



***That Radical Jesus:***  
**"GO ALSO THE SECOND MILE!"**

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*"And if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."*  
(Matthew 5:40-42)

There's a very simple phrase we use whenever we think we've gone above and beyond with some person or in some area of responsibility. We say, "I went the second mile." That means, if you have to go one mile, go that extra mile; go two miles where only one mile is expected or reasonably required. And if we don't say it aloud to someone else, we may well say it to ourselves: "I certainly went the second mile with that person." And it sounds very noble, very sacrificial.

That phrase, that idea, comes, of course, from one of those difficult, all-too-clear instructions from Jesus: "Whosoever shall compel you to go with them one mile, go with them two miles." C. Roy Angell, noted preacher of another generation, commenting on this phrase, wrote, "There is an innocent sounding sentence spoken by Jesus Christ in his Sermon on the Mount that contains enough dynamite to change the course of the entire world!"

And it does. This little verse is part of the genius of the Christian life. This is what we are to be as Christians – if we are required to do this, we are to meet those requirements and we are to go and do even more than anyone would ever expect of us. That's the "second mile" of the Christian life.

Perhaps you know the background of this verse: it was the Roman control of the Jewish world at this juncture of history. When the Romans took control of a town or city or a province, they usually would take out a contract and they would "ask" the citizens of that city, the mayor or their officials, to sign this contract saying the Romans were in control. And down at the bottom of that contract, in some fine print like you'd find on insurance policies, there was this stipulation, that if any Roman citizen would ask any Jew to go with him a mile or guide them for a mile, day or night, it was an absolute requirement. Now, the people of Israel did not like to be dominated, but especially they despised this recognition of dominance by the Roman empire. Moses said it accurately when he spoke of his people. He said, "You Jews are a proud and a stiff-

necked people.” In fact, four times in the book of Exodus, either God or Moses calls the Israelites a “stiff-necked people!”

And they often were asked to go a mile, to guide a Roman a mile, and those Hebrews hated the mark of the yoke upon them. Now, let’s imagine for a moment that here is a young boy working in a field with his hoe and he sees a Roman soldier coming down the road. Every Jewish boy, tradition tells us, had a mile peg driven down at every road leading from his home to make sure that if he were caught, conscripted, by a Roman citizen, he would never go more than that basic required mile. So, here’s a guy working a field with his hoe, he sees a Roman soldier coming, and this officer says, “Hey! Hey, you son! Yeah, I’m talking to you. Come here and carry my pack. I’m tired, I’ve been traveling for three days. And you know, by law you’ve got to carry my pack a mile.”

And you can see all the anger, all the racial pride in that young Jewish boy, and he puts down his hoe and he walks slowly and he drags over that rock fence and he gets out to the road and he half picks up that pack and half drags it, and he’s mumbling and cursing and being sarcastic and biting to the soldier. The soldier has to encourage him to pick up the pace, he’s in a hurry. And they get to that mile peg, the required distance, he takes that Roman’s pack and he throws it down at his feet, and he says, “You just wait until my nation’s on top. I’ll make you carry ten tons ten miles!” And he goes back to the field and he’s so angry he breaks his hoe over a rock and goes back to his home and takes it out on his family. And that’s probably how most of us would be.

Let’s look at another young Jewish boy. He had been with Jesus. He had caught the beauty and the genius and the thrust of this “second mile” principle. He’s working in the field with his hoe. A Roman Centurion comes up and yells, “Hey, boy! You come and carry my pack for a mile!” And that young man puts that hoe down and vaults over that fence. He picks up that pack, he walks at such a pace the soldier has to keep up, he’s asking questions about battles he’d fought, about where he’d been, about his family, about his life. In a few minutes they walk past that mile peg. And the officer says, “Son, you’ve gone the required distance. I’ll take my pack now.” He says, “No sir. There’s more I want to know. I’ll walk with you to the edge of the city.”

