

THE TILLAGE OF THE POOR: THE RESPONSIBILITY OF SMALL GIFTS

taken from

Proverbs 13:23



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Proverbs 13:23, "Much food is in the tillage of the poor: but there is that is destroyed for want of judgment."

Palestine was a land of small peasant proprietors, and the institution of the Year of Jubilee was intended to prevent the acquisition of large estates by any Israelite. The consequences, as intended, were a level of modest prosperity. It was "the tillage of the poor," the careful diligent husbandry of the man who had only a little patch of land to look after, that filled the storehouses of the Holy Land.

Hence the proverb of our text arose. It preserved for us the picture of the economical conditions in which it originated. And it is capable of, and is intended to have, an application to all forms and fields of work. In all it is true that the bulk of the harvested results are due, not to the large labors of the few, but to the minute, unnoticed toils of the many.

Small service is true service. And the aggregate of such produces large crops.

Spade husbandry gets most out of the ground. The laborer's allotment of half an acre is generally more prolific than the average of the squire's estate. Much may be made of slender gifts, small resources, and limited opportunities, if carefully cultivated, as they should be, and as their very slenderness should stimulate their being.

One of the Psalms addresses, "The children of Ephraim" because they "being armed and carrying bows, they turned back in the day of battle." That saying deduces obligation from equipment and preaches a stringent code of duty to those who are in any direction largely gifted.

Power to its last particle is duty, and not small is the crime of those who, with great capacities, have small desire to use them, and leave the brunt of the battle to half-

trained soldiers, badly armed. But the imagery of the fight is not sufficient to include all the aspects of the Christian life. The peaceful toil of the husbandman that labors, stands in one of Paul's letters, side by side with the heroism of the man that wars.

Our text gives us the former image, and so supplements that other. It completes the lesson of the Psalm in another respect, as insisting on the importance, not of the well-endowed, but of the slenderly furnished, who are immensely in the majority.

This text is a message to ordinary, mediocre people, without much ability or influence. First, it teaches the responsibility of small gifts. It is no mere accident that in our Lord's great parable, He represents the man with the one talent as the hider of his gift.

There is a certain pleasure in doing what we can do, or fancy we can do well. There is a certain pleasure in the exercise of any kind of gift, be it of body or mind. But when we know that we are but very slightly gifted by Him, there is a temptation to say, "It doesn't matter much whether I contribute my share to this, or the other work, or not. I am a poor man. My fifty cents will make but a small difference in the total. I am possessed of very little leisure. The few minutes that I can spare for individual cultivation, or for benevolent work, will not matter at all. I am only an insignificant unit. Nobody pays any attention to my opinion. It does not in the least signify whether I make my influence felt in regard to the social, spiritual, or political questions and the like. I can leave all that to the more influential men."

The littleness at least has the prerogative of immunity. "My little finger would produce such a slight impact on the scale, that it is indifferent whether I apply it or not. It is a good deal easier for me to wrap up my talent, which, after all, is only a nickel and not

a talent, and put it away and do nothing.” Yes, but then you forget that **responsibility does not diminish with the size of the gifts.** But that there is a great responsibility for the use of the smallest, as for the use of the largest. And that although it doesn’t matter very much to anybody but yourself what you do, it matters all the world to you.

But in addition, the text tells us that it does matter whether the poor man sets himself to make the most of his little patch of ground or not. “There is much food in the tillage of the poor.” The slenderly endowed are the immense majority. There is a genius or two here and there, dotted along the line of the world’s and the Church’s history. The great men and the wise men and the wealthy men may be counted by units, but the men that are not very much of anything are counted by millions.

Unless we can find some stringent law of responsibility that applies to them, the bulk of the human race will be under no obligation to do anything either for God or for others, or for themselves. If I am absolved from the task of bringing my weight to bear on the side of right because my weight is infinitesimal and I am only one in a million, suppose all the million were to plead the same excuse. What then? Then there would not be any weight on the side of the right at all.

The barns of Palestine were not filled by farming on a great scale, like that pursued way out on the western prairies, where one man will own, and his servants will plow a furrow for miles long. But they were filled by the small industries of the owners of tiny patches. The “tillage of the poor” meaning thereby not the mendicant, but the peasant owner of a little plot, who yielded the bulk of the “food.”

The wholesome old proverb, “many littles make a nickel,” is as true about the influence brought to bear in the world to arrest evil and to sweeten corruption as it is about anything besides. Christ has a great deal more need of the cultivation of the small patches that He gives to the most of us than

He has even of the cultivation of the largest estates that He bestows on a few.

Responsibility is not to be measured by the amount of the gift. But is equally stringent, entire, and absolute whatever be the magnitude of the endowments from which it arises.

Let me remind you how the same virtues and excellencies can be practiced in the administering of the smallest as in that of the greatest gifts. Some say, “Oh, if I were eloquent like So-n-so, rich like So-n-so, a man of weight and importance like some other, how I would consecrate my powers to the Lord. But I am slow of speech, nobody minds me, or I have very little that I can give.” Yes, “He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.”

