

The Second Mile

M. W. Bassford, 2010

Introduction.

The new year is upon us once again, with all of its promise and, for many of us, all of its resolutions. We often use the first part of January as a time to pause, consider our lives, and decide what we need to do to reach our goals and dreams. Although there's nothing in the Bible about New Year's resolutions, it's appropriate for us to engage in this custom and even more appropriate to make sure that at least some of our resolutions concern our spiritual goals.

At the top of this spiritual resolution list for all of us ought to be a resolution to be better evangelists in the coming year than we have been in the past year. This is going to be the area of emphasis for our congregation throughout the next nine months. Evangelism isn't just critical for the preacher, or critical for the elders. It's critical for every one of us. God expects every one of His children to be active in saving the lost, and all around us, every day, we see people who are headed for eternal torment unless they come to the Lord first. If there were some terrible fire, or earthquake, or some other natural disaster in the Joliet area, our compassion would move us to do everything we could to help the victims. In a world where most people are not faithful to God, we see a spiritual disaster unfold every day. We can't stand idly by and watch that and do nothing. We need to be people who are eager to rescue and save the victims of sin.

For many of us, perhaps most of us, the idea of committing ourselves to reaching out to the lost is intimidating. It seems so overwhelming that we don't know where to begin, so we do nothing. As the saying goes, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and the same thing is true of evangelism. If we break the process down into manageable steps, any of us can be an effective fisher of men. The first step is to walk what we can call the second mile.

Defining It.

As always, before we go any farther, it's important for us to define just what we're talking about when we talk about the second mile. The Scripture that this comes from, of course, is Matthew 5:41. In context, Jesus is discussing the ways that we need to be righteous and merciful, even in our dealings with our enemies. The specific situation that He presents in this verse is not a hypothetical one. When the Roman Empire came in and conquered a people, as they had conquered the Jews 50 years before the birth of Christ, their rule was not marked by love and kindness. Instead, they oppressed their new subjects as much as they thought they could get away with without provoking a revolt. This certainly included forced labor. Even a humble Roman soldier, walking along the road, could and would make his life easier by grabbing some farmer from the roadside and forcing him to carry the soldier's gear. There was no way to avoid this sort of casual injustice, but it certainly built up resentment. The peasants were as obstructionist as they could get away with being in their obedience to the Romans, and 40 years after Christ's death, the entire Jewish people revolted.

Against this backdrop of wrong and retaliation, the words of Christ are truly shocking. Rather than being the worst, most reluctant bearers of burdens, disciples of Jesus were supposed to do twice as much as their oppressors asked. Thankfully, we live in a country where forced labor is illegal, but we can still make a general application of the principle here. First, we must see that as Christians, we can't refuse to walk at all. We have to go the first mile because God expects it of us. Consider, for instance, Romans 13:7. Here, Paul is specifically addressing the Christian's responsibility toward government, but his words have a broader reach than even that. We have to deal justly with others by giving them the things that are due them. This means that we have to pay our taxes, that we have to pay our private debts, but even more than that, we have to pay the non-financial debts that our relationships with others demand of us. For example, if we agree to work for an employer, it's our responsibility as Christians to fulfill the terms of that employment agreement in the way that our employer expects. If we get married, we are required to fulfill the terms of our marriage vows. When someone helps us, we should look for ways to return the favor. All of these things are walking the first mile.

However, because we are disciples of Jesus, it's not enough for us simply to fulfill expectations in our relationships with others. We must look to exceed those expectations. It's not enough for us to be just and give people what they deserve. We must be merciful and seek to give them more than they deserve. Jesus Himself says precisely this in Luke 6:35-36. We do this because we are compelled by the example of a God who is merciful. God most certainly does not give any of us what we deserve, otherwise we would all be smoking grease spots. He does not bless us only when we are appropriately grateful. I was just thinking the other day about all of the wretched people in places like Bangladesh and Sudan, and how incomprehensibly better our lives are than theirs. We too could be sitting in mud huts starving, but instead, through no merit of our own, we live in a land of astounding plenty, where we actually have so much to eat that we have to work at not gaining weight. And yet, we spend so much more time thinking about the things that we don't have than the things that we do have. If God were only just, He'd send us a disaster or three to teach us manners. Instead, He is merciful and continues to bless us. We must learn to walk the second mile from Him.

Walking It When We Are . . .

