

THE GLORY OF THE SECOND MILE

"And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain" (Matthew 5:41).

This is one of the "hard" sayings of our Lord, as they are frequently called. But these sayings are not as difficult to understand as they are hard to obey. When Christ uttered this statement, His hearers understood clearly what He meant.

The Persian custom of conscripting couriers when a government official or soldier needed them, and putting them into constrained service, had passed very readily through the Greeks into the customs of the Romans, and all the subjects of the conquered provinces of the Roman Empire knew and hated this system of forced labor. In our text Christ was simply drawing upon a custom of the day whereby an official or a soldier might press a citizen into service to run an errand, to deliver a message, or to carry a load. The Jews strongly resented such pressure at the hands of foreigners. They reluctantly carried the load only to the bare limit of the requirement of the law. They considered such an assignment a disagreeable duty, but one that had to be done.

An example of this was when the Roman soldiers commandeered Simon the Cyrenian and compelled him to bear the cross that was too heavy for Christ to carry as He went to the place of the crucifixion. The centurion and his soldiers had a legal right to do that, and Simon did not have any choice in the matter. It is entirely possible that Simon came to trust Christ as his Saviour as a result of being called upon to render that service, and, if so, he was grateful ever after for having been commandeered.

Such service has never been popular. Often the demand causes inconvenience and requires labor, and the service is rendered in a reluctant and complaining spirit. But Christ taught that even when service is constrained and unreasonable, it should never be rendered in a sullen and slavish spirit, but always cheerfully and in excess of the demand. There are circumstances in all of our lives that force us to perform unwelcome tasks. All of us also have duties which are undertaken not of choice but of necessity, and they, too, should be performed readily and cheerfully.

When the Lord Jesus took one of the most hated incidents out of the lives of the people who detested foreign tyranny as few people have done, and made it luminous as an example of what the conduct of His followers should be, how His hearers opened their eyes! This was a new and shocking teaching indeed when He said: "And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain."

When you are compelled to go a mile, go an extra mile just for good measure. According to the law they were taught to do only what they had to do, but according to the teaching of Christ they were to go the second mile. This was a new interpretation for the Jews, and many of them were reluctant to obey. Little did they realize what benefits they would derive from the application of this principle.

This command of Christ is a grim reminder of the minimum kind of living most of us do. Most of us do just as little as we can. We go so far and no farther. We are satisfied just to reach the average standard. Normal manhood or womanhood is enough for us. We live to ourselves. We do not answer any high challenge. We hedge and draw back and are afraid to go beyond the custom of the crowd. We fulfill the necessary obligations of life, but we don't like to do more than is required. It seems that our world does not have but very little use for those who live outside of the realm of the average standard. Those who are below the average, it penalizes; those who are above the average, it martyrs.

What does this strange teaching mean? It means that the first mile is law, and that the second mile is grace or love. The first-mile person is compelled to go, whereas the second-mile person goes voluntarily. Samuel Chadwick reminded us that "Virtue begins where compulsion ceases." An individual does not deserve any special honor for doing what the law requires him to do. To live up to the law of duty is to live on the stretch of the first mile of compulsion. Only when one enters the stretch of willingness to do more than is required does he enter upon the second-mile life. The difference between the average and the outstanding Christian is not a difference of gift or talent, but of character. It is in response to the challenge of the second mile that Christian character is wrought. Christ urges this higher life because it is the two-mile manhood that has achieved in the past, and is the hope of the future. It is the second-mile Christians who carry the gospel of Christ to others -- sometimes singing, and sometimes struggling, but always advancing. The romance of history, the glory of the past, and the vitality of the ages have been but the strength of the worthy sons of the second mile. Our Lord challenges us to additional and greater achievements.

It is safe for us to assume that our Lord was not thinking so much of a literal walking of a specified distance as of a habit of mind, a set of the soul, and an ideal in which the motive force would be that of privilege rather than compulsion. Duty, He seems to say, may start one on a journey, but a sense of privilege should carry further. The outstanding difference between the various classes of Christians one meets is the extent to which the principle of the second mile is translated into life and outlook, whether the dominating motive of action is that of stern duty or glad privilege.

Christ prescribed for His followers in all ages the Christian attitude toward the inevitable duties of life which compel all men. They are not to regard them as being mere irksome and irrevocable necessity, upon which it may chance that all daily bread depends, but are rather to take them up in the generous spirit of service. They are to look upon them not merely as obligation but as privilege. They are to respond not in the unwilling spirit of "I must," but in the gladsome spirit of "I may." Christ taught His own to do more than they are compelled to do. Do not say, "How much must I do?" Ask, "How much may I do?" Invent surprises of love, and make duty a delight. Christ asks us to go beyond the one mile of necessity and obligation into the second mile of voluntary and free service.

What evils would be remedied, what misunderstandings would be settled, if Christ's standard of the second mile were to become the standard of our daily living! It is not the things we (do that we do that we) are compelled to do that count for Christ, character and conduct, but the extra things that we do -- the things we do not have to do. It is going the extra mile that really counts. It does not count to do what you cannot help doing, but when you do the thing you could easily escape, that brings the blessing and wins the praise. Sometimes a person will do a good deed and then somebody makes the remark, "The best of it is that he need not have done," nobody expected it of him." Render an unstinted service. Do your very best for Christ Who has done so much for you.

