small matter*” (vs. 16-17—italics, author’s emphasis). He was given ten cities as a reward to take charge of

The faithfulness of this servant in a small matter earned him a big matter—he became the governor of ten cities. It is out of small things that big things grow. I talked about this earlier but I need to resound it in another way: God does not have bosses and lords but servants taking care of small and big business alike.

In the godly order, the magnitude of the assignment does not promote a servant into a master—one remains a servant all the way. In the same way, the “insignificance” of an assignment does not make the one taking care of it any inferior in the order of servanthood. For those serving in the limelight, apart from considering their faithfulness to the assignment, they would also be checked against pride. The question would be, ‘Did their position bring a haughty spirit, or did it, instead, make them even more humble?’ If we use the very thing that ought to have made us proud to make us humble, it would be virtue that counts.

The Gospel according Matthew, on its part, presents another way of looking at it. According to Luke’s record, it is deducible that each servant was given one mina. Depending on how much each of them tended his mina, there was a tremendous potentiality of growth. They ended up with different results being the effect of their varied enthusiasm. Luke’s case showed that the potentiality for growth is not limited by the *size* of the *gift*. It, however, depends on faithfulness and diligence put behind the pursuit of profit. The Gospel according to Matthew (25:14-25) records that the servants were entrusted with different amounts of talents of money. To one, he gave five talents; to another, two talents, and finally one talent, each according to his ability.

The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. Likewise, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

After a long time, the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents earned five more. “Master,” he said, “you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.” The master replied, “Well done, good and faithful *servant!* You have been faithful with a *few things*; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!” (vs. 20-21—italics, author’s emphasis). The man with the two talents also made a profit of two more. He was also commended as a good and faithful servant. Since he was also faithful with a few things, his master put him in charge of many things.

The man who had received the one talent also came but unlike the first two, he made excuses and expressed the fear he had a result of which he hid his master’s talent in the ground. He gave back exactly what he was given—no profit whatsoever. His master rebuked and punished him.

There are things that look big to us. Perhaps we may think that we can only relate with those things when we behave ourselves pompous. Yet for Christ, we get there by taking care of small matters. Though Christ referred to the one given *five talents* to have been faithful in *small matters*, the servant may have seen it in a different light—a big responsibility. It is interesting that when Jesus is announcing the “promotion”, the title remains—a servant. We may be entrusted with a big responsibility but we remain servants. This should be a warning to those of us who after serving God for a long stretch of

time or after accomplishing “big” assignments would appropriate or accept titles of aggrandisement to identify their new positions in the service. Qualifications like “senior”, “reverent”, *etc.*, as I have mentioned elsewhere in this book, do not add anything to the service. They may subtract though. After the servants had worked well, at their promotion, Jesus didn’t say, ‘To identify your new position, you will be called “senior servant”’, *etc.*

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Most people given responsibility over big matters wouldn’t want to remain servants. And we seem to be mobilised more by the magnitude of the assignment given to us—because we think that the bigger it is the more it counts to the Master. It is interesting to note that though the first servant was given more than the others, his was referred to as *small matters*, the same expression used for the second servant.

For the first servant to get five more talents, and the second to earn two more and the last with one talent doing nothing, it shows that these servants were mobilised in the proportions of the value they saw in what they were entrusted with. Though they were given talents each according to his ability, the one who got one talent cannot be said to have had “no ability”.

My interest is on the first and the third servants. They compare contrastingly, and especially considering the implied attitude of the master and that of the servants. I have already noted that the *attitude* of the master was that what looked big (five minas) was actually a “small matter”. The third servant got only one mina and this ought to have been the “small matter”. The master could have done well to ignore it when he realised that the said servant didn’t put his one talent into work but it turned out to be a “big matter”. Being unfaithful in small matter is a big matter

Was it for the sake of it that Jesus showed that those given bigger value took responsibility and a step to invest while the one who got meagre value just buried it? Chances are that the man wasn’t mobilised to invest because what was given to him was “negligible”. When the master returned, we see that he minded every bit of value (resources) he entrusted to the servants. If he never cared for the little things, he could have told the servant, ‘Well, you were expected to invest it, but forget about it! After all, it was just one talent. It was equally not going to give much profit—I can do without it’. No! He didn’t say that. He arraigned and scolded him. In fact, He judged him.

