Little Things Count!

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Much about life in this world seems designed to make us think that what we are or what we think or do is of no account. We feel that it really makes no difference whether we live or die. We feel that we are lost in the shuffle; we are nameless, faceless blobs in the teeming masses of humanity!

I once read of the accomplishments of a famous athlete who had entertained millions of people. The writer described him as a "shooting star" that attracted attention, but was over and gone in a flash. Once his brilliance passed, the world went back to what it had been doing, as though he and his performances had never existed.

So many people with so many similar names do so many things that it has become difficult to keep track of them all. To simplify matters, our culture has turned to numbers to identify us. I have a social security number and a draft number. Companies I have worked for have identified me by at least five different employee numbers. I also have credit card numbers, a driver's license number, car registration number, home and business phone numbers, home and business address numbers and a post office box number. Each one of these numbers identifies John Ritenbaugh!

But are we not more than numbers? Do we not each have a face and personality that identifies us and nobody else? Do we have any impact? Does what I do mean anything? Do I count?

Numbers, Numbers, Numbers!

Newscasters casually toss immense figures at us so often that we feel bludgeoned into insensibility about their possible significance to us. The federal government's debt is over $4 trillion, and total indebtedness (public and private) is well over twice that! Interest payments alone on the federal debt this year will be much larger than the entire 1960 federal budget, the last year America had a surplus!

How long is a trillion seconds? A billion seconds equals thirty-two years, but 1 trillion is one thousand times longer—32,000 years or 26,000 years before God created Adam and Eve! Even 1 billion minutes ago was AD 76. Peter and Paul had been martyred about a decade earlier, the Christians had fled Jerusalem for Pella, and six years had passed since Titus had destroyed the Temple.

If one had $1 trillion to spend, and he spent it at an average of $1 million a day, it would take him 2,750 years! Or, if he spent $80 million a day, it would still take him 35 years! However, the U.S. government spends the total lifetime taxes of the average person in less than one second! If that does not make one feel puny, insignificant and of no account, nothing will.

In God's creation, the figures are equally staggering. Earth's nearest heavenly neighbor, the moon, is roughly 240,000 miles away—about the same distance as ten times around the equator. If it were possible, walking at three miles per hour twenty-four hours a day, it would take a man 80,000 hours, 3,333 1/3 days, or nine years and one month to get there. If he were to walk only a normal work day of eight hours, it would take twenty-seven years and three months. Leaving in June 1996, he would arrive on the moon in about September 2023! That is quite a hike!
We can break this down into steps. If he had a twenty-four-inch stride, he would have to take 633,600,000 steps. But, if at any point in the journey he decided **not** to take the next small, twenty-four-inch step, **he would never arrive**!

**Details Matter**

We think that "little things," even our individual lives, do not count for much. Do not be deceived—they do! Even seemingly insignificant human beings matter because we participate in processes. We can begin them, move them along or even conclude them. People play a large role in determining the direction and quality of an event or thing. A choir director knows that the quality of individual singers and their desire to blend with the whole determines the overall quality of his chorale. An infinite amount of care and quality control must be given to thousands of details to cause a Rolls Royce to be such a fine and costly automobile.

This principle is especially familiar to us in its application to mechanical things. Remove a single, almost microscopic part from a watch, and it stops operating. Leave one ingredient from a recipe, and it will likely fall flat. From one couple, all of mankind spread over the face of the earth, and if one member of that pair had been missing, we would not exist!

Yet, in relation to living organisms, we either do not always understand or we ignore this principle. God has built safeguards or a certain amount of adaptability into living things, but it can be stretched only so far. How we interact with living things can be exceedingly important regardless of our being only one person. Man is learning dramatically that he is an integral part of the web of life. What he does with earth's resources makes a huge difference in the quality of life for ourselves and our posterity. Two principles that are at work on this earth among living things are important to understand:

- First, in the reproductive process there is a powerful tendency toward increase. Simple observation of our lawns establishes this truth— weeds!

- The second is stated in Galatians 6:7-8, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life." What a man sows follows the universal law of "kind reproduces kind." We cannot get cabbage from brussels sprout seeds, nor carrots from radish seeds—no matter how much the seeds may look alike. They are simply not of the same kind.

**Good Fruit, Bad Fruit**

If we planted corn and got pumpkins, we would be greatly surprised. Similarly, if we gossip about our friends, we should not be surprised to find that we do not have as many friends as before or that people are more guarded in their relationships with us. The seeds of gossip can produce only one kind of fruit—bad! Every action produces results, and every result tends to be of the kind that was sowed.

