

IS YOUR BURDEN HEAVY ENOUGH?

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If you are a little bit confused about this servant, it's okay. Scholars have been for a long time. As we speak of this servant today, we will speak as if it's one person, a "he", Jesus the Christ. But it's probably accurate to say, the servant is all of what we have mentioned. Both the nation, Israel, and a small group in the nation, Israel, both Jesus the Christ, himself, and the extension of Christ, here, the church.

Let us look and see what we can learn about this servant, and how God deals with the servant. The servant who's been commissioned, it's obvious, in fact from even before birth. He says, "While I was in the womb, you knew me". The servant understands what his task is to pull the people of God back to righteousness; to bring the people, Israel, the house of Jacob, back to God. This servant has all the tools necessary. He is skilled. He is sharp as a sword; as polished as an arrow. This isn't some person who doesn't know what he is doing. No. He is well suited for the task.

And yet, he is discouraged. He is down. He is depressed. He feels that his efforts have fallen far short. The results are not good. He has been a failure. His work has been in vain. He has wasted his time. He has been faithful, yes, but he has not been fruitful so he is discouraged.

I wonder if that resonates with anyone here; if anyone here has felt a little like that. Perhaps you have worked for a large company for an employer for many years, and you are now looking at the possibility of losing your position. Or maybe you have worked for years, and you just don't feel that anything you have ever done has made a bit of difference. No one cares. It amounts to nothing. Or perhaps we can extend that into the church. You've been a part of a committee or a task force that has been working for years on something, and there has been one obstacle after another to prevent you from reaching your goal. And you say to yourself, "Is it ever going to happen? Will we ever get there, or is all of this work in vain?"

Perhaps you are a teenager, one of those who gets good grades, and you stay

out of trouble, you are involved in numerous positive extracurricular activities, but you still think you are a loser. Perhaps you are a parent. You've done the best that you can, but your child or your children haven't turned out the way you wanted them to. They haven't turned out to be the responsible people you intended and worked so hard for. They're not productive. You feel like a failure.

I tend to look at our relationship with God as a parent-child sort of relationship. So I ask what would God do with us when we are discouraged, if we are a servant and we are discouraged, what would God do? What would a good parent do? Surely, any good parent would call their child aside and say, "You know, you're not a failure, and you can do this". We would encourage our child, maybe help him along a little bit. Or maybe we would say to them, "Let's try just small steps, and we'll get to your goal just a little bit at a time". Or maybe we would even convince our child to lower their sights a little and set their goals a little bit lower. Or maybe we would convince them to give it up entirely, and try something totally new.

Maybe they can build their confidence with something less than or totally different. We certainly don't want to break their spirit.

So God would do something like that, right? But that's not what we get in the forty-ninth chapter of Isaiah. God hears from the servant, "I'm a failure, everything I do is in vain. I am discouraged". And God says, "You know, I think I understand what the problem here is, and I know what the solution is. Your burden, your task is too light. I'm going to give you something heavier, something more to do. If you're feeling a bit overwhelmed with what you're doing and you're not doing a good job, the solution simply is to give you more". Did you hear that? "It's too light a thing," God says, "that I send you out as my servant to bring back the house of Israel, the house of Jacob. I will give you as a light to the nations. You're just not responsible for this little group anymore; you're responsible for everybody".

That makes sense, doesn't it? You understand how that works. You're a failure with your own children. You're put in charge of the orphanage. What in the world could God be thinking here? And what is going on?

Many of you sitting out here today have been through Stephen Minister training, and that is some training that helps some of us go out and be a friend in need, a spiritual support to people who are feeling heavily burdened. You remember the training that one night where we talked about those who were really discouraged, who were feeling that they were struggling under the

weight of their enormous responsibilities. You remember how we told you that the right thing to do is to suggest that they needed to take on more; that they needed to double and triple their responsibilities. You remember that statement? No? Well, you're right, there was no such statement.

It makes no sense. We don't teach that. We don't say as Christians that if you're feeling like you are just about pushed down to where you can't get up anymore, that we're going to give you more. Get the shovel out; we're going to pile it on. That's the solution. We don't do that. So what is God doing? What do we make of this passage where God says, "Oh, too light a load; too small a task; I'll give you more".