Anyone who thinks that he is not given “enough talent” to mobilise him to set to work should take note. However small a talent God bestowed on us is, He will call us to account for it, not just to bring it the way it was given, but to show its growth. We better get to work, regardless of the size of the assignment. Virtue that counts is minding every bit of talent given to us.

**No Wastage!**

There are usually portions of the Scripture that one may read and pass several times before “seeing” the insight. Some statements look like a drop in the biblical ocean of captivating glamour. I don’t know how many times I read through John 6 and failed to pick much from verse 12. Anytime I was reading John 6, I would get buried in the storyline, paying more attention to the idea of miraculous multiplication and divine provision. Verse 12 “hides” a very important value.

John 6 from verse 1 onwards details that Jesus was followed by a great crowd of people whom at one point He perceived to be hungry. The crowd was so big (about five thousand men) that according to Philip, eight months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite. There was found a boy however with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far would they go among so many?

Jesus directed that people be seated on the grass. He then took the loaves, gave thanks, and the loaves were multiplied and were distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. The same was done with the fish. The climax of this story would end with the fact that all people ate to their fill out of the five loaves and two small fish.

One day, I was however “distracted” by a very startling portion—an anticlimax. I didn’t seem to have noticed it before. Verse 12 and 13 says:

When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “*Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted*”. So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten (italics, author’s emphasis).

Look at it again! The Divine Provider; The Multiplier; the One who has just shown the divine abundance and lavishness, directing that the fragments be gathered up! What for? These pieces were not only pieces, they were left-over. People had just had their fill, why bother to gather the pieces? If the Bible didn’t tell us, we would suggest that Jesus was probably an environmentalist and wanted the place cleaned up. He was definitely an environmentalist but the Lord gave the reason for which He wanted the fragments gathered up—“Let nothing be wasted”. Jesus surely gets very preoccupied with little things—things that people would ignore or throw away.

For Jesus to call attention to the fragments was not only symbolic of the fact that Divine estimation doesn’t ignore the little things, it was also a show of the divine consistency, namely, it was out of the little that He provided the abundance. The lesson is that we may not know God’s abundance if we disregard the little.

I mentioned earlier that people who eat and throw food might be throwing away food that ought to feed somebody somewhere. Throwing or wasting food is not Christian. I usually question people who serve themselves from a serving bowl, eat and then leave some on their plates to be wasted. It is not only rude and a discouragement to the person who took his/her time to prepare the food but also an insensitive wastefulness. I usually serve on my plate what I know I will clear. If I suspect that I might not like the food, I would put very little so that I can finish it. To make it even worse, sometimes we are given the privilege of self-service but we end up in “selfish-service”. This is a case where one loads his/her plate full and fails to finish the food yet those coming behind would get either little or no food left.

## The Value of a Soul

A man wrote a manuscript and gave it out to his friends to read through so that they could give him feedback. Out of ten, nine felt that the work wasn’t worth publishing. It may not “sell”. He had applied

to quite a number of the traditional publishers for its publication but they rejected it. If it was to be published, he had to self-publish it, i.e. he would pay for its entire publication. The publication and some little advertisement was to bring the cost to over US \$ 2,000. Judging from the feedback from his friends, there was no guarantee that he would “make any profit” from the project.

Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit spoke to him and he was persuaded about it. He told him that there would be only *one person* whose life would be changed dramatically as a result of reading his book; that there was something he wrote that would directly and specifically identify with the person. This one person would be helped to walk out of darkness into the marvellous light of the Son of God. The Holy Spirit didn't however advise him to either go ahead with the publication or abandon it. He was then certain that the pursuit of publishing the book would not necessarily be economically viable. On the spiritual viability, there is a guarantee of only one person. What was he to do?

*God does not have bosses and lords but servants  
taking care of small and big business alike.*

For many, it may not be difficult to make a decision in this case. The project wouldn't just be worth it. But would it? This is the point of the test. What actually is the motive and attitude of the work we do for God? *How much* “return”, and in *what form* do we expect it? Do we put the *gains* before the *grace*; *profit* before *providence*, and *prosperity* before *posterity*? Do we look for the multitude and ignore the solitude?

