

Small, But Significant

by Staff

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Most of us probably remember the name "Cyrene," but many would find it difficult to explain what it is. We may know it has some biblical connection, but it certainly played a minor role in Scripture. Other than that, we know the word sounds like a backwoods mispronunciation of "siren."

Founded by Dorian Greeks around 630 BC, Cyrene was an ancient city on the north coast of Africa, situated near present-day Tripoli, Libya. It was the home of many renowned Greeks, including the poet Callimachus and the mathematician Eratosthenes. Although the Old Testament makes no mention of Cyrene, it became important in New Testament times because of its large Jewish population, dispersed there by Pharaoh Ptolemy I.

Once a very populous city, Cyrene declined for several reasons. In a Jewish revolt in AD 115-116, over 200,000 inhabitants of the city died in the rioting. A disastrous earthquake in AD 365 contributed to its further decline. With the Arab invasion of AD 642, the city was deserted. Except for archeological digs, the site is now a wasteland occupied by Bedouins.

Cyrenians were present at the church's first Pentecost (Acts 2:10), and some were converted and subsequently scattered in the persecution that followed Stephen's death (Acts 11:19-20). Interestingly, many similarities exist between the city of Cyrene and the modern history of God's church.

The most notable citizen from Cyrene may or may not be a familiar name, but an act that he performed is most certainly well known. Simon of Cyrene did something that may seem insignificant at first glance, but probably meant a great deal to the One that he was made to help, as well as for each of us today. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record his deed:

» **Matthew 27:32:** Now as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. Him they compelled to bear His cross.

» **Mark 15:21:** Then they compelled a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His cross.

» **Luke 23:26:** Now as they led Him away, they laid hold of a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, who was coming from the country, and on him they laid the cross that he might bear it after Jesus.

Of course, the deed he performed was to help Jesus carry the stake on which He would soon suffer crucifixion. While it may seem a little difficult to put ourselves in Simon's place, it is important to think about what he actually did. In a very critical time and circumstance, Simon gave of himself to the Savior of all mankind. At this point, when Christ was very close to the end of His life, Simon's help was a personal act that may seem insignificant, but God considers it important enough to mention it three times in His Word.

Small, But Mighty

How often do we look at situations or responsibilities that may seem just as insignificant or even a lost cause—after all, Simon helped to carry the instrument of Christ's death—and contemptuously dismiss them? We could say the same for our efforts as we strive to do His will as a church of God, especially amidst the turmoil within the organizations that make up the greater church of God.

How much do we see our own deeds and actions as pertinent to the task God has given each of us? How could God expect us to do something so important with so few people to help or to support this work financially? What does God really expect of us in what could be seen as a lost cause or as insignificant in the bigger scheme of things, especially in light of the smorgasbord of churches that are presently on the scene?

What God wants from us is neither insignificant nor menial. In almost any effort that sees effective results, two key ingredients are going to be a part of the equation: attitude and effort. Without these, the result is usually either substandard or incomplete.

Many are familiar with the story of two brothers—one an optimist, the other a pessimist—who were placed in separate rooms. The pessimist's room was full of toys. He just sat in the middle of the room, declaring that he did not want to play with any of the toys because he might break one. On the other hand, the optimist's room was filled with manure. He responded by digging vigorously, shouting, "With all this manure, there must be a pony in here somewhere!"

Many people approach their lives in one of these ways. Do we fail to use our blessings and gifts (a room full of toys) because we are afraid of failure (breaking one)? Do we allow our present circumstances (a room full of manure) to cloud our vision of the possibilities (the pony)?

We can also apply this to our Christian life. The goal we seek (God's Kingdom) can be clouded by the distractions of the world, the church's breakup, the size of our organization or even our own personal struggles as a Christian. It is not the size or the ability that matters, but our personal attitude and effort can often make up the difference. Every journey starts with one small step. Even a small, insignificant drop of water does its part in eroding a huge mountain or carving out a river channel.

Our Attitude

Charles Swindoll's popular motivational quotation states his thoughts on the subject of attitude.

The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, God-given gifts or skill. It will make or break a company . . . a church . . . a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice everyday regarding the attitude we embrace for that day. We cannot change our past. We cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is to play on the one string we have, and that is attitude. I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it. And so it is with you. We are in charge of our attitudes.

Attitude, it would seem, is a great equalizer for all people, regardless of station or lot in life. It is a key to the development and success or failure of nearly everything that is central to our lives as God's people. For us, the one key factor is that we must be willing partners to aid in the process with God and Jesus Christ. There is one qualifier, however, that must be in place in order to receive this aid: doing it God's way. To have their will and mind as a central lifeline is a surefire way to success as Christians, even during the turmoil of everyday life and amidst problems within the church.