Jesus confirms this principle in human conduct:
You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. (Matthew 7:16-18)

When we put these two principles together, we find that no matter what a man sows, unless something intervenes to interrupt the cycle, more will be produced than was sown. One can fake living according to Christian standards and morals for a while, but no matter how careful a person is, the fruit produced by his life will betray him. As Numbers 32:23 says, "But if you do not do [as God commands], then take note, you have sinned against the LORD; and be sure your sin will find you out."

No one knows how long it will take and how much fruit will be produced, but sin will produce spiritual weaknesses, even though they are concealed with great energy and hypocrisy. Bitterness, divisiveness, weak understanding, confusion and spiritual lethargy will surface. Many variables affect how much and how soon the fruit will appear, but because of the principle of increase, it is certain that more will be reaped than was originally sown.

Jesus' Parable of the Sower and the Seed teaches us about the effects of these variables:

And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear! (Matthew 13:4-9)

Jesus describes quite a number of variables here, and we could add such things as weather, insects, viruses, molds, parasites, soil quality and seed quality.

What happens when we plant an apple seed? In due time, the seed grows into a mature tree, which produces far more than just one apple. In all likelihood, it will produce many bushels of apples for many years. The apples fall to the ground or are carried away from their point of origin—sometimes very far away in the stomach of a bird or a horse. New seeds are then deposited on the ground, and the "spreading" cycle begins anew to be repeated almost endlessly. Of course, there are some impediments to this process, but where the factors are right, both apple trees and their fruit can increase greatly.

Suppose someone plants a choice morsel of gossip into another's ear. If that sin falls on fertile "ground" (a person with all the "right" proclivities for carrying it to others without regard to consequences), who knows how much destruction can be caused! If that person tells ten others, and these in turn tell ten more, in three cycles one thousand people are involved in this sin! It is entirely possible that not even one person in that thousand would see himself as a cog in the process of spreading potential destruction!

Paul confirms this in II Timothy 2:16-17. "But shun profane and vain babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like cancer." The New English Bible translates that last sentence as, "The infection of their teaching will spread like a gangrene." Conduct
like this will bear bad fruit because human nature provides very few impediments to sin. Human nature can produce nothing else, as Paul writes in Romans 8:6, "For to be carnally minded is death." To add to the tragedy, human nature almost always drags others into its curse along the way to death.

The Increase of Evil

Paul mentions this principle of increase again in II Timothy 3:13, "But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived." Men are not improving; they are growing increasingly worse! Here God is acknowledging that human nature is prone to progressive degeneration. There are two related reasons for this:

1. Sin has a drug-like addictive quality in that the sense of relief, satisfaction or pleasure derived from it does not last. Thus, to receive the same amount of pleasure as before one has to sink deeper and deeper into the perversion.

2. Closely related is that a person must commit the sin more frequently because the duration of satisfaction decreases the longer one continues in a sin.

Because of this inclination toward increase, social and religious barriers to immorality within the individual and community gradually come down. Therefore, each new generation provides a more fertile breeding ground for sin because human nature provides no real impediment to it. As sin becomes more acceptable in a society, the people have more difficulty recognizing it.

To the Christian, this sets up a disturbing possibility. Suppose twenty years ago we were fifty percent more righteous than society, and today we are still fifty percent more righteous. But because standards in society have declined steeply, we have slipped far ourselves! People who do not understand sin call evil good and good evil until society reaches the point illustrated in Genesis 6:5: "Then the L ORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." In cultures all over this globe, mankind is rapidly approaching conditions that are just like the days of Noah (Matthew 24:37).

Each Life Is Significant!

Do we still think our individual lives are insignificant? After all, how will our puny lives with our tiny sins have much effect on the rest of humanity or the course of history? Who sees us? Are we not just nonentities, merely nameless, faceless numbers? Who gets hurt by our "little" sins? Are there not victimless crimes?

Maybe we should turn it around a little. How comfortable would we be if God held an "open house" on our lives? How significant would our influence be if we saw on the silver screen how our lives affected all our acquaintances, friends, relatives? Would we say we do not matter?

God gave Ezekiel such a view of the leaders of Israel in his time:

Then He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the room of his idols? For they say, 'The L ORD does not see us, the L ORD has forsaken the land.'" . . . Then He said to me, "Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it a trivial thing to the house of Judah to commit the abomination which they commit here? For they have filled the land with violence; then they have returned to
provoke Me to anger. Indeed they put the branch to their nose. Therefore I also will act in fury. My eye will not spare nor will I have pity; and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them." (Ezekiel 8:12, 17-18)

Their sins did not slip by God, did they? God says their sins done "in the dark . . . filled the land with violence." Their lives affected the whole nation! The result was God's unsparing judgment descending upon Judah, and thousands of lives ended in death or captivity.

As for victimless crimes, what about Christ as sin's victim? Their sins certainly killed Him! A victimless crime does not exist.

