

Sermon for Sunday, October 13, 1974 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"THE TROUBLE WITH THE SECOND MILE"
St. Matthew 5:38-48

Text: "...and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."
St. Matthew 5:41

The King James translation of our text for this morning reminds me of a story about Mark Twain. It seems that Mr. Twain had a neighbor who went for a long walk each afternoon and when he passed Mr. Twain's home, the famous author would be sitting on the front porch enjoying the evening breeze. The neighbor was always trying to get Mr. Twain to join him on his walk, but exercise was not one of Twain's hobbies. However, one day the man said to Mr. Twain, "If I can prove to you from the Bible that you are commanded to go with me by name, will you join me for my walk?" Twain was amused by this and readily agreed. His neighbor then quoted him our text for this morning as it is found in the King James version, "...and whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain." Having been bested, Mr. Twain joined his neighbor for a walk!

During the days in which Jesus lived, his country was ruled by the Romans. It was a custom or tradition that a Roman soldier who had some burden to carry could compel one of the natives to carry his load for him for one mile. You will remember that when Jesus was on the way to his crucifixion, he fell under the burden of the cross. And the Roman soldiers felt perfectly free to conscript someone from the ranks of the onlookers to carry the cross for them. Thus, Simon of Cyrene went down in history because he was picked from the crowd to carry the cross of Jesus, and this was in keeping with the custom of the Roman soldiers. In that sense, then, to go a mile was a duty.

As a matter of fact, if you will read the entire fifth chapter of St. Matthew, you will discover that Jesus is talking about going beyond duty. For example, he says that if in a lawsuit you are compelled to give up your coat, go one step beyond duty and give up your cloak as well. Again, the law of the Jews said that a man is to love his neighbor. Jesus carries duty one step further and says to love your enemy as well. The law said that a man was not to commit adultery. Jesus carried duty one step further and said that a man should not even look lustfully at a woman.

Now, going one step beyond duty is what the New Testament calls "agape" - a word that is translated as love. It is love that is uncaused, undeserved, unmerited. Agape is uniquely Christian love - love that goes one step beyond duty, one step beyond what is required. So, the thing that is expected of us as Christians is agape - a unique kind of love that goes one step beyond duty. We have come to call that kind of Christian love "going the second mile." And going the second mile is doing more than the law requires, it is doing more than we have to. But there is just one problem with the second mile. You see, you can't go the second mile until you have gone the first mile.

Now, it is right here that a lot of us Christians run into trouble. We want to go the second mile without going the first mile first. We want to be loving and kind without first fulfilling duty. The fact is, being a Christian doesn't free us from duty, it simply helps us go beyond it. We ought not to make any mistake about that. Jesus didn't come to destroy the law but to fulfill the law. Take tithing for example. The Bible teaches in the law that a man should give ten percent of all he has to the Lord. But Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites

because they didn't go beyond the law, they didn't go the second mile. He said, "...you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done (that is, tithe the mint and dill and cumin), but without neglecting the others." (Matt. 23:23) So, you can't go the second mile of tithing the little things without paying attention first to the things of duty, like justice and mercy. You see, you can't go the second mile until you have been the first mile first.

So the first mile represents duty and the second mile represents love. And the man who tries to go the second mile without having first gone the first mile is simply kidding himself. Love - which represents the second mile - without duty - which represents the first mile - is false love. It is love without foundation. It is "appearance only" love. I always thought it was interesting that Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss. A kiss represents love. It represents commitment and affection. Yet, it was that kiss that betrayed Jesus and pointed him out to his enemies. It was false love because it did not have the first mile of duty and loyalty and responsibility behind it. There is a similar incident in the Old Testament in the book of Ruth. Naomi had two daughters-in-law. Her husband died and then her two sons. Naomi determined to return to her homeland and told her two daughters-in-law to stay there and find husbands for themselves. The Bible says that the two girls "lifted up their voices and wept." And then it says a strange thing, it says, "...and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her." One daughter-in-law, Orpah, exhibited outward love, the second mile. But Ruth went the first mile first for she clung to Naomi. She stood by her in her time of need. And I can testify to you this morning that in a time of need, in a time of crisis, it is not so much who kisses you that counts, but who stands by you when the chips are down.