Christ did not say, "You must do your duty and go a mile," but He said, "Go with him twain," which simply means, "Do more than your duty." The first mile is compulsory -- that is, what you ought; the second mile is the love-mile, and it has a fascination all its own. All of us are familiar with the first mile, the regulation mile, the mile in which we don't have any choice, but the beauty and joy of life consist in having the disposition and desire to go beyond what is compulsory to what is voluntary.

This is the secret of the highest life. It is the great principle of useful service, and also of real success in life. An old business firm has this motto: "A little better than is necessary." That is the secret of success.

World War I enriched our vocabulary. Since then, when a campaign succeeds, we say it has gone "over the top". When an aviator makes a great record, he is called an "ace." Another term that filled a felt need and which presents a striking and picturesque portrayal of life is the word "gimper." Someone asked Eddie Rickenbacker to explain the meaning of "gimper" as used by aviators. This is what he said: "A gimper is a scout who does everything just a little better than he has to." All honor to gimpers! They are good scouts. Their right to preeminence is that they do everything just a little better than they have to. Scorn to be less than the best you can be. Hate shoddy work.

In an address to a graduating class in New York, Mr. Andrew Carnegie gave some good advice to the young men on how to win success in life. He said: "There are several classes of young men. There are those who do not do all their duty; there are those also who profess to do their duty; and there is a third class, far better than the other two: those who do their duty, and a little more. You young lads have begun well. Keep on. Don't bother about the future. Do your duty, and a little more, and the future will take care of itself." This principle is true in all departments of life. Life is of value when there is a margin over and above what is necessary. The world sits up and takes notice of the person who walks the second mile. It is not accustomed to seeing this done, so it asks, "Why did he do that beautiful thing? Why was that unselfish act performed?"

Christ trod the second mile, and challenged all Christians to do likewise. Of course, it is not easy to do. It is the mile where one can very easily win or earn the encomium of crank, fanatic, or purist. Scornfully or sneeringly somebody may say, "Peculiar man, that, while others are resting, he is pressing on." A Christian truly begins to live when he goes beyond the first mile. All that we are and have and can become belong to Christ, and He does not want us to wait until we reach heaven to give them to Him. He wants us to invest all of these things for the sake of our fellowmen in radiant smiles, in tender touch, in loving deeds, and in sharing burdens. The second mile is the Christian's opportunity.

Christians are greatly needed in the world today, those who are not serving God merely because they must, but because they may; not dominated merely by a sense of duty, but of love; not satisfied with the experiences of the first mile, but always pressing on to deeper spiritual experiences. The first-mile Christian may enjoy the forgiveness of sins, but the second-mile Christian presses on to victory over sin. The one may have enough religion to insure his getting to heaven, the other brings the principles and resources of heaven into daily life. The one may be satisfied with personal salvation, the other is consumed with a passion for the salvation of others. The one is content to receive God's gifts, the ideal of the other is that of service and sacrifice in sharing those gifts with others, recognizing that free receiving should always lead to free giving.

Those who go the second mile get the blessing and help and soul enrichment that the first milers miss, the joy of fellowship with Christ and His followers, the satisfaction of the seeker in finding the object of his search, the joy of the scholar in the unfolding of truth, the pure gladness that accompanies all true cooperation in effort Christ and His Kingdom.

Rebellious living can lead only to closed doors, barren lives and vain regrets. The positive, sympathetic, generous spirit will get results even in difficult situations. This power of willingness is often the difference between failure and success, defeat and victory, surrender and triumph. The power of willingness is the difference between dully existing and living adventurously. God can take small talents, if they are cheerfully dedicated to Him, and make them grow and multiply.

Willingness has the power to take the drudgery out of hard tasks. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick told about the time his mother sent him to pick a quart of raspberries, when he was a boy. He did not want to pick a quart of raspberries. He dragged himself to the berry patch in a rebellious mood. He was resentful of a world in which little boys had to pick raspberries when they wanted to do other things. Then he had an idea. He thought it might be interesting to pick two quarts of raspberries instead of one and surprise his mother and the other members of the family. He said: "I had so interesting a time picking two quarts of raspberries to the utter amazement of the household, that although it happened nearly half a century ago, I have never forgotten it . . . What circumstances and compulsions of life do to us depends upon what they find in us."

The power of willingness guarantees results. Years ago two seniors in a certain university were competing for school honors in grades. One night, as one of the boys was turning off his light to go to bed, he noticed the light of his competitor still burning. The next night he stayed up until the other light went off and then kept on studying for one hour longer. He repeated the same thing each night. When the year was over, he had defeated his rival and stood at the head of the class. He had learned the lesson of the power of willingness. He must have learned it well -- his name was James A. Garfield, and he later became president of the United States.

Many of life's achievements come because men and women are willing to go the second mile. Listless, half-hearted effort that fulfills requirements only blocks many programs and goals. What we accomplish in life depends not on what we have but on what we do with what we have. This is basic to achievement in any sphere. This is why there are so many ordinary and so few extraordinary people in the world. Most of us don't get results because we are not willing to pay the price. Men are not driven to the heights. They reach the heights because they cannot be stopped.

In one of his poems, Dr. James M. Gray wrote:

"If one bid thee go a mile,
Go with him the second mile.
Let not duty set thy pace,
Christian love keeps step with grace.

It is thus with Jesus' love,
Love all other loves above,
Jesus fills our cup and more,
Fills it till it runneth o'er,

Love like this in you and me,
Setting us at liberty.
Freeing us from self and sin,
Lost and dying souls would win.

Ah, my brother, will it pay?
At Christ's judgment seat some day
It will have been worth our while
To have gone the second mile."

Oh, the glory of the second mile!