

**Note: This is the first chapter of *The Pound for Pound Principle: How to Increase Your God-given Capacity* by Mike Kai, edited by Ken Walker. Released August 11, 2020 by Four Rivers Media.**

## **Chapter 1**

### **UNDERDOG**

#### **Doing the Best You Can with What You've Been Given**

*“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’”*

—Matthew 25:21

I am still in love with my first love. She was always good to me. As we grew older, she would aim for goals and always bounce back. Always. I loved the way I could take her everywhere without anyone getting jealous and asking, “What’s *she* doing here?” Sure, she was round, but that’s the way she was supposed to be. Besides, she loved me unconditionally.

There was nothing like my first love: basketball. When I grew up in rural Hawaii, the “big city” on our island only had 25,000 people—and was an hour away. We often had nothing better to do. My dad put up a hoop in the driveway when we were young kids. If we weren’t otherwise occupied, we’d be in the driveway shooting hoops. We loved playing one-on-one or HORSE, where we sought to outdo one another with trick shots. We were (and remain) very competitive.

However, despite my love for the game, I fought a major handicap every time I stepped onto the court: my height. As a youngster, I was the “little guy,” which meant developing an

underdog complex. Whether I was struggling in a basketball game, the classroom, or against some bully, I always felt like the low man on the totem pole.

These feelings were helped along by my identification with my older brother, Keoni, who was also a late bloomer. In the late 1970s, Keoni was away for his junior high years at a boarding school in Honolulu. His arrival there coincided with the release of Randy Newman's hit tune, "Short People." Keoni told my parents how bigger kids always teased him about it. If it came on the radio, I'd turn it off. It reminded me of Keoni and how much I missed him. My height, that stupid song, and my love for my brother all contributed to my underdog mentality. As an underdog, I searched for heroes who had also been underdogs.

## A PARABLE PERSONIFIED

My life's overriding message is summarized in Jesus's parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30). The story contains life-changing principles for everyone. Though I included this passage earlier, I want to retell it in my own words to emphasize three things. First, notice that the master gives something to everyone. Second, the servants are expected to multiply what they receive. Third, each is held accountable for what they do—or do not do—with it.

The parable starts with the master leaving for a long journey. He called his servants to distribute his wealth, but not evenly; he gave according to each servant's abilities. The servant with two bags of gold did what was expected and wound up with four bags. The servant with five bags doubled them to ten. When the master returned to settle accounts, these servants had passed the test of faithfulness.

The servant who received one bag must have felt like the proverbial underdog. Trouble is, he did nothing. He didn't understand what I call the "Pound-for-Pound Principle." Namely, doing the best you can with what you have. To the master's chagrin, the suspect-servant reported: "Listen, I know you're a tough guy and was afraid of your reaction if I failed. So, instead of investing the gold, I buried it—for safe-keeping." Then, in a lame attempt to excuse his poor judgment and lackadaisical attitude, he added, "See? I'm giving back what you gave me."

Well, that hardly satisfied the master. Calling the servant wicked and lazy, he declared, "You have misjudged me. If that is the way you see me then you should have at the very least put it in a certificate of deposit where it could have earned some interest."

Never one to waste an opportunity for a teachable moment, the master told the servants to let this serve as a lesson: those who use their resources well will receive more, but those who take them for granted or squander them will lose what they have. He concluded: “And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v. 30).

## WORKING WITH WHAT YOU’VE GOT

Have you noticed that around the world, especially in developed nations, people place a premium on bigness? In almost any endeavor, we measure size. In athletics, height and weight matter. Athletes looking for an edge often take illegal steroids or human growth hormones. The ministry is not immune to this focus. Pastors and church members alike face the temptation to find fulfillment in church size, how many attended our conference, or the money in the offering. Conversely, we can also feel defeated by a lack of numbers.

Perhaps you’ve felt similar elation or frustration. At first glance, your accomplishments didn’t quite measure up to others. But what numbers cannot measure is potential. Though we are now a megachurch, we started out with forty people. In those early days I remember being envious when I’d visit a larger church or hear about a fast-growing one. Yet these feelings began stirring something in me. I began wrestling with what I was going to do with what I had been given.

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah . . .”