Some have suggested that maybe what is going on is God is just playing with us a little bit, trying to motivate us. You know the way the professor says to the student, "you'll never make it in this university. You might as well get out of my class". And the student says, "Darn it, I'm going to prove him wrong". Maybe that's sort of what God is doing. It's a psychological thing, and I don't really think that is the case. That doesn't quite cut it with me.

Maybe what God is trying to do is to show us that when something really big comes along, it puts things into perspective. For example, your plumbing may be going bad, you may need some repairs to your house, and suddenly we are attacked by a foreign country or by terrorists right here in our neighborhood and lives are at risk. You are not going to be all that worried about repairs on your house and plumbing. You're going to be worried about life and limb and protecting those your love. Maybe it's just a matter of perspective, not doing so well with little things, give you something big. And then everything will seem all right. But that doesn't cut it for me either. It just doesn't do it. I would suggest that what God is doing in this situation is that God is trying to remind us that when our tasks are small enough to think that we can do them all on our own, with the talents, gifts, and skills he has given, then we may have a tendency to leave God out of the picture entirely. But when the task, the burden is so big that we can't even fathom how we might get through it and accomplish it, we must turn to God and rely on God's power.

Got something small? How many of us choose tasks and set goals according to what we think we can do, just by what we have within. How many of us shy away from the larger goals and tasks because "oh, my gosh, that's way too big. And little old me, no, not me".

Perhaps what this passage is saying to us is that when we are tempted to keep only to those goals that we can accomplish with our personal skills, success may be elusive. But when we take hold of a commission so big that there's only one way we can achieve it, well then the power of God will truly manifest itself in ways that we can't even fathom.

“I will send you as a light to the nations.” Does that sound familiar? Remember Jesus saying, “Go out into the world and make disciples of all nations.” That's a big task. It's not small. It does not reach only those few people around you that are easy to reach. It's not worship when you can, and learn when it's convenient. What God charges us with, and the burden, the tasks He places on us is enormous. I believe part of the reason for this is so we recognize we can't do it alone; that only God can do it with us.

A number of years ago, I read a story in the newspaper, and I wish I had cut it out because I don't know the details anymore. I can't remember the city where it happened or the little boy's name, or exactly when it was. But I remember clearly this little boy, eight, ten, twelve years old, I can't remember exactly, he had noticed a story on the news. He had been passing by with the local news on, and the weather person was saying “the temperature is dropping; it's very cold outside, in fact dangerously cold, and we're worried about our large homeless population”. And the boy said, “Mom, what's a homeless population.” He learned that there were people who actually didn't have places to live, and they were going to be out there in the cold. And the boy knew what it was to be cold, and it didn't make sense to him. So he went and found the extra blankets, and he went to the houses next door. He then had his mother take him to town, the crime ridden section of town, where he proceeded to hand out blankets to homeless people.

Now, it's a little ridiculous that one young boy can make a difference in that way. Most of us would say to a young boy, “You want to make a difference? Set up a lemonade stand, make a little money and put it in the offering plate, or something nice like that”. But what happened was so interesting. Out of this one boy's burden that was much bigger than himself, people caught on. They heard what he was doing, and suddenly lots of people were collecting blankets, and getting in vans and going around in the city and taking the homeless people some warmth. Until they say, a few days later you couldn't find a homeless person without at least two blankets in the city.

That, my friends, is someone taking on a task much bigger than him or herself, and God's power being made manifest through it. If the only task you and I take on are the ones we can reasonably accomplish with the gifts that we have been given, then God's power isn't being used in the way that God intends. But when we are willing to let our goal, our burden, be enormous, then the power of God will be made real to many.

I don't know about how you were feeling about your own Christian life at work, at witness, how well you feel you are responding to God's call to be Christ's disciple, but I seem to remember that what we have been called to as Christians is huge, enormous. So I ask you to contemplate, is your burden too light? Do you need something a little heavier so that God's power might be manifest in and through you? Well, I'm not happy with it either, but this is the Word of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

This sermon was presented by the pastor from a brief outline and not from a written manuscript. It was transcribed from audiotape and edited by individuals other than the pastor who claims ownership. Said pastor did not necessarily read this transcript before publication.