When he gets to the edge of the city, he hands the soldier his pack, and you can see the soldier take off that great Centurion glove and extend his hand to the boy and say, “Son, I want you to know you’ve made a friend today. And anytime you need anything from Rome, you contact me!” And he went back to the field, he did two hours’ work in one hour’s time, and when his family saw him coming home at night, they saw a glow about him, and they all speculated about it and said, “You know, I believe he went the second mile today.”

That’s what all this is about: we are to take evil and transform it by the power of God. We are to go the second mile when we’re struck. We are to go the second mile when we are giving or when someone is borrowing from us. We are to go that second mile all through our lives if we are to have Jesus Christ increase within us. And the blessed thing is that practically none of us here really believe in what Jesus is telling us. Oh, I hope a few of us are struggling with this. If you are, I hope you come up to me after the service and tell me so – you’ll gladden the heart of God.

Because this is a golden rule for our spiritual growth. We are to die to self, and we're a long way from it. "If anyone would be my disciple let him deny himself and follow me, come after me."

"Whosoever shall compel you to go with them one mile, go with them a second mile also." Isn't that the thrust of Christian life? And don't you just hate it? Doesn't it offend your personal pride? Doesn't it just humiliate you? Oh, yes it does. We're a proud lot here. This is one of the hard teachings of that radical rabbi Jesus that we'd just as soon ignore.

But you know what? Before I say anything more about this terribly difficult second mile, I need to say that I've never read a book about that first mile. Have you? Have you ever heard a sermon on the first mile? Actually, you have. You just didn't recognize it as such.

Now, I think all of you know my wife's a runner, and like all runners she finds her time and place to brag about it. I think that if anybody's foolish enough to mess around with distance running, they ought to have the right to expose their foolishness. And she's been jogging for a long time she runs, oh, I don't know, 6 to 10 miles a day (I don't know, I'm not there). And she told me years ago that the toughest mile to run isn't the second mile. If you know anything at all about running, the toughest mile to run is not the second mile, it's not the third mile, it's not the fourth mile, or the fifth mile. The toughest mile to run is the *first* mile. That's the most difficult mile of all.

The "first mile" is doing what we have to do in order to get started. It's the basic, required fundamentals of our faith. Nobody sees the first mile in the Christian life. The first mile is spending quiet time each day to commune with God, to talk with God and listen to God. The first mile is reading your Bible every day. This is all "first mile" stuff. It's stuff we think we can ignore but which, if we don't do it, we'll never take on the second mile. We all like the sound of the second mile approach. But the first mile, that's the most important mile of all.

Strange as it may seem to you, there are people who try to jump over the first mile and begin with the second mile. Is that unusual? Not really. I went to college with a fellow and he had all kinds of hours, more than enough hours to graduate, but they were all in minors, they were in optional courses; he had all kinds of electives but he never sat down and decided what he would major in and so he had none of the basics. He could have had five different majors, but he'd never completed the basics in any one area. He'd done lots of "second mile," interesting, innovative, creative stuff, but he never got his degree. He hadn't done the basic requirements.

There was a very talented woman in a church I once I served. She was very well known, politically active. Whenever the United Way came around, she'd be chairing it. Want to teach a Bible class, she's right there leading that class. She was really something and everyone bragged on her for her leadership and her ability. She was a beautiful person in going the "second mile." But I happened to know her husband very well. He wished that she could be home once in a while, that he'd see her when he got home from work, that they could do things together.

I knew her daughter, she was in my youth group, and I soon learned that the daughter needed to spend more time with her mother, she wanted to have more time with her. This woman had an aged father in a retirement home. When I went to see him, chances are he'd ask, "What do you

hear about my daughter? I read in the paper about her. Isn't she something? I'd sure like to see her more."

You see, part of our problem, for both men and women, is that we try to leap over the first mile and get on with the second mile in our vocation and lives, but you look behind and so many are not walking that first mile with their wife or husband, with their children and family. And we disregard the Christian basics of investing time with God, serving in the church, tithing, studying, helping one another. The basics. The minimum requirements. The first mile comes first.