If you do not utilize the capacity possessed, to increase the estate would only be to increase the crop of weeds from its cultivated clods. We never palm off a greater deception on ourselves than when we try to hoodwink conscience by pleading bounded gifts as an excuse for boundless indolence. And to persuade ourselves that if we could do more we should be less inclined to do nothing.

The most largely endowed has no more obligation and no fairer field than the most slenderly gifted lies under and possessed. All service coming from the same motive and tending to the same end is the same with the Lord. Not the magnitude of the act, but the motive thereof determines the whole character of the life of which it is a part.

The same graces of obedience, consecration, quick compassion, self-denying effort, may be cultivated and manifested in the spending of a nickel, as in the administration of millions. The smallest rainbow in the tiniest drop that hangs from some sooty cave and catches the sunlight has precisely the same lines, in the same order as the great arch that strides across the whole sky.

If you go to the giant’s causeway, or to the other end of it almost the scotch hebrides, you will find the hexagonal basaltic pillars all of identically the same pattern and

the same shape. Whether their height be measured by feet or by tenths of an inch, big or little, they obey exactly the same law.

“There is much food in the tillage of the poor.” Secondly, notice how **there must be a diligent cultivation of the small gifts.**

The inventor of this proverb had looked carefully and sympathetically at the way in which the little peasant proprietors worked. And he saw in that a pattern for life. It is not always the case, of course, that a little holding means good husbandry. But it is generally so. And you will find few waste corners and few unweeded patches on the ground of a man whose whole ground is measured by rods instead of miles. There will usually be little waste time. And few neglected opportunities of working in the case of the peasant whose subsistence, with that of his family, depends on the diligent and wise cropping of the little patch that does belong to him.

If you and I have to take our place in the ranks of the one-talented men, the commonplace run of ordinary people, the more reason for us to enlarge our gifts by a sedulous diligence, by an unwearied perseverance, by a keen look out for all opportunities for service. And above all, by a prayerful dependence upon Him from whom alone comes the power to toil, and who alone gives the increase. The less we are conscious of large gifts, the more we should be bowed in dependence on Him from whom cometh every good and every perfect gift. And Who gives according to His wisdom, and the more earnestly should we use the slender possession which God may have given us.

Industry applied to small natural capacity will do far more than larger power rusted away by sloth. You know that it is so in regard of daily life, and common business, and the acquisition of mundane sciences and arts. It is just as true in regard to the Christian race, and to the Christian Church work of witness.

Who are they who have done the most in this world for God and for men? The largely endowed men? “Not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble are called.”

The coral insect is microscopic, but it will build up from the profoundest depth of the ocean a reef against which the whole Pacific may dash in vain. It is the small gifts that, after all, are the important ones.

So, let us cultivate them the more earnestly, the more humbly we think of our own capacity. Play well thy part. Here all the honor lies. God, who has builded up some of the towering Alps out of micaflakes, builds up His Church out of infinitesimally small particles, slenderly endowed men touched by the consecration of His love.

Thirdly, let me remind you that the harvest reaped from these slender gifts when sedulously tilled. Two great results of such conscientious cultivation and use of small resources and opportunities may be suggested as included in that abundant food of which our text speaks.

The faithful uses faculty increases. “To him that hath shall be given.” Some say, “Oh, if only I had a wider sphere how I would flame in it, and fill it.” If so, then twinkle your best in your little sphere, and that will bring a wider one some time or other.

For as a rule, and in the general, though with exceptions, opportunities come to the men that can use them, and roughly, but yet substantially. Men are set in the world where they can shine to the most advantage to the Lord. Fill your place. And if you like, like Paul, have borne witness for the Lord in little Jerusalem, He will not keep you there, but carry you to bear witness for Him in imperial Rome itself.

The old fable of the man who told his children to dig all over the field and they would find treasure, has its true application in regard to Christian effort and faithful stewardship of the gifts bestowed upon us. The sons found no gold, but they improved the field, and secured its bearing golden harvests, and they strengthened their own muscles, which was better than gold.

So, if we want larger endowments, let us honestly use what we possess, and use will make growth.

The other issue is that the final reward of all faithful service is “Enter thou into the joy of the Lord.” It is said, not to the brilliant, but to the “faithful” servant.

In that great parable, which is the very textbook of this whole subject of gifts and responsibilities and recompense, the men who were entrusted with unequal sums use these unequal sums with equal diligence, as is manifested by the fact that they realized an equal rate of increase. He that got two talents made two more out of them. And he that had five did no more. For he too, but doubled his capital. So because the poorer servant with his two, and the richer with his ten, had equally cultivated their diversely

measured estates, they were identical in reward, and to each of them the same thing is said, “Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”

It matters little whether we copy some great picture upon a canvas as big as the side of a house, or upon a thumbnail. The main thing is that we copy it. If we truly employ whatsoever gifts God has given to us, then we shall be accepted according to what we have, and not according to that we have not. “Much food is the tillage of the poor.”

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