"CBS Radio Mystery Theater" once presented the story of a prosperous and respected college professor. He was married and the father of two children about to enter college, and he lived in an upscale, wooded suburban neighborhood. To others, he seemed to "have it all." Inside, however, he felt cheated, conspired against and held back by superiors who did not realize his value to the university. He especially believed he was underpaid for his many contributions to the university's reputation.

In emotional turmoil one day, he decided to leave the office early, go home and think things through. Upon arriving home and discovering that his wife had gone shopping, he left his car in the garage and started to stroll through the neighborhood to a nearby wood. Before he left the house, though, he took the garbage to the curb because his wife had failed to take it out and the refuse truck was in the neighborhood.

Unknown to him, in another part of town at the same time, a bank had been robbed. The thieves made their escape with the loot, but the police were in hot pursuit. They were so close that the thieves decided they should get rid of the stolen goods. Pulling into the professor's neighborhood, the thieves deposited the money bag in his neighbor's garbage container. From his hidden position in the woods, the professor watched the thieves speed away. But before long, his curiosity drove him to inspect the contents of the mysterious bag. He casually retrieved the bag and took it inside.

When he opened it, he discovered $80,000 in cash! The perfect crime! he thought. Now I have the money I deserve! And nobody is hurt—the bank's money is insured, isn't it? The thieves dumped the money into the neighbor's garbage, so if they get caught and confess, the focus will be on the neighbors, not me. If the police question me, I can just conveniently remember it was garbage collection day.

Jesus had an interesting thing to say about situations of this sort in Luke 12:2-3:

For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have spoken in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have spoken in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops.

The author of the radio drama also understood these principles. Before the story concluded, the professor's wife had been murdered, and his best friend wounded. His own mind snapped from the stress of the ordeal. His children, burdened with a name stained by the crime, had to go on with their lives without their parents and without a college education.

**Sin's Effects Multiplied**
What Jesus said and the radio program dramatized is that the effects of our sins will eventually show. This process contains the power to reach out and multiply its potential for damage by involving others who may be innocent of the sin that began it.

We do not sin in a vacuum; no man is an island for good or bad. God wants to cover sin, but if no other way will produce repentance, He will bring it out into the full light for all to see. We are living organisms, interacting with and having an impact upon other living organisms. Why are we so indifferent to the effects of our behavior? Should not God's Spirit lead us to strive to produce positive fruits? Could we be grieving His Spirit by resisting its prodding?

Joshua 6 and 7 contain the tragic story of Achan's sin, which is similar to the radio program's theme. Achan, one man, sinned by stealing a garment, 200 shekels of silver and a wedge of gold during the heat of battle after having been instructed that all the booty from Jericho was devoted to God (Joshua 6:17-19; 7:1, 20-21). He had no accomplices, and no one saw him do it. Nonetheless, Israel's army became paralyzed with fear when they attacked the little city of Ai (verses 4-5). Joshua faltered and became confused (verses 6-9). Thirty-six men died—wives were widowed and children lost fathers. In the end, Achan's entire family was destroyed, even though they were innocent of his sin.

The whole nation was affected! When God analyzed Achan's sin, He saw it as a national sin (verses 10-12). The sin of one part was the sin of the whole. When one failed, they all failed. We need to pay more attention to this approach because it is part of the "one body" analogy. We should also notice that God was personally involved. It was after all, His nation, His church, and its conduct is of intense concern to Him. This story also contains a clear illustration of sin's leavening effect. Until a correction was made, it did not just lie there and die. Its effect increased.

Deuteronomy 20:1-2, 8 addresses the effect the conduct of one has on many:

> When you go out to battle against your enemies, and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the Lord your God is with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt. So it shall be, when you are on the verge of battle, that . . . the officers shall speak . . . to the people, and say, "What man is there who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest the heart of his brethren faint like his heart."

God understands the effect of "mob psychology." Even in war with lives on the line, men tend to behave in a way that will increase to affect the whole army negatively unless it is impeded or prevented entirely.

In the New Testament, Paul writes of this principle in the context of sexual sins:

> It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. . . . Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? (I Corinthians 5:1-2, 6)

Did the fornicator think that his singular actions were affecting the whole congregation? Not only did he not think so, but neither did the whole congregation! None of them, it seems, understood how his sin was having a damaging effect upon them!
We, however, must begin to think in this way. **We are one body**, and what each part does and how he does it affects the efficiency, effectiveness and purity of the whole. In Corinth it played a major role in puffing up, confusing and dividing the congregation—jeopardizing the spiritual health of all!

This is so important that God includes it in the Ten Commandments! "You shall not bow down to [idols] nor serve them. For I, the **Lord** your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me" (Exodus 20:5). God warns that evil will reach out, spread and afflict unborn generations. The effects of drugs, smoking, alcohol, medicines, x-rays and poor diets upon the unborn are well known. However, we often fail to think of the effect of example. Do we care what we pass on to our children? Remember, it will very likely increase.