—Micah 5:2

As short stuff, during elementary school recess I often got picked in the lower half when captains chose up sides for teams. Plus, I was a sensitive kid—maybe even a mama’s boy. This helped make me fodder for opportunistic bullies. I eventually became a vigilante type of self-seeker of justice and defender of underdogs. Little came easy for me. In class I had to struggle to get A’s and B’s.

Even though I loved basketball, I got cut from the ninth-grade junior varsity team and two years later from the varsity. After each cut, though, I worked hard and made the team the next season. To my surprise, the major highlight of my short-lived athletic career came in

football. I went out for football for the first time as a senior. I made starting wide receiver and the all-conference team to boot. Just five-nine and 130 pounds, I had to be crafty and quick. When I caught the ball, I would run as fast as the wind for fear of getting knocked out.

## WHO SAID LIFE WAS UNFAIR?

In the parable of the talents, the master owned everything and gave the three individuals all they possessed. That principle is simple: God owns it all—gifts, abilities, money, relationships, and church. It's also important to understand the master didn't provide the servants any instruction. He abruptly left and then surprised the servants with his return. Thankfully, we don't face such surprises. You and I have the greatest instruction book of all time: the Bible.

Still, the element of this story that resonates with me is that what the servants had is *all they had*. Today it's common to hear the phrase, "It is what it is." In Jesus' parable, it was what it was. The servants had no say in what they received, just the choice of doing what they could with what they had. It is interesting to note that he gave each servant a designated amount of talent according to "his own ability." This tells me the master knew how much each person could manage and distributed their talents accordingly.

## **What I have been given is all up to me.**

In American society, some might say, "Wait a minute. That's unfair! Shouldn't each person be given an equal amount of talents? Each should get 2.67 talents!" I understand that. And wouldn't it be great if every sixteen-year-old basketball player was only six feet tall? Then we could say, "Let the best man win!" Of course, in life all is not fair. At least, not at first glance.

But I see two lessons in this parable that counteract the "fairness" philosophy: Everything comes from God, and what I do with what I have is up to me. This stirs several reactions. For one, I am motivated to see how much I can do with what I have been given. Another side of me wonders why I didn't receive as the guy with five talents. And yet another part of me scoffs at the guy who buried his single talent. I cannot help but think, *There is no way I'm letting the master return and discover I let the two other dudes beat me!*

Now that I am older and proving myself in athletics or the classroom is behind me, I realize I have always been a two-talent guy. Some see five-talent guys as Microsoft's Bill Gates, the late evangelist Billy Graham, Hillsongs leader Brian Houston, or pastors of megachurches. Five-talent women can be such examples as adventurer Amelia Earhart, Bible teacher Lisa Bevere, or golf prodigy Michelle Wie. It's so easy to think, "Oh, I could never be like them." But that's the problem. We begin diminishing what we have when we evaluate it in the light of someone else's lamp.

It's good to remember that five-talent people work hard to earn that status, sacrificing and often suffering heartache or pain. While a missionary in China, Sister Aimee—pregnant with her first child—lost her husband of less than a year. Throughout Michelle Wie's childhood and teenage years, she put in long hours at the driving range. Basketball star Jeremy Lin became the first Asian American to play for an NBA championship team (the Toronto Raptors) in 2019 before signing a contract with a team in China. But his journey included getting cut twice by NBA teams and laboring in a developmental league before finally becoming a household name with the New York Knicks.

Although these individuals had to work to fulfill their God-given potential, from birth they were each "graced to do what they were called to do,"<sup>1</sup> as my friend and author John Bevere describes it. They still had to work hard to achieve their assigned destinies, but God enabled them to be tenacious, dedicated, and committed. I too learned I have been called and blessed.

**What matters most is that you are using  
what God has given you to the best of  
your ability.**

While some assume I am a five-talent guy (FTG) because of the size of our church, I'm pretty sure I started as a two-talent guy with five-talent potential. Some might say that my wife, Lisa, and I pastor a five-talent church (FTC). They may be right; that's not for me to say. But we sure didn't start that way. I believe many FTGs and FTCs are not necessarily born, they are made. Over time, they have proven themselves worthy of receiving what God has given them.

