



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Challenge of the First Mile

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Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 5:38-48

This is one of those passages that has moved out of the bible and into the vernacular, a popularized saying ‘*to go the second mile*’, used by people who have no sense of its biblical roots.

When we are faced with a challenge, when the going gets tough, give that extra effort. It even speaks of something heroic, “*to go the second mile.*”

Mothers do it on a daily basis. Coaches encourage their athletes. Books of quotations offer it as an inspiring word to meet the challenges of the day: *Go the second mile.*

But let’s remind ourselves of the context of this popular saying. We need to remember that Jesus lived and preached in a country ruled by the Roman Empire and occupied by Roman soldiers.

And Roman law said that these occupying troops were permitted to force any Jewish citizen to do their bidding. According to this law a Roman soldier could force a Jewish citizen to carry his pack for him a distance of one mile. One never knew when a Roman soldier would say, “Hey, you carry this for me.”

So Jesus' statement here is quite revolutionary. If you were compelled at spear point to carry the pack one mile, do so but then go one more.

It is against this background that we look at our text for this morning, *“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”*

Jesus is telling us we have a choice to make about the second mile. But it seems to me, our focus on the second mile overlooks something basic, something obvious: The first mile.

It seems so basic that it hardly needs mentioning, but reality is that you cannot make a journey of two miles without first going the first mile.

The requirements of the first mile serve as the foundation of the second mile. So, before we ever get to the choice about the second mile, let’s look at our choices for that first mile: First, about ourselves.

You don’t have to look very far to find a reason to feel sorry for yourself when the burden falls on you, when trouble hits, when the unforeseen rears its ugly head. It’s your choice.

But why would you choose to waste even a few moments of your precious life on self-pity? Wishing for more or feeling resentment because you don’t have more; that only wastes your precious time.

It is the lesson we can learn from the lady who moved out of her home of 56 years to an assisted living studio apartment. Her husband of 60 years had passed away, making the move necessary, and her children had selected this facility.

As she maneuvered her walker to the elevator, the director was providing a visual description of her tiny room, but

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before the director could finish...“I love it,” she stated with the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old having just been given a new puppy.

“Mrs. Jones, you haven’t seen the room, just wait.” “That doesn’t have anything to do with it,” she replied. “Whether I like my room or not doesn’t depend on how the furniture is arranged; it’s how I arrange my mind.

It’s a decision I make every morning when I wake up. Each day is a gift, and as long as my eyes are open, I’ll focus on the new day.”

The challenge of the first mile is the choice we make about ourselves, how we arrange our mind.

And the second choice is about how we choose to respond, what action we take as that first step of the first mile.

It feels good to do acts of kindness for people who appreciate them. It is enjoyable to go farther and to do more for people if they respond positively.

We all like that kind of affirmation. But in his instruction to go the second mile, Jesus was not referring to appreciated acts of unusual kindness.

Jesus said: "Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

The Mosaic Law, the Code of Hammurabi, and Roman law all required that one who does an evil act should get what they had given; another one of those biblical passages that has made its way into popular usage: *An eye for an eye, tooth for tooth.*

Jesus is repealing this law of retaliation that had been in effect for centuries. And not just concerning people, but also circumstances in life, to unforeseen situations that tumble in on us.

Just because you've been hurt, been disappointed, been let down, been put upon is no reason to add to the trouble with your own actions. No more, Jesus says, you have a choice in the challenge of the first mile; how you respond to whomever, whatever comes your way.

Thomas Keating, in his book Invitation to Love, describes our choices:

There is no commandment that says we have to be upset by the way other people treat us. The reason we are upset is because we have an emotional program that says, "If someone is nasty to me, I cannot be happy or feel good about myself.

Now yes, (he says) there are situations we have every right to be indignant and to take steps to remedy them when we're not treated as human beings. But apart from such circumstances, (he concludes) instead of reacting compulsively and retaliating, we could enjoy our freedom as human beings and refuse to be upset.

Let's put it this way: No one makes you angry, you choose to be angry...No one puts you on a guilt trip unless you buy the ticket...No one can drive you crazy unless you give them the steering wheel!

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It's all in how we accept the challenge of the first mile. We have the choice of whether to be faithful to our Lord, and to choose the way of love rather than the way of bitterness or self-pity, the way of revenge or retaliation.

Jesus is telling us that we don't need to run away from the challenge or try to wish away the problem.

The challenge of the first mile is to open yourself to the fullness of your faith and tap into the unique richness that is yours through the Holy Spirit.

Your actions are based on your choices in this moment, not on past history. Your actions are based on what you've decided to make of what comes next, not on what life has dealt you.

It speaks of the reality of the basic, bedrock response of faith: Practicing what we preach when the unforeseen, the trouble, the burden is cast is upon us.

I believe that is where we are as a congregation, making our choices for this first mile after having a financial burden placed on us. We know the second mile is coming, but right now we have choices about the first mile as we prepare to do ministry and mission in the next year.

We have choices: An old-time preacher was getting warmed up in the midst of his annual sermon on stewardship, "*This church has got to get up and fly.*" And the people shouted, "AMEN!"

"*This church has got to rise up and run.*" And the people shouted, "AMEN!" "*If this church is going to run and fly, it's*

got to have money.” And the people shouted,
“LET’S WALK!”

The fact is when things go wrong; we have to make a choice about the first mile. We can make things worse or we can make things better.

It’s true in each of our lives. We have had some kind of burden placed on us at some time somewhere along the way, a problem to deal with, situations forced on us. You can feel sorry for yourself, or you can let the situation inspire you to take positive action. You can look for someone to blame, or you can make a decisive move forward.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul lists those steps we can take along the way to fill the first mile with beauty, with love, with effort, and discipline, with commitment and focus, with passion, to live peaceably with all.

I like the way Mattie Stepanek said it in his brief poem
“Facing the Future”:

*Every journey begins
With but a small step.
And every day is a chance
For a new, small step in the right direction.*

The challenge of the first mile is taking those steps that will transform it into a blessing. Each step along the way is your opportunity to get to the second mile with precisely the things that mean the most to you.

By doing so, you will not only be creating fulfillment in your own life. You’ll also be giving your own special gifts to the world around you.

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And then you will have met the challenge of the first mile, ready to go, not just the second mile, but a life journey with Jesus Christ.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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