But what, actually, is the worth of a soul? If we spend US \$1 billion in search of souls only to end up with just one soul when we are spending the last dime of our US \$ 1 billion, would we count it “worth” the money, time and effort? The Bible says:

It was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed... but with the precious blood of Christ.

—1 Peter 1:18-19.

Silver and gold is used to refer to money. Money is the most free-flowing value determinant in the world today. People who kill others because of money should know that all the moneys of the world put together is not worth the soul of a man. There is no monetary price on a soul.

If we go out looking for souls and the search becomes extremely dangerous, and we are aware that our very life is in danger, what would we do? To make matters discouraging, we have been made to know that the best we can get out of our dangerous adventure is one soul. We are also made aware that if we continue, we would win the soul yes, but at the expense of our very life. Would we still count it “worth”, would we continue?

I must reemphasise: there is no material price on a soul. Even when I gave a US \$ 1 billion tag as the “value” of winning a soul, it must be remembered that the sum is not the price of a soul. The price of a soul is *the* priceless Blood of the Lamb of God. Not even our blood is a price worth for a soul. Neither is any material worth is its price. That is why Jesus said that you cannot exchange your soul for any material gains in the whole world. In other words, even the worth of the whole material world put together cannot exchange as the worth of a soul (Mk. 8:36-37).

It is amazing how we have not taken this seriously and still behave in ways that show we are exchanging our souls for a lot less than the worth of the world. It is also chilling to see how we are usually careless with individual souls. It is important that we take people at the value that the Lord Himself attached to them. Failure to see this would be failing to recognise what counts before God.

### It Gets Even More Startling

I want to show you how strange it becomes, a reason for which we are prone to miss it over and over again. Suppose your friend sends you an invitation card. The purpose is that you are called to a celebration. And the celebration is because your friend has found a coin that he lost. The value of the coin is definitely lower than what he is going to spend to entertain you and his other friends. Many people would probably attend for the purpose of *partying* but not for the value of and an excitement for the *recovery* of just a coin. In fact, many would question the sanity of celebrating a recovered coin. But this is actually what Jesus said in the parables we referred to in Luke 15—not once but twice in a row. Let us go back to it for purposes of emphasising a point. In the parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus says:

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. *Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep'*  
—vs. 4-6.(italics, author's emphasis).

It was already going too far chasing after one sheep while leaving ninety nine unattended, but calling a party for a recovered sheep was even more ridiculous. But even if people would not see the sense of rejoicing over one recovered sheep, heaven would rejoice over one sinner who repents.

Jesus also gave the parable of the Lost Coin:

Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? *And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin'*  
—vs. 8-9 (italics, author's emphasis).

But even if people should fail to rejoice over a recovered coin, there would be a roaring rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Let us dramatise it to get the real picture: Matthew and a group of friends are walking back to their various houses. They meet Judas (an acquaintance). A conversation starts. The conversation goes something like this:

*Judas:* How are you Matthew, you people look so happy, where are you from?

*Matthew:* We have been partying. First we were at John's place. You remember he lost one of his sheep. He found it and called us to rejoice over the recovery. We ate and drank. After that we also went to Mary Magdalene's place. She lost a coin yesterday night. She made a search and found it. She also invited us to go and rejoice over the recovered coin. She baked and cooked. We ate and drank there as well. It has been a wonderful day! We wish you were there!

*Judas:* How much did these people spend to throw a party that magnificent over such meagre recoveries?

*Matthew:* I don't know how much they spent specifically, I only know that John slaughtered a lamb for us and Mary did some good baking. They definitely spent quite a bit. Nevertheless, I know that the recoveries were important for them and so it was for us because when one of us is happy, we all join in the happiness. It is important to be happy for the sake of our friends.

*Judas:* I have started some economic classes. I believe people like John and Mary need some lessons on financial and material management.

Hoping that one cannot call people to rejoice with him and fail to entertain them with something to eat or drink, it would be apparent that the cost of throwing a party would definitely be higher than the recoveries. What is the sense then? That is why we miss many things that are very important for God. We neither see their significance nor their sense. Many of us fall in the category of Judas in the above drama. John even slaughtered a lamb that was worth more than the one he recovered. What really is the sense?