Because this second-mile Christianity is so important, both generally and evangelistically, we need to learn how to walk it. The first and perhaps easiest way we can do this is through being **HOSPITABLE**. Hospitality is all through the New Testament, and we see a good example of it in Lydia in Acts 16:15. Lydia has just heard the gospel from Paul and obeyed it, so she invites Paul and his companions to stay with her household for as long as they want. Today, we don't necessarily have to give strangers open-ended invitations to live with us, but hospitality is still an important part of the Christian existence. Indeed, for all of us who want to reach the lost, hospitality is an essential tool. It's so useful precisely because it's so unexpected. Culturally speaking, Americans don't invite each other over for meals anymore, so when we do, we're automatically going above and beyond. We're automatically going the second mile.

Even more than that, though, hospitality helps us to forge the connection that must exist between us and those we teach. For instance, Lauren was talking the other day to the wife of a man with whom we hope to study. This woman said, "My husband doesn't want somebody he doesn't know to come in and ram the Bible down his throat. Instead, he wants to talk to them first, get to know what kind of people they are, and then, once he has that figured out, then he might listen." I guarantee you that 99% of the lost people out there feel just the same way. They have to see the gospel in our love for them before they will want to hear it from our lips. We have to go the second mile through hospitality.

Likewise, if there's anybody at work we wish to reach, we have to start by being **GOOD EMPLOYEES**. It's our responsibility as Christians to be better and harder workers than our employers were expecting when they hired us. Paul sets the standard for us in Ephesians 6:5-6. Obviously, this specific context refers to the relationship between slaves and their masters, but as long as we agree to work for another, he is our master too. We need to serve him with the same devotion with which we serve Christ. Let me tell you a story that David Banning told me about his father Robert. Long ago, when Robert was still working in a factory, when the other employees were on break, they would wait in the break room until the bell rang and then head back to their stations. Robert, though, would leave his break a few minutes early, so that just as soon as the bell rang, he would be at his station and be able to start work immediately. That's the difference between a first-mile employee and a second-mile employee. One offers what is expected; the other offers more.

Obviously, there's a balance to be struck here. We can easily lose ourselves in our jobs and neglect our families, and that's not what God wants either. We can't rob our spouses and children of the time we owe them. However, in the time that we are on the clock, we have to be 100% dedicated to our bosses. This may irritate some of our co-workers, but anybody who doesn't admire righteousness isn't likely to become a Christian anyway. For the rest, though, and for our employers, it shows that we live for something different. It puts our foot in the door that may open to Christ.

In our home lives, if we are married to someone who is not faithful to the Lord, we must walk the second mile by being **GOOD SPOUSES**. Although this manifests itself in different ways, it is true both for husbands and for wives. Consider Peter's instruction to women married to non-Christian husbands in 1 Peter 3:1-2. No matter what the tenets of feminism may say, even today, it's hard for a man to be ruled by a woman, and when a Christian wife starts telling her non-Christian husband what he has to do to be saved, that makes him feel like she's being the leader, and not him. In most cases, he's going to push back. This kind of verbal confrontation is usually not the answer. Instead, what she ought to do is preach Christ not with her lips, but with her life. She needs to do everything she can to be the best wife she can be, to make him the happiest husband he can be, so that he is overcome by her example without a word being said. Once he reaches that point, even if he's still not willing to listen to her, he may be willing to listen to a man from the congregation. Obviously, this is the work of years, not moments, but it's a critical second mile for her to walk.

For men who have non-Christian wives, the prescription is similar. Look with me at Ephesians 5:25-26. Men are the leaders in most families, and it is often possible for a Christian man to drag his unbelieving wife to church. However, for her to be saved, he has to win her heart too, and he does that by loving her like Christ loved the church. When she sees the spiritual strength of her husband, his commitment to living for her in every way imaginable, that's the kind of thing that moves her to come to the Lord too. Once again, this is a slow process, but it's the road he has to walk.

Finally, we must look to go a second mile as **GOOD NEIGHBORS**. This doesn't merely refer to those who occupy houses immediately to the right and to the left of ours, although it certainly should begin with them. Instead, it means that we should help anyone we have the ability to help. We see this from Jesus' definition of "neighbor" in Luke 10:36-37. In the parable of the good Samaritan, the Samaritan didn't even live in the same province as the man he helped, but he became his neighbor when he showed him mercy. Likewise, if we wish to spread the gospel, we must always be on the alert for opportunities to be merciful, especially with people we see regularly. We can tell somebody all we want that we love him and we're on his side, but when we help him move into his new house or take him food after the loss of a loved one, that's when we show him that we love him and we're on his side. This can't be some kind of gimmick. We can't do one nice thing for somebody and then stand there expectantly, waiting for the reward of getting to study the Bible with them. Instead, we have to be merciful for the sake of mercy. We have to do good for the sake of good being done. If we make a lifestyle out of this, though, we will open more doors for the word than we ever thought possible.