

Tackling Goliath

Article Summary: Many followers of Christ understand the biblical mandate for helping the poor – and desire to do so. Standing in the way of this desire is the recognition that extreme poverty is a problem of enormous dimensions – our efforts to help seem miniscule by comparison, leading to a sense of futility. How can our gifts possibly have an impact? A look at God’s Word yields two key truths which we can rely upon as we faithfully obey His command to show tangible compassion towards the world’s least and last. First is the truth that God is present and active in the fight against extreme poverty; we are not alone in this battle, and indeed, He purposes to win it. Second is the truth that He is a God of multiplication, multiplying the gifts of the faithful many times over to accomplish His purposes. Relying upon these two scriptural truths, our part is to simply and faithfully bring what we have. Our gifts, whether they be time, talent, or treasure, do indeed matter – to those whose lives are changed, and to our great God, whose hand is upon all.

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Our Triune God is a giving God.... the giver of life, provision, and blessing. In His Word, He has set the spiritual and practical foundations for the generosity He has designed us to receive and to extend. We live trusting in the sufficiency of His provision for us. We know that we are blessed to be a blessing, and, as such, are not entitled to the riches He has blessed us with, but rather, are entrusted with them. We intentionally provide for margin in our financial practices in order to ensure that we have money to share with those in need. We value faith tangibly expressing itself in love over the materialism rampant in our self-absorbed consumer culture. Most of all, we understand that our faith is not a private transaction between ourselves and God, but a clear call to partner with Him in proving true the prayer "*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*"

Overwhelmed

As we study God's revelation of himself in His Word, we glimpse our Father's heart for the poor, and His prescriptions for helping them: The biblical mandate for serving the poor is clear. In this 21st century since Christ came to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, we have become all too aware of the nature and depth of the poor's sufferings, as well as our unprecedented ability to help. Further, we understand the terrible price paid in lost reputation and diminished relevance when the Church ignores God's call to help the least and the last.

What does this mean for giving specifically to help the world's most desperately poor? Some one billion people live out their lives in extreme poverty. Over 9,000,000 people die each year due to hunger; another 5,000,000 due to unsafe drinking water. Nearly 20,000 children die *each day*, due entirely to preventable causes. The numbers are overwhelming; the prospect of even making a dent seems impossible.

We have come to a place in our walk, then, where the plight of the least and the last hangs heavy on our hearts. We wonder over the incredible disparity between our lives, here in America, and theirs. The Spirit whispers that *we have been blessed in order to be a blessing....* that we are indeed givers by design. As we align our hearts with God's, we find ourselves wanting to make a difference for the desperately poor, and willing to give, sacrificially, to do it.

Yet, when we come face to face with the sheer size and scope of the problem of extreme poverty, we begin to wonder if the problem can ever be solved. The help we wish to give seems as a drop of water in an endless desert; the problem is overwhelming. A sense of futility creeps in, and we question whether our gifts can really make a difference. It is at this point that many remain on the sidelines, discouraged, out of the game.

The biblical mandate for helping the least and the last means that staying on the sidelines is not an option. How, then, does one do battle with this sense of futility, this sense that our meager contributions cannot possibly make a difference? *By embracing the scriptural truth that it's not all up to us.*

It's *Not* All Up to Us

The importance of this truth – that it's not all up to us – is played out in scripture time and time again, from beginning to end. Think Moses, Gideon, David, Esther, an unnamed boy with five loaves and two fish, the early church..... Our Father is a God of redemption, of *victory over futility*. We serve a God of miraculous power, of abundance, of multiplication – a God who delights in using the weak and the small to achieve His great ends. As we live in this truth, what seem to be overwhelming problems turn into occasions for joyful service. Joyful giving to serve the least and the last, then, relies on knowing that it's not all up to us – that the battle is the Lord's, that He is the Lord of multiplication, that our part is to bring what we have.

The Battle is the Lord's

The story of David and Goliath is a favorite because it shows the small and insignificant triumphing against insurmountable odds. David is no-one special – a mere shepherd boy, not a warrior, certainly not an “expert” -- except that God has a plan for him (as He does for each of us). This is a story of God's power, shown in one who humbly loves and trusts Him.¹ The key to this story, and its application to us, is in David's address to Goliath as he enters the battle, found in 1 Samuel 17:45-47. This passage peaks with the phrase “the battle is the Lord's.”

The implication for the battle against extreme poverty is clear. The problem is of truly gigantic proportions, seemingly unbeatable. We, and our contributions, are miniscule by comparison. But, “the battle is the Lord's.” God's heart for the poor, His concern for them, is clear. While the bible tells us we will always have the poor, this does not mean that He has abandoned them. He has made provision for them, *through us*, as is made clear throughout scripture.² He has blessed us to be a blessing; He has made us givers by design.

The battle against extreme poverty is the Lord's battle; like David, we can count on Him to take an active, miraculous hand in it. He means for this battle to be won, to His glory. He will do it.

Can we truly make a difference with our small gifts? Yes! How do we know? Because God wills it.

The Lord of Multiplication

The story of Jesus feeding the 5000 is often cited as evidence that God's concern extends beyond our spiritual needs, to our physical needs as well. What is interesting is the way in which God's power is made manifest in this miracle. That is, God chose to multiply what was, rather than to create anew – Jesus' first step was to make clear that He was not going to handle this Himself, but wanted the participation of His disciples. Five barley loaves and two fish, all that could be found, were brought – offered – to Jesus. Though this was a ridiculously small amount in the face of such an enormous need, Jesus accepted the offering. Scripture tells us He gave thanks, then multiplied this insignificant contribution to such an extent that not only was everyone fed all they wanted, but the leftovers amounted to more than the original contribution. Twelve baskets, in fact – enough to remind each disciple, basket in hand, of the multiplication that He had just wrought.

