

When Effort is Not Enough

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When you pursue an important goal, you want God's help to accomplish it, whether looking for a job, trying to lose weight, or seeking wisdom for a friend in trouble. But what is the balance between exerting effort and trusting in God? What is your part and what is God's part? How do you know the difference?

Trust Alone

Let's look at the extremes, first. I've known people who, desiring to be spiritual, wait on God to make the first move. These people expect God to provide income, housing, or a spouse without any effort on their part. It's like trusting God for good grades without studying. "If God wants me to have this, He will provide it," they say. When the desired thing doesn't happen, then it must not be God's will. The Bible says, "You have not, because you ask not," (James 4:2) but some things require more than just asking. I believe God wants us to participate in the answer. These days, new age spirituality emphasizes the power of intention, but we need to apply willingness and effort, along with intention, toward our goals and desires. Our participation demonstrates to God our seriousness of intention. "God will provide," but only if we do our part. We collaborate with God as we work toward our goals. It is meant to be a joint effort.

Effort Alone

At the other extreme are those who believe that goals are accomplished by pure effort alone. In effect, they take God out of the equation. But we can only do so much on our own. We have limitations. We need God to bless, extend, or multiply our labors to get us to the other side. It's foolish to think that effort alone is sufficient. Our efforts fall short. We need God to open doors, grant us favor, manifest resources, and bring about what only He can do.

Sowing, Waiting, and Reaping

The challenge is to know when to restrain effort. For example, we could spend twelve hours a day looking for work, but anyone who has tried will tell you that nothing is more depressing. A farmer plants seeds, then waits for the seeds to sprout, trusting that God will bless him with a harvest. We invest ourselves, then we step back and wait and trust. We try to be wise with how we use our time. When we are desperate or fearful, we tend to over-invest and employ a scattershot approach to things, doing everything and anything that might make a difference. That leads to despair and burnout. A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself whether your effort is driven by fear or trust. Fear-driven effort produces far less results than trust-driven effort. We do our part, trusting in God, then we step back and trust God to do His part. We must remember to give God time to do His part. Seeds don't sprout overnight.

We have to be careful with over-exertion. Sometimes, our efforts get in God's way. We can be so focused on our labors that we miss God's provision. I remember when I had to be out of my apartment by the end of the day. I should have spent all day looking for a new apartment because time was running out. Fear and panic could have driven all my effort. Instead, I chose to go to church that morning. I spoke with someone at church who happened to have an available room. That day, I moved into my new place. A farmer knows the seasons, when to sow, when to rest, when to reap. After sowing, the farmer scans his field for any changes, looking for first sprouts. In the same way, we step back and widen our view to look for any movement or change that God has brought about. If we keep our heads down all the time, we miss what may be happening around us. One purpose of the Sabbath is to remind us we need to rest from our labors and enjoy God.

The Bigger Picture

In my twenties, I struggled with a dysfunctional friend, not knowing how to deal with his codependency and attachment. I pushed back and set firm

boundaries, but he became more passive-aggressive and resentful. Years later, out of the blue, it occurred to me that I needed to ask his forgiveness for hurting him. Up to that point, I was focused on his hurting me and my having to forgive him, since he was the problem. When I asked him to forgive me, he broke into sobs. We both experienced much healing as a result of that action. The friendship became more manageable after that. He had never been given an outlet to release his hurt and anger until I gave him an opportunity to forgive. If only I had stepped back and looked at the bigger picture, I would have seen the pain I had caused him by my actions. My point is that we need to remind ourselves to look at the larger picture and not always be so focused on our goals. The answer sometimes comes when we get rid of our tunnel vision.

When We Lack

In some situations, we can do nothing, such as a sibling's cancer diagnosis. But even then, our part would be to pray for them. Or we can offer practical support. A friend was diagnosed with stage-four esophageal cancer. Never have I known anyone to put so much creative effort toward his own cure. He changed his diet and his thought life, banishing all things unhealthy or negative. He underwent alternative treatments, even flying to Asia for a special detox procedure. He tried experimental drugs, one of which proved effective. He's now cancer free, and attributes people's prayers and positive intentions to this miracle. From my perspective, his attitude and spirited efforts were contributing factors.

After we have done all we can do, all that's left is to trust, and that's sufficient. There comes a time when we surrender. We've done all we know to do and nothing has worked for us. At that point, we give everything to God, trusting God to do what we cannot do. That is the point where we abandon all effort. We give up. It's now up to God. God may or may not act, but we have tried. In my experience, God often waits until I reach the end of myself as the prompt for Him to act. I suppose He wants me to know my limitations and wants to break my pride. Sometimes, we place our faith in our own efforts,

when our faith ought to be in God, so He lets our efforts come to naught in order to teach us this lesson. On occasion, new direction comes during this surrender and we are given a new task or a shift in focus, but we need to be in a posture of watchful waiting—the farmer looking at the entire field, not the patch of dirt at his feet.

We all experience times when we don't have faith, when we are discouraged or doubtful. In those times, I think it serves us to go through the motions. Even that is an act of faith—applying effort when we can't see if it will do any good. We don't have as much control over our lives as we think we do. Some goals are never realized. Some harvests never manifest. The true benefit of working toward a goal isn't the goal itself, but the inner growth that results from the effort and faith applied. Are we learning patience, endurance, trust, and compassion? Are we being changed? That is the best measurement of a goal.

Finding A Balance

It's difficult to know the balance between effort and trust. Am I doing enough? Am I trusting enough? An excellent picture of this balance is found in Exodus 17:10-12 where the Amalekites fought the Israelites while Moses stood on a hilltop during the battle with the staff of God in his hand. As long as he held up his hands, Israel prevailed. When he lowered them, the Amalekites prevailed. So Aaron and Hur sat Moses down on a stone and they held his hands up, one on each side, until the battle was won. The lifting of the staff demonstrated trust in God, but it took effort to keep it elevated. This action embodied faith. In this illustration, effort and faith went hand-in-hand. In the same way, our efforts should be acts of faith. As far as it's possible, our strivings should be founded on faith and focused on God. In other words, faith generates action, and action reinforces faith.

Moses got weary, so his friends helped him to keep his hands uplifted. We, too, need to rely on our support network in our undertakings. Whether we are

searching for work, housing, or wisdom, we need our friends to come alongside and hold us up when we weaken. We often forget about this important resource. Don't be quick to write off friends because you think they can't help or understand. They may have ideas or resources you don't have. Or find a support group of people who can relate.

This balance between effort and trust shifts over time. At times, we work. At times, we rest from our labors and trust God for a harvest. In everything, we exercise faith, believing that God is working on our behalf to bless our efforts. It's an opportunity to draw close to God and learn His priorities for us. In the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42), Jesus affirmed Mary for spending time with him, whereas Martha missed out on relationship because she was preoccupied with her work. In our laboring, we need to remember to stop and listen to God as Mary did. Let us cultivate relationship with God, which is God's greatest desire for us and which supersedes the less important goals we set for ourselves. These smaller goals are but opportunities for God to teach us and transform us, through both success and failure.

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