

GO THE EXTRA MILE

Matthew 5:38-48

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How we receive advice depends a great deal on who's dispensing it. If your doctor tells you to quit smoking, yet you can see a pack of cigarettes through his shirt pocket, you're less likely to take his advice. You wouldn't pay a personal trainer who doesn't look fit herself, you wouldn't want to go for counseling advice to someone whose own life seems to be a total mess, you wouldn't hire an atheist pastor.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives advice on how to live according to the vision and values of God. How to live as if we were already in God's realm, God's kingdom. Advice on how to live in a way that will make earth more like heaven.

The advice isn't easy. Love your neighbor, but also love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Who wants to live that way, to choose a more difficult path? Life is hard enough already. But people listened, because of the person giving the advice. People listened because of Jesus. Because his life testified to the wisdom and power of his words. He embodied a strength, a love and a character that drew people to him. He lived these words. He walked the walk. His life had authenticity and integrity. So people listened.

"Go the extra mile", he said. Here's what that means. In the days of the Roman Empire, political and military leaders could grab citizens off the streets and enlist their help. "Here," they'd say to a strong looking man, "help me carry my belongings for a while." It would give the traveling soldier a break. If the man had an animal, the animal would become the pack mule for the Roman entourage. This happened frequently.

So when Jesus says, “If someone forces you to go one mile,” people knew what he was talking about. It was a kind of abuse, a kind of temporary slavery. Your body was forcibly used for the empire. “If someone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” Willingly give yourself to these corrupt oppressors? But there is a clever, clever wisdom to Jesus’ advice.

Imagine someone forcing you to carry their heavy backpack for one mile. You reach the mile marker. The person stops, expecting you to stop as well, and relieve yourself of the burden. But you just smile and say, “Oh, I’ve decided to walk another mile with you.” There’s a shift of power here. You had no choice in the first mile, but now you are exercising your agency. And you do it in a way that shocks the oppressor. A bit of power has shifted from him to you.

And what might happen as you walk that extra mile? Perhaps a conversation takes place. Perhaps you see each other, on this second mile, not as adversaries but as fellow human beings. Perhaps the oppressor says to you, “No one has ever volunteered to go an extra mile before,” and you then have the opportunity to say, “Well, the God I worship is a God of grace and generosity so I try to live that way myself.” You have now witnessed through your actions and your words.

It’s the same with the other example Jesus gives in our passage for today. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. Why? It’s a way of saying, “You may like violence, but you are not in total control. I choose another way.” The turning of the other cheek discloses that cruel people may do violence, but they do not have the power to take away the dignity and humanity of other people.

Going the extra mile is a way of saying to the world, “I live according to different values.”

Going the extra mile is living according to different rules, God-centered rules. It means willing to be different, to stand out.

One of the most fun aspects of living in Cleveland during this incredible sports year is that we’ve had some genuinely good people to cheer for. Now I think it’s obscene the amount of money we pay professional athletes, and none of them are perfect, but I enjoy cheering for LeBron James who has developed into a strong community leader and who genuinely seems to care about other people.

And I love the leadership of Terry Francona on the Cleveland Indians. He is a leader who cares about his players, he loves them like family, and he has their trust. Earlier this fall, Francona was thinking about the rifts in this country, especially some of the clashes between minority youth and police. Those clashes have led to some professional athletes protesting during the National Anthem. He is an empathetic person who saw both sides of the issue. He talked to a police officer about it. He talked to two African-American players on the Indians team about it. And then he decided to do something about it. Rather than moving towards one pole or another and creating more polarization, he found a third way, a different way to respond. He created what the Indians organization is calling the Larry Doby Youth Fund, with all the proceeds going to help disadvantaged children in Cleveland and working to curb youth violence.

He named the foundation after Larry Doby, the first black player in the American league. Then every single person affiliated with the team made a donation. Every player, every coach, every trainer, everyone in the clubhouse and the front office.

\$600,000 was raised within a week. Then the two owners made a contribution which raised the total to \$1 million. \$1 million raised in a week, because one man saw a problem and decided to go the extra mile to find a solution.

Terry Francona didn't have to do that. It's not in his job description. But he obviously lives by different rules.

Last week I attended a meeting of the UCC clergy in Lorain County. I was chatting with a colleague of mine who retired earlier this year after serving two very small churches in the county. He and his wife purchased their first home, a condo, after spending their adult lives in a parsonage. They had saved for it for years, and I know that he is living on a limited pension. In the course of conversation, it came up that he is spending his free time volunteering at the Second Harvest Food Bank and becoming trained to be a hospice volunteer. I was so impressed with what he is doing with his time, in just his first year of retirement. He's walking the walk and going the extra mile. Not calling attention to himself, but quietly witnessing to the God who has been calling the shots in his life for a long time.

I see examples of that kind of faithful living all around me. I'm so grateful for the volunteers in this church, for the retired couple who was here last week moving furniture when new carpet was delivered. This week the house that our church sponsored with Lorain County Habitat for Humanity was finished. 48 volunteers worked on the house. 30 of them were from our church. Special thanks to Don Young who did all of the drywall work and C.J. Jasany who watered the landscaping every day this summer. Did you know that last Saturday over \$12,000 was raised for hunger relief, at the Empty Bowls event? Our church members were everywhere, and made up the entire clean-up

crew. I'm not saying that to brag, but to hold up to the light these examples of faithfulness and to praise the God whose love motivates this kind of extra mile living and giving.

I'm grateful beyond words to Kim Banks who said "yes" late last spring to coming on board as our interim Director of Christian Education. Kim is doing a phenomenal job preparing our classrooms every Sunday morning, recruiting teachers and nursery workers, and ensuring that our children's faith formation is of the best quality. She has gone the extra mile, and it's making a real difference in the lives of our children.

Going the extra mile is a countercultural way of life. It's unselfish, it doesn't help us make money, it doesn't bring us prestige or power. It doesn't look like success in terms of the values of this world. But Jesus came to show us how to be faithful, not how to be successful on the world's terms.

As one of my minister friends once said, "There's not a lot of traffic on the extra mile."

Here's another way to think about this passage. The first mile is the mile you have to walk. It's on the second mile where your life begins to take on character.

We can't choose everything about our path. Some paths have huge boulders in the way. They cause us to trip, stumble, fall down, sometimes bleed. Some paths have sharp pieces of rock that wound us. Some paths just have annoying gravel so that the walk is unpleasant for a long time. And some people just seem to have smoother paths. We can't always avoid the obstacles on our paths. We don't choose obstacles like health problems - both mental and physical, relationships that break apart, financial

setbacks. We walk the first mile just to survive. Because we have to. Much like being forced to carry a Roman official's heavy pack.

It's on the second mile that we choose the quality of our walk. We can choose to carry ourselves with dignity, knowing that we are beloved by the God who created us. We can choose to notice those who are walking with us and do whatever we can to lift them up along the way. We can choose to walk with strength, courage and joy.

I think of the people in this church who have faced the most unimaginable difficulties on their first mile: people living with serious illness and chronic pain, people who have overcome addiction, those who have lost children. Their first mile was a matter of putting one foot in front of the other, every step of the grief journey one of excruciating pain. But on the second mile, they have chosen to help others. They are using the pain of their own lives to create faithful support systems for others.

This is countercultural. This is not the behavior of the status quo. This is what is called Kingdom Behavior. Of one thing we can be certain, when we go the extra mile, we will find God's presence very near.

Reference: Tom Long's commentary on Matthew