

Sermon for Sunday, July 22, 1973 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"WHEN AMOUNT DOESN'T COUNT"

Judges 7:1-8

Text: The Lord said to Gideon, "The People with you are too many...lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying 'My own hand has delivered me.'" Judges 7:2

Gideon was in a hole. Literally, he was in a hole and it was hot--hot like a humid August day in St. Louis. And down in that hole he was working hard. He was threshing wheat. The dust of the wheat must have clogged the air and the chaff must have stuck itchily to his sweating body as he pounded the wheat to separate the grain from the covering of chaff. Ordinarily people don't get down in a place like that to thresh wheat. In those days people got up on some high point where the breeze would blow the chaff away. But things were different that day for Gideon. His country was under attack by wandering nomads who came in to plunder the farms, to take the livestock, to steal the wheat. Gideon means "Grim Warrior". So here was our hero down in a hole threshing wheat so the enemy would not see him. And he was grim enough all right.

As Grim Warrior worked away at the wheat, perhaps his mind wandered by over the history of his people, Israel. Under Moses they had left the land of Egypt behind as they crossed the Red Sea into the wilderness. There they had wandered for forty years until that dramatic day, under the leadership of Joshua, they had crossed the river Jordan at Jericho. Things had gone so well at first. As their troops spread out across the Promised Land it was as though God had gone before them. In battle after battle they had been victorious until the land lay subdued before them. With most of the fighting over, they began the difficult process of settling the land. Back there in the desert they had been a wandering people who followed their flocks about seeking water and grazing in a sparse land. Now they began the transition of becoming farmers in a more settled and stable environment. And learning to farm had been no easy task, especially since they had to learn it from their pagan neighbors. Those neighbors not only introduced them to farming, they also introduced them to their gods whom they depended on to make farming work. It was hard for the Jews to separate farming from those gods and it was to keep them in hot water for decades.

That's how Gideon got in the hole in the first place. The Bible says, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel...you shall not pay reverence to the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell, but you have not given heed to my voice." And because they didn't listen to God and played footsie with idols, God let the Midianites attack the Jews--and that's when the Bible says that Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press to hide it from the Midianites.

The Jewish economy was a mess. It must have looked like phase four! The Bible says, "For whenever the Israelites put in seed the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up and attack them; they would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the land, as far as the neighborhood of Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel, and no sheep or ox or ass. For they would come up with their cattle and their tents, coming like locusts for number; both they and their camels could not be counted; so that they wasted the land as they came in."

So there was Gideon in the hole--with his nose clogged by the dust, his eyes red and irritated, with the sweat rolling off and the chaff sticking to him with itchy persistence with his arms aching with weariness from pounding the wheat. It was at this moment that the Bible says an angel appeared to him and said, "The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor." Now, really! If he is such a man of valor, what is he doing hiding out in that wine press? And if God is with him--well, let

Gideon speak for himself. The Bible says, "And Gideon said to him, 'Pray, sir, if the Lord is with us why then has all this befallen us? And where are all his wonderful deeds which our fathers recounted to us...?'"

Well, surely you remember the next part of the story. The angel tells him that he has been chosen to deliver Israel from the enemy, but Gideon is somewhat doubtful. He asks for a sign. He puts out a lamb's skin that night and asks God that if the angel has told the truth to let the dew cover the fleece that night, but let the ground around it be dry. The next morning the ground is dry and Gideon wrings out a bowl full of water from the fleece. But Gideon is hard to convince. He wants to put out another fleece. He asks that the next night that the ground be wet and the fleece dry. When he awakes the next day, the ground is covered with dew, but the lamb's skin is dry.

So Gideon sends out a call to arms to the Hebrews and 32,000 men respond. The enemy is camped in a nice green spot with plenty of water in the valley of Jezreel. And there are lots of them! The Bible says they were as a host. The Bible says they were like "grasshoppers for the multitude." Gideon and his motley group camp on the slopes of Mount Gilboa overlooking the invaders and Gideon tries to figure out what to do next. God speaks to him and tells him to send everyone home who is scared. So Gideon tells everybody who is scared to go home and suddenly 22,000 depart. That left only ten thousand. But again the Lord tells Gideon he has too many men. He is to take them to the stream for a drink. Now, if you don't have a cup there are two ways you can drink at a stream. First, you can kneel down, put your face in the water and drink directly. Second, you can use your hand for a cup and lift the water to your mouth. God told Gideon that everyone who used his hand to drink was to be set aside to go to battle with him. There were three hundred of these.

Now Gideon was in a different kind of a hole. With but three hundred to go against a multitude is surely being in the hole. Do you remember what happened? The three hundred were split into three groups. In one hand each had a trumpet, in the other each had a torch hidden under a jar. They surrounded the camp at night, blew all three hundred trumpets, broke the jars and lifted up their torches, and shouted, "for the Lord and for Gideon." The enemy went crazy! They began to fight in the dark and kill one another and finally they fled into the night. Gideon and his men had defeated an army and never lifted a sword. You see, amount didn't count.