II Timothy 1:6-10 gives us a clearer look at the process of having God involved in our attitude and personal approach to life:

Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. . . .

The concept of a "sound mind" has more to do with our attitude than we may realize. If our mind is sound, it is not cluttered up with the cares of this world. Its processes start with God and end with God. It recognizes the power of God and His love for us. However, having and maintaining a sound mind requires constant work, a positive approach and an acceptance of both the good and the bad. It needs continual stirring, like a simmering pot on the stove. We have to guard it and exercise it at all times.

A sound mind recognizes that we are special to God, not from our own strength but because of the gift of His Holy Spirit. Even though we may be only one person and insignificant, we must have the kind of mind that takes charge of itself and moves forward, not in retreat as many of God's people are doing today. God is a very positive God, who looks forward to the future and the promises of having us as a key part of His creation.

Consider Proverbs 29:18: "Where there is no revelation [*vision*, KJV], the people cast off restraint; but happy is he who keeps the law." "Revelation" or "vision" comes from the Hebrew word *chazown*, which translates to "a sight (mentally), i.e., a dream, revelation, or oracle." With this type of sight, we must keep plodding along, with the little strength that we may have, in obedience to what God considers holy.

Philippians 2:1-5 gives us God's ideal attitude for us, His children:

Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. . . .

Our Effort

One example that covers both attitude and effort is the Parable of the Widow's Mite in Mark 12:41-44:

Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much. Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. So He called His disciples to Him and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood."

Many people were putting great sums of money into the treasury. Christ does not condemn them for giving so much, but He makes an insightful observation on the human condition. These people gave much because they had much from which they could give. Note that He is not even saying that they gave their donations in a wrong attitude. Their effort, however, was probably not very great, especially since they were not experiencing financial hardship.

Nevertheless, He makes the point that the widow gave all that she had. Whether from the perspective of the size of her gift, the attitude behind it or even how insignificant the amount might seem, the widow took her responsibility very seriously. Actually, she was putting her life on the line! It takes tremendous effort to trust God's promises to provide for one's needs.

We should compare this to our situation in the church. We were once part of a work that we could readily see as being viable, sizeable and economically sound. We could see just how much we were accomplishing from the size of our holy day offerings and number of television and radio stations the church's program played on. Yet, if we look at what has occurred, we quickly realize how money alone did not solve our problems. All the money and effort we expended, while not totally for naught, did not produce the spiritual results God is looking for. God is the One who determines the success of His people, not us or our money or our efforts. Our part is to strive to follow His lead.

How many people consider a smaller group to be a viable product of God's efforts? Can we see that, even though we may be a "widow's mite"-sized group, the approach and the results are what really matter to God? God is working with us individually to help us grow in grace, knowledge and truth. A large group with a visible, potent work is not necessary for that goal. In fact, it may be subtly detrimental. It may be good to see ourselves as a group like Gideon's army, which needed a great deal of help from God to succeed.

If this is the case, we need to have the Luke 12:48 approach: "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more." Undoubtedly, God has given us much, more than we ever deserved. What we must ask ourselves is, "What are we doing with it, and what is our attitude in doing it?"

God Is the Pattern

If we consider the example of Simon of Cyrene as insignificant, then we may see our efforts in the same manner. Simon probably felt a great responsibility to do what he did. He could have said, "No, I won't carry the stake" for various reasons, but the Bible does not record it that way. He could have decided that he was not going to be a part of Christ's death by carrying the instrument of His death.

His demeanor and attitude could have landed him in serious trouble if he had refused to follow the Roman soldiers' instructions. From what we see in the Scripture, he took on the burden for Christ because it was the right thing to do. He followed up his right attitude with proper effort.

We must have the same approach in giving of ourselves, our time, our efforts, our money and perhaps even our lives. God is a cheerful giver, giving us more than we can even measure. If we are to pattern our ways and will after His, does it not stand to reason that God expects no less from us?

The principle of the mustard seed is a good analogy to consider in this vein (Matthew 13:31-32). Jesus says the mustard seed "is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs. . . ." It takes effort to plant this insignificant seed and nurture its growth. Looking just at the seed, a person cannot see its possibilities and potential once it begins to grow. Its initial size has little or nothing to do with its characteristics upon maturity.

We individually—and even collectively—may be tiny and insignificant right now, but the potential we have with God's help and our continued involvement in doing His work can spread to unbelievable proportions. This result depends on whether we have the right attitude and faith that God will give us the needed nourishment and support. Most importantly, we must never look at our efforts as insignificant or meaningless. God does not make mistakes, and He has chosen and planted us to produce a bountiful harvest!