Elsewhere, (Matt. 10:29-31) the Lord says that the hair on our head are numbered. Really? Why should God of the universe care about the hair on my head? When one falls—a single hair—He knows it. Can we really see how God can get low and involve Himself with “petty things”? I can lose up to hundreds of my hair before it catches my attention, yet God would know when one falls. This should send us grieving over the fact that a whole human being can fall out of the flock and we don't even notice, leave alone caring.

*Being unfaithful in small matter is a big matter.*

Let us get the picture: Suppose I invite one of the renowned world evangelists all the way from abroad to come and minister in my town, I would quickly think of the numbers. I would go into advertisement and announce that a servant of God is coming. I would do my best to raise a good crowd—and this is in order. But how many people would I need to attend the meeting to make it a viable for a renowned servant of God? Suppose I can only be sure of gathering three people? What about only one person? If I make it known to the preacher that he is coming all the way to minister to one person, would he still come?

A man was in a programme of Secondary schools' ministry in a developing country. At one time, he cycled a total of 60 km one way to preach to secondary school students. Though the school wasn't a big one, he had expected to get at least 100 students in the gathering. When he reached, he was surprised that there were only half a dozen students scattered in one of the classrooms.

He struggled with the thought, 'Is it worth riding a total of 120 km to preach to only six young people?' The Spirit of God whispered to him that the numbers are important yes, but not important enough to neutralise the worth of few people or even one person. It was still worth even if he got one person. If Jesus' interest were swallowed up in the crowd, He wouldn't have given the low quorum for His attendance. He promised that where two or three people are gathered in His name He will be there (Matt. 18:20). What about an individual—just one person? He gets individual too. He resides in each

one who has allowed Him in (Rev. 3:20). If Christ would come all the way from Heaven to attend a meeting of two or three, why would his servant, regardless of his status, fail to cross over from one continent to another to meet one person who needs to hear about the Master?

*People had just had their fill, why bother to gather the pieces?*

For the man, riding a long distance to minister to a small group of students was not a daunting test. It was his area of operation. He was a small-scale preacher ministering to secondary schools' students. The test, however, mounts as one climbs the ladder. If God would promote him to the next level and even all the way to the "top", being ranked world-wide, would he still be willing to ride a bicycle (the place is only accessible by bicycle) to a village secondary school and be satisfied to get a student or two to minister to? That is the test!

It is human tendency to get carried by the crowd to the extent that the worth of individuals gets drowned in the crowd. It counts to God—very much so—if we remember from where He built us so that despite our "promotion" we don't behave as if we have outgrown humble ministries. Even people who started on a high note, there must be the seeking of the heart of Jesus as we serve in His leadership. If Jesus would get involved with individuals, how much should we consider it important to do likewise? Time and resources spent ministering to a few people or even an individual soul is not wasted.

I am of the conviction that if we get zealous with individuals, God would raise a crowd for us. If we get zealous with a coin, He would help us raise thousands of bills. I am, however, not talking about being a penny-pincher or a miser, I am talking about being a good steward and a diligent accountant, yet generous for calls of ministration.

### **A Preacher is Tested by His Own Conventions**

I read a story of a preacher who talked about the kind of honesty and integrity expected of a Christian. He was so strict and picked on some "negligible" things that some people in his audience didn't believe him. They thought that the kind of little things he expected Christians to be honest about were not humanly possible.

Someone may call it "chance" but I call it "divine appointment" A time for testing came. A sceptical bus driver happened to have been in the audience this preacher ministered to the previous evening. It never crossed his mind that he would be a passenger the following day of one of those he preached to. He couldn't recognise all the people in that meeting. So when he boarded a bus, he couldn't tell that the driver was in his audience. This gave a conducive environment to be tested.

The bus driver decided to test the integrity and the honesty of the preacher in a practical way. The preacher paid his fare and got back the change. The driver deliberately gave him a little extra in the change. After doing this, he watched the man of God in the mirror to see if he would count the money. He almost put the money in his pocket without counting. A voice, however, whispered to him, 'count the money and check the receipt!' He promptly did so. He realised that he had been given slightly more but the extra was so negligible—50 cents to be exact. In a moment's time, he had reasoned many things

in his mind, ‘This is so little it will not do the company any damage neither will it put the driver into any accounting jeopardy. It is a waste of time going back to the driver to return this’.