The implication for the battle against extreme poverty, the care and feeding of literal multitudes, is plain for those who believe in the power of God to produce present-day miracles. Though we can neither understand nor control this multiplication effect for ourselves, we are called to trust in it, in Him who wields it. We glimpse it in the work of relief and development organizations who secure government or industry grants which match (sometimes as high as 20:1) our contributions. We glimpse it in the work of research organizations who discover and disseminate new ways to improve agricultural practices and yields for subsistence farmers in the developing world. We glimpse it in the explosion of microfinance operations, which recycle the same funds over and over again, creating economic opportunity for the poor. Most of all, we glimpse it in the empowerment, new hope, and transformation wrought in desperately poor communities and then spread, like a holy virus, to neighboring communities. In these ways, and countless unseen others, we see the Lord of multiplication at work.

And it starts with simply, obediently bringing what we have....

Playing our Part

As crazy as it may seem, God wants to use us – the small, the weak, the imperfect – to accomplish His great ends. This theme runs throughout scripture, to His glory. There is no denying that we, each of us, has a part to play in the advance of His Kingdom, tangibly demonstrating His love to a hurting world. We can all play a part in the battle against extreme poverty.

We all have a part to play, a part we were created to play. Faced with the task of feeding the 5000, the disciples said it was impossible – to which Jesus replied “you do it.” Faced with the unbeatable Goliath, Saul and his army said it was impossible – yet David acted, knowing whose battle it really was, and trusting Him for it. In both of these instances, the players brought what they had: the disciples, a boy with 5 loaves and 2 fish; David a sling and a few smooth stones.

They brought what they had – and that was all they brought. The disciples did not take up a collection and go into town to buy more food. David refused Saul’s armor – he could scarcely even walk in it. Our Father did not ask them for what they did not have; yet, the 5000 were fed, Goliath defeated. Likewise, He does not ask us for what we do not have; He asks only that *we play our part* – He stands ready to play His.

Our Gifts Matter

Doing nothing because we can’t do everything is a rejection of God’s purposes and power. It is not all up to us, but we do need to play our part. The Lord to whom the battle belongs, the Lord who multiplies our gifts, ensures the victory – according to His will, and for His glory. One billion people suffer daily in extreme poverty. A little over one percent of American Christians’ income would be enough to sustainably lift them out of their desperation. *It’s a miracle waiting to happen;* we have only to do our part.

Our gifts matter. They are the good fruit, the return that the master desires.³ This is reason enough.

But we live in a tangible, physical world as well; we want to know if our gifts make a difference here and now. An old story⁴ provides perspective.... A man is walking along the beach after a particularly violent storm. As he goes, he picks up the starfish that have been washed up on the beach and throws them, one by one, back into the water. A passerby notices what he is doing, and points out the futility of his efforts – thousands of starfish lie withering on the beach, and he can’t possibly save them all. “Nothing you can do will make a difference,” the passerby says. Throwing another starfish back into the sea, the man replies, “it made a difference to that one!”

Yes, our gifts to help the least and the last matter in the here and now. And, these acts of compassion and love, and the faithfulness and obedience implicit in them, will bring us eternal rewards as well. But will these small gifts matter when Christ returns, all creation is redeemed, and God’s Kingdom is established in all its fullness and glory?

To answer this question, consider this wonderful and telling passage from N. T. Wright:⁵
“But what we can and must do in the present, if we are obedient to the gospel, if we are following Jesus, and if we are indwelt, energized, and directed by the Spirit, is to build for the kingdom. This brings us back to 1 Corinthians 15:58 once more: what you do in the Lord is not in vain. You are not oiling the wheels of a machine that’s about to roll over a cliff. You are not restoring a great painting that’s shortly going to be thrown on the fire. You are not planting roses in a garden that’s about to be dug up for a building site. You are – strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself – accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God’s new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one’s fellow human beings and for that matter one’s fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching,

every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world – all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make. That is the logic of the mission of God.”

JOY.... In this way we find joy in giving to help the least and the last.

Can I really Make a Difference?

Throughout scripture, we learn of God’s heart for the poor, the reality of His present and future Kingdom, and that we have a part in His great ends. Can we really expect to tangibly extend the love that is in Christ to the least and the last on the other side of the globe? Can our small gifts really make a difference in the battle against extreme poverty?

The Lord to whom the battle belongs,
The Lord who multiplies,
The Lord to whom we pray
“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”

Says.....

“YES.”

¹ The storyline “the battle is the Lord’s” is not unique to David and Goliath; indeed, it is the story of the bible. Consider Moses, slow and clumsy in speech, going toe to toe with Pharaoh for the release of God’s chosen people. Or insecure Gideon, attacking the Midianites with 300 men. Or Peter’s address to the crowd in Acts 2, in which 3000 believed. Or.....

² There are over 2000 verses, throughout all 66 books of the bible, dealing with poverty/oppression/wealth... See especially Deut 24:19-22 and Lev 19:9-10; James 1:27 and Micah 6:8; James 2:15-16 and 1 Jn 3:18; Luke 3:11 and 1 John 3:17; Matt 25:34-40.

³ Matthew 25:14-30

⁴ Adapted from *The Star Thrower*, by Loren Eiseley, Harvest publishers, 1979.

⁵ N. T. Wright, as quoted in *The Hole in Our Gospel* (p.69), by Richard Stearns, Thomas Nelson publishers, 2009.

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