**An Encouraging Flip Side**

But notice the other side of this principle as revealed in the same commandment: "... but showing mercy to thousands [of generations], to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (verse 6). In His mercy God has provided that the good we do goes a long, long way—almost immeasurably farther than our evil deeds. God is sovereign over His creation, actively participating in stopping evil before it destroys us. At the same time, He is active in producing good in us toward His Kingdom.

An excellent example of this occurs in Romans 11:26-29:

> And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins." Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.

God has a commitment to Israel—and thus us—because of the obedience of one man, Abraham. We are reaping the benefits of the good Abraham sowed almost four thousand years ago because God is faithful to His promises!

Why does God tell us so much about the kings of Israel and Judah? One reason is that each king reflected the attitudes and conduct of the entire nation, so He can describe the whole nation in microcosm. An equally important reason is to show that the nation reflected its leadership. If the nation was led by a David, Hezekiah or Josiah, things went well. If the leadership fell to an Ahab or Manasseh, the country degenerated quickly.

God is showing that there is a ripple effect within the nation; the moral and spiritual quality of its leadership radiates out toward the people (Proverbs 29:2). Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man." Parents need to take note of this. What kind of ripple effect is influencing your children?

In Romans 5:12-19, Paul expounds these principles to a limited degree and gives some examples. Verse 12 has an especially chilling phrase: "... and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned." Sin was introduced and death spread. Adam and Eve never thought that the episode in the garden would have such impact! But it was the crack in the dike that has led to the flood of sins in every facet of man's life.
Our acts may not be as important as Christ's, Abraham's or Adam and Eve's, but the principle is there and working. We do not live in a vacuum. As part of a body, our actions affect many others.

**A Team Effort**

God does everything perfectly and with wisdom and love. He did not carelessly call us. We are not nonentities swallowed up in the vastness of humanity. Matthew 10:29-30 assures us that God's sovereignty is not limited to just big issues; He superintends even the tiniest details. Each of us is so valuable He gave His Son for us. Thus, we need not fear that He will overlook us as we struggle with life. However, we do need to consider much more deeply how valuable our conduct and attitude are to the whole body.

Paul writes in I Corinthians 3:6-7, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase." When we are doing God's will and yielding to Him in obedience, God adds a miraculous element to produce spiritual growth. Verse 8 adds that, even though we have different functions, we are united in submission to God, but we will be rewarded individually. This proves that God is watching each person's conduct. To Him, we are not a faceless blob in a sea of church members. How could we be rewarded accordingly if our labors were not being individually noted?

God's work involves many individuals with a variety of gifts. To God there are no superstars, only team members called and placed to perform their own special role for which He has prepared them. When we fail to do our part, a slow separation begins, and because a part is not functioning as it should, the body suffers. Paul begins this epistle asking, "Is Christ divided?" (I Corinthians 1:13), and proceeds to discuss a variety of sins that produce division. Later, he teaches the application of the body analogy to the church, and in chapter 13 he stresses the main function of every member: to love.

In I Corinthians 12:4-11, Paul shows that each person God places in the body receives gifts for the benefit of the entire body. In verses 14-20 he explains that diversity in the body is necessary because, if the entire body was just one part, it could not function. The diversity in this context is in terms of gifts, not doctrine, nationality, sex or race. Diversity enables the body to be much more effective, efficient and versatile in performing its intended purpose. Each person has a specific function necessary to the whole.

In verses 21-25 Paul makes a veiled warning that we need to guard against both pride in our abilities and its opposite—equally vain—that we have nothing to give. We become useful members when we choose to set aside these vanities and begin doing what we should.

Verse 18, combined with verses 22-26, teaches us that God Himself has organized the body. We need to understand that the greatest authority in all of creation has specifically placed us within it and given us gifts. If the body is to function as He has purposed, each part must recognize his individual dependence upon and concern for the whole. In addition, each must understand what the body is designed to accomplish. It is the responsibility of each part to subordinate himself to God in order to produce the unity that will enable the whole body to do its work.

God expresses these concerns for the body because He wants it to function efficiently and effectively in unity. Therefore, what happens to one part, or what one part does, affects the whole. What we do does indeed make a difference because we are individual parts of a living, spiritual organism. Our actions will produce an increase of good or evil, efficiency or inefficiency in the use of spiritual
resources, effectiveness or ineffectiveness of our witness, and growth or backsliding in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 4:15-16 succinctly summarizes these principles:

. . . but speaking the truth in love, [we] may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

Brethren, never think that what you do is meaningless! You occupy a position in the most important organization on earth, and what you are doing is preparing you to affect the lives of billions in time to come. Little things, like you and me, count because God has graciously inserted Himself into our lives. Our lives do make a difference!