*But what, actually, is the worth of a soul? If we spend US\$1 billion in search of souls only to end up with just one soul when we are spending the last dime of our US\$1 billion, would we count it “worth” the money, time and effort?*

He also thought that it would not make any difference in his economy—it wasn’t a temptation at all. As he was beginning to settle on his seat, he felt that going back to the driver who was then beginning to drive off, would not only distract him but probably waste the time for the other passengers who might be in a hurry. Though he finally sat down, his conscience didn’t sit with him. Yes, the money was no temptation neither would it jeopardise the driver’s job nor plunge the bus company into a financial loss, it wasn’t his and he had just to do the right thing. He went back to the driver and told him that he gave him more change by 50 cents.

The driver owned up and told him that it was deliberate. He was in his meeting the previous evening and didn’t believe him in respect to the things he was talking about. But that after the *test*, he then believed. If he had not returned the money, he would have been entered into the driver’s evidence for the hypocrisy of preachers. He concluded: “Now I believe! There are people who are truly serious about *this* faith”.

### Trivial Things Work Both Ways

The trivial things may work to build enormously or destroy extensively. Insignificant things can have tremendous significance over the quality of our good works and the value of our relationship with God. We take them for granted or ignore them at our own peril. Some of the insights we have seen so far indicate the positive significance of the petty things. They are the very things that God would use to measure the value and quality of our commitment. Our reward will be based on how much we got deeply involved with things that don’t command attention from the world.

It wasn’t by chance that God intended big things to start small. When Jesus gave the parable of the mustard seed, He clearly showed that small things have a great potentiality. They only need to be tended. It is important to emphasise that a man would be wise, after his mustard seed has grown into a big tree, not to despise or ignore its origin. In other words, let not the big tree take your attention away from the seed. Tending little things proves a godly character of patience, faith hope and humility.

The other side of the insignificant things is that they are the very things that the enemy uses to neutralise the effectiveness of God’s work among believers. In the following paragraphs, we are going to see how the small things can actually cause damage to our relationship with God.

*If Christ would come all the way from Heaven to attend a meeting of two or three, why would his servant, regardless of his status, fail to cross over from one continent to meet one person who needs to hear about the Master?*

Generally, a sincere Christian who has made a solemn decision to follow Christ may not succumb to the temptation by the “big sins”. Keeping off an outright stealing or adultery or whatever other big sins we may think about may not be a problem. The devil knows this. To get these people, he tries the “little sins”. These little sins may look less serious when they are of the form of omission than when they are commission. The intention here is to weaken the spiritual fervour of the one involved. The cumulative effect of these small sins will in the end cause a big damage. This is why the lover said, “Catch for us the foxes, the *little* foxes that ruin our vineyards, our vineyards that are in blossom” (Song. 2:15 Italics emphasis).

A sixteenth century English explorer by the name Sir Francis Drake had been out in the seas sailing around the world. He faced and survived formidable storms and waves. This man ought to have accumulated “enough experience” and confidence yet when he was back home, in a familiar environment, while crossing the Thames River, a violent storm threatened to capsize his boat. It was enough to scare life out of him. He cried, “Shall I who have endured the storms of oceans be drowned in a ditch?” Yes, people drown in the oceans but perhaps it is more likely to drown in the streams. The reason being that we take the stream for granted. We may not take the necessary precautions the way we do when we face the ocean. It is even trickier if we have had an ocean experience and were unscathed.

### Reflections and Questions to Ponder

- 1. If you are leading a big congregation, how would you practically demonstrate leaving behind the big flock to chase after one straying soul? What impression would it make if you “abandon” your preaching assignment one Sunday morning in order to pay a surprise visit to a soul that seems to be straying? Would you consider this to be one of the ways of showing the much you care about a soul?*
- 2. What are some of the little things that you seem to have been ignoring but you have realised that ‘they are not that small’? What are you going to do about them?*
- 3. What are some of the other little things not mentioned in this book but of which you feel are being quickened in your heart to think about?*
- 4. How do you evaluate your stewardship over food? Is it possible to manage it to the point that you will have nil tolerance on wastage? What would be the cumulative effect of nil tolerance to unnecessary wastage? Is it worth it?*