Notice in the first place that amount doesn't count when you are obeying God. Gideon didn't go into battle with overwhelming odds against him because he thought he had a chance militarily. No, he went because God said to him, "do not I send you?" He was simply being obedient to God and amount didn't count. I don't know about you, but it really helps me to know that amount doesn't count when I'm trying to obey God. The world today seems to be going in the opposite direction from God's clear will for men. Sometimes the church seems such a tiny dike trying to hold back a tidal wave. But amount doesn't count if we are being obedient to God rather than men. Let me say a word particularly to you young people and young adults. A recent issue of Newsweek had a major article on the swinging singles and the changing patterns in attitudes toward sex and other forms of permissiveness. It will be hard for you to go against the crowd. You will begin to feel, "well, what does it matter. I'm just one person. Why should I act differently when everyone else is doing it?" But in the long run history will be shaped by those who are obedient to God's will. For example, when the Roman Empire was collapsing from internal moral rot, a small group of people who were obedient to God's will were meeting in the catacombs of Rome. Out of that small group of men and women was to arise what was to be known for centuries as the Holy Roman Empire. Amount didn't count.

There will come times in the lives of all of us when God's will, God's way, God's Word will not make sense to us. There comes those times when obeying God will seem old fashioned, out of step, or inadequate. But Gideon changed the history of his nation with his three hundred men because he was obedient to God's call and amount didn't count. You will find it so in your life.

Notice secondly that amount doesn't count when you use what you have for God. Gideon could have said, "I don't have nearly enough soldiers to confront the enemy. Three hundred men against a multitude is sheer suicide." But instead he took what he had, put it at the disposal of God, and that night won an astounding victory. Amount didn't count when he put what he had at God's disposal.

You will find this true in your own life. Dwight L. Moody was an uneducated man with little talents or abilities. Yet, he set out to discover what God could do with a fully committed man, determined that he would be that man. And God took Dwight Moody and made a great evangelist out of him. Or in our own day, take Billy Graham. On his way to California for the Los Angeles Crusade which was to begin his great career, he and Grady Wilson pulled off the highway onto a little side road out in the desert. There they knelt down and committed themselves wholly and completely to God. They went on to Los Angeles to initiate a career unparalleled in Christian history. Amount didn't count when they took what they had and put it at God's disposal.

Do you remember the story of the woman in the temple who put all she had in the offering? It wasn't much, but Jesus who was watching said to his disciples, "She had put in more than all the rest." You see, amount doesn't count when you take what you have and put it at God's disposal.

One day when Jesus had been preaching to the multitude, he saw that they were tired and hungry and needed to be fed before making the return trip home. Yet, out in the wilderness there was no food for them. A little boy had brought a little bread and a few fish. It wasn't much, but it was all he had. He put it in the hands of Jesus and the multitude was fed. That's the way life works. You may not have much ability or many talents. You may not have great qualities or much leadership. But if you will take what you have, put it in the hands of Jesus, he will bless it and use it beyond your wildest dreams. You see, in the hands of Jesus, amount doesn't count.

Notice thirdly that amount doesn't count when you are trusting God. How would you have liked to be one of those soldiers of Gideon that dark night with only a trumpet and a lantern in your hand against a foe so numerous they could hardly be counted? Surely they were not putting their trust in their own ability or might or strength. Shivering in the coldness of the night, about to launch an absurd plan, they could only trust God. And when they did that, they discovered that amount didn't count.

William Carey was the first missionary to India in modern times. He felt that God was calling him to minister to that great nation. So one lone man set out to India. Because he trusted God, God opened that nation to Jesus. Amount didn't count when he was trusting God.

Or look at a man like Martin Luther. Would you have thought that one lone monk could defy the monolithic structure of the Roman Catholic Church and break its power? No, but when Luther trusted God, when he put what he had at God's disposal, when he sought to be obedient only to God's will, amount didn't count and the Protestant Reformation was born.

Again, picture in your mind's eye that man Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. As he dies in agony it seems that all he stood for, all he preached and taught, all he had said about the Kingdom of God was coming to a disastrous conclusion. At the foot of his cross the Jews cried out, "He trusted in God, let God deliver him..." Yes, he trusted in God. Because he did God took that cross--a symbol of death and defeat--and turned it into God's plus sign, God's symbol of victory over sin and death. This morning you and I have hope of salvation because of that very cross and that very man Jesus. Amount didn't count because he did indeed trust God, even to Calvary.

Yes, obeying God's will, putting what we have at his disposal, and trusting him. When we do that, amount doesn't count. There is one final thing to be said. You can have your name on the rolls of the church and even attend regularly. You can give your money to the work of the Lord. You can be a fine person with many good deeds to your credit. You can do many things that are noble and worthwhile. Yet, if you are not trusting in Jesus alone for your salvation, you will never get through the gates of heaven. What counts with God is your relationship to his Son and though your good works be as numerous as the Midianites they won't be enough. You see, amount doesn't count--only Jesus matters.

One day when Jesus had been preaching to the multitude, he saw that they were tired and hungry and needed to rest before making the journey home. So he sat down on the grass and said to the disciples, "Bring me here some bread." A little boy had brought a little bread and a few fish. "It wasn't much," he said, "but it was all I had." Jesus took the bread and the fish and blessed them. Then he broke the bread and gave it to the people. They ate and were filled. Then he took the fish and gave it to them. They ate and were satisfied. Jesus said to the disciples, "I tell you, you have seen what I have done. If you have faith, you can do much more than I have done." The people who had seen this said, "What a sign!"

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