So the trouble with the second mile is that you have to go the first mile first. Do you remember how the book of James puts it? He writes, "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." No, you can't go the second mile until you've gone the first mile first. True love cannot begin until we have first fulfilled our duty, our obligation, our moral responsibility.

Now there are many ways that this principle applies to our everyday Christian life. Let's look at a few illustrations to see how it works. Take for example the family. According to the Bible a man's first responsibility is to his family. The Bible says, "If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." Now, that's the first mile - that is duty. Love can begin only when we have provided for our own. I know a Christian business man who is always bringing his parents presents at special seasons of the year. Yet, at the same time their finances are such they can hardly pay their utility bills and the only time they do see him is on those special occasions. By the same token, I know a professed atheist who goes to see his parents weekly, he sees to it that their bills are paid, that they have adequate medical attention, and that they lack for nothing. Now, just on the surface, would you say a Christian or an atheist makes a better son? I also know couples in the church who use their activities in the church as an excuse for not being proper parents. Their children are actually neglected and suffer because one or the other - or both - parents are gone so often to church functions. A man can't truly serve the church until he has first met his duty to his family. Or take one other example from the family. According to the Bible (Eph. 6:4) the father has the duty to

bring his children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Yet, I have seen many fathers who leave the religious education of the children to the mother or to the church or neglect it altogether. Can you really say that such a father loves his children (the second mile) when he has not first gone the first mile of duty?

Over in I John 3:18 we read, "Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and in truth." A little earlier I said that the Christian love that goes beyond duty is called agape. But if we try to love in word and speech without first loving in deed and in truth, we are guilty of what one writer has called "sloppy agape." Are you ever guilty of that? Well, I know I am. There are a lot of things about the Christian life that I would like to ignore or by-pass or side-step. For example, over in II Peter we are given seven stages of Christian growth and development. And these stages of spiritual development basically represent the first mile. St. Peter writes, "...supplement your faith and virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection (and then he adds the second mile) and supplement brotherly affection with love." (1:5-7) Do you ever want to skip virtue when it means honesty, integrity, fairness? Do you ever want to by-pass knowledge when it means really putting your nose to the grindstone and bearing down? Do you ever want to ignore the duty of self-control when it means you have to control your emotions, your angers, your frustrations, your irritations? I suspect most of us are guilty of sloppy agape. We want to get on to the second mile without having first gone the first mile.

Another area of sloppy agape is in the area where a Christian earns his living. I sometimes think that some Christians think their Christianity is an excuse for not being excellent in their secular profession. They say something like this, "Well, my true profession is witnessing to Jesus and I don't have to do my job well since I am a Christian." But over in Luke 16:10 and 11, Jesus says, "He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much." And then Jesus adds this sobering thought, "If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon (that is, your secular responsibility), who will entrust to you the true riches (that is, an enlarged spiritual ministry)" So you can't go the second mile of a spiritual witness until you have gone the first mile of duty and responsibility in your secular profession. When I entered seminary there were 36 young men in my class. Of that number exactly one half of them graduated and a 50% attrition rate is pretty high. Now, why did that happen? Well, in many cases they were young men who had not proved themselves in their secular employment. Do you think God would give them a broader and more weighty spiritual responsibility when they had not been faithful in smaller things - could they go the second mile of full-time Christian service without ever having gone the first mile of excellence in secular things? In the scripture I quoted a moment ago we read, "...and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest in much." Young men who had failed to give the time and effort and energy to do well in a secular profession came to seminary with that same dishonest, they could not give time to the first mile of discipline and study and work to prepare themselves for the ministry. No, you can't go the second mile until you have been the first mile.

Over in the 13th chapter of Romans St. Paul writes, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." Notice the sequence there. The first injunction is a negative one - owe no one anything. That is, first of all fulfill the duty, the requirement that you have, towards others. Don't owe a man a thing in your relationship - don't short-change your duty to another. You see, it is only after we have met our legal and moral and ethical duty to another that we can then move on to the positive

requirement to "love one another." To try to love another without meeting the responsibility of duty is to be guilty of sloppy agape. What Paul is saying can be paraphrased as, "Real love goes the first mile first by making sure that all its debts are paid."

In the fifth chapter of St. Matthew from which we read this morning, Jesus says, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them." And that is just the problem with the second mile, you have to go the first mile first.

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