"Whosoever shall compel you to go with them one mile, go with them two miles." But don't try the un-Christian act of leaping over the first mile, that un-applauded mile, that un-glamorous mile, that unseen basic mile, because that's the mile where we have to begin.

But then let's not forget here that once we've gone that first mile, Jesus commands us to go the *second* mile as well. There can be no radiant Christian living without the willingness and personal sacrifice to go the second mile. The first mile is fundamental, it's required, but Jesus said you don't stop there. Not if you follow him.

Back during a time when young men were drafted into the armed service, a devout young man was drafted from a farm in south Georgia and was sent into the army. He had never been but a few miles from his home. Now he was suddenly thrust into a new, highly structured environment. But as he left his home he took with him the Christian faith and practices that had been an important part of his life since childhood. That meant, for him, such things as reading the Bible daily and kneeling by his bed each night for a time of prayer.

Such obvious devotion infuriated the rough sergeant who was in charge of the company of recruits. He set about to deliberately humiliate the young Christian. And he set about making that young man's life over into the image of hostility and brute force that he, the sergeant, lived. That sergeant abused the young man verbally. He issued him all sorts of unfair treatment. He used every opportunity to harass the soldier. Yet, at no point did the young Georgian resort to "returning evil for evil" – he always went the second mile in enduring what he was given. He endured all the abuse without a word of complaint. Again and again, he found occasion to do kind things for this sergeant who persecuted him.

Late one Saturday night the sergeant came through the barracks three-fourths drunk. On seeing the young man kneeling beside his bunk, the sergeant exploded. He shouted and tried every way he could to distract the boy. When nothing seemed to work, the sergeant took off one of his muddy, heavy boots and threw it at the boy. Sailing across the room it hit the young man on the back of the head. Though stunned, the young recruit regained his composure and without a word resumed his prayer time by the side of his bunk. Further enraged, the sergeant took off the other boot and flung it at the young recruit. And although that sergeant was not in possession of his senses, it, too, hit the boy, but he did not retaliate in anger. Then the sergeant reeled off a string of oaths and stumbled into his own quarters and to bed.

The next morning when the sergeant awoke with swollen eyes and throbbing head, the first thing he saw were his boots: clean and polished, sitting by his bed. Now, that sergeant could have continued with his abuse. He could have continued with his anger and ridicule, but I think even he had reached a point where he knew he was wrong and the sight of those polished boots were more than he could take. With tears in his eyes he walked into the barracks, found the young man and said, “What is it with you? I have done everything in my power to break you. Instead, you have broken me. What do you know that I do not know? What is your secret? What is your power?”

The young boy replied, “God. Just God. As hateful as you’ve been to me, I know God loves you. And God wants me to love you, as well.” The only answer is “God.” You can’t love others when they kick you unless it’s by God’s power. You can’t endure abuse and insults from another person unless you care for them, and love them with the love which comes from God.

It’s the *second* mile. Go the second mile. For the power to go the second mile is a transforming power, and you can only walk it with God. There is enough dynamite in this one little verse from Christ Jesus that it can change the world – but more importantly, it can change *your* life.

Yes, it’s a hard teaching. But Jesus taught it and lived it. So let me ask you: Is this how you have decided to live your life? Is this the standard you put to yourself when someone imposes upon you? When you’re thinking about another person and what is the right thing to do toward them, is this the criterion that you use? Just remember: this is the Way of Jesus Christ.

Resolve to go the second mile with those who persecute you, the second mile in your Christian service, the second mile in your Christian giving, the second mile in your Christian example, and you will find a joy which cannot be explained other than by saying, “I’m walking with my God, and God is my strength and my salvation.”

May we pray? Gracious God, we hear you. We hear you tell us how far to go for others. Grant us your Holy Spirit to enable us to go that second mile in all aspects of our life just as you have commanded. Help us to love without limits, even when it hurts us, for that is how you first have loved us. But, Lord, let us not vault over that first mile. Remind us to do those essential things you would have us do in our lives, in our family, and in our church. Help us to be people of both miles, to the glory of your name. Amen.