How? Through dedication, hard work, and a tenacious spirit that translates into rewards. How do we become five-talent people? While I used to ask that, instead I think we should ask, “Am I doing everything I can with what I’ve been given? In what areas of my life can I prove myself faithful so that I can receive all the Lord has planned for me and bring glory to him?”

Did I complain about being shorter than some of the kids in my class? Sure. When we started the church, did I ever ask God why I hadn’t received as many “talents” as others? More than once. But I finally had to stop looking over the fence (or basketball hoop) and focusing on what others had. I needed to quit whining about what I didn’t have and thank God for what I did have. Each of us needs to do the same and ask ourselves: *What am I doing with what I’ve been given?*

## THE WEIGH-IN IS THE WAY UP

I’m not a boxing expert but consider myself a fan of good boxing. During my high school years in the 1980s, the matches for supremacy in the sport seemed to involve three fighters: Marvin Hagler, Thomas Hearns, and “Sugar” Ray Leonard.

“Marvelous” Marvin Hagler, the bald-headed, goatee-sporting fighter with a menacing look and a right cross hook to equal his appearance, dominated the welterweight division. Around the same time a lanky left-handed boxer from Detroit came along, named Thomas “Hitman” Hearns (don’t you love the nicknames?). Hearns faced Hagler in 1985. What a fight! In the end, Hagler got the better of Hearns.

Their epic fight set the stage for the rise of the popular “Sugar” Ray Leonard, one of the smoothest boxers of all time. Sugar Ray would taunt his opponents with a mesmerizing, right-handed windmill, then follow up with a quick left-handed jab that stunned opponents. He would do a shuffle-step dance that wowed crowds, who went go crazy whenever Sugar Ray gathered momentum. What a showman! I remember the pandemonium of watching a Leonard–Hagler bout in 1986 on satellite screens at the Honolulu Blaisdell Center. Leonard came back in the twelfth round from what seemed to be a sure Hagler win. No boxers captured my imagination like that trio, even though heavyweights like Muhammad Ali, Evander Holyfield, and Mike Tyson drew more media attention.

No matter their weight class, though, boxers are judged by wins and losses. It gets interesting trying to determine the best all-time fighters, especially if they competed in different

weight classes and never fought each other. Experts and fans alike argue over a fighter's pound-for-pound (P4P) value, based on things championship belts, knockouts, and opponents' records. You might be thinking, Okay, Mike, where are you headed with the boxing illustrations? My point: *The size of a fighter isn't as important as his effectiveness.*

In recent years, many have considered Filipino Emmanuel “Manny” Pacquiao boxing's best. Some believe “Pacman” is the best P4P fighter in history. I think at the least this five-foot-six-inch, 150-pounder is worthy of the title of this generation's best. Forty-one years old when he entered a welterweight championship fight in the spring of 2020, he had compiled a record of sixty-two wins, seven losses, and two draws. Consider he's the size of the average (short) Filipino male. If you saw Manny walking down the street and did not recognize him, you would never know he is one of the greatest boxers of all time.

If you read enough about Manny Pacquiao, you'll see a different “stat” mentioned over and over. What people admire—but can't measure—is the size of his heart. Not the size of the organ that pumps blood to his fists, nor does his heart have anything to do with good intentions. The only thing that matters when the bell rings and the referee yells, “Box!” is the size of his dedication, hard work, and tenacity.

Whatever the talent level or motivation, what it boils down to is summarized in a statement I first heard as a kid: “It's not the size of the dog in the fight that matters, but the size of the fight in the dog.” That statement holds a lot of truth. It can be applied to almost anything. One of the great measurements of any pastor, CEO, or other leader is their P4P value. What you do with what you've got—the size of your heart—that's the Pound for Pound Principle.

## LEADERSHIP TAKEAWAY

Time for reflection. If it helps, sit down with a mentor or small group to discuss what you have just learned. If you can't shoehorn anything else into your day, write the following on a paper or electronic notepad.

Start with the leading leadership lesson you gleaned from this chapter. It may be that you have allowed the past—including childhood setbacks that once plagued the author—to hold you back.

Maybe you have a habit of complaining about shortcomings instead of appreciating what you have. Write down three specific blessings and how they helped you move forward.

Finally, answer this question: What are two things God is asking me to do with my skills and talents?