

## “The Extra Mile”

There are a lot of people who think being a Christian isn't that difficult. You try to be a nice person...help people out...do good in your neighborhood and community...believe in God. This is what Christians do! That's really not that hard!

But anyone who thinks that following Jesus and doing what He commanded is not that difficult probably has never read nor taken seriously the teachings of Jesus! Today we will look at some words of Jesus that remind us that living as a follower of Jesus is one of the most difficult things in the world! (This is not going to be an easy sermon to preach, or to hear. This may be a bumpy flight! Are you ready?)

Let's begin by looking at Jesus' words found in Matthew 5:38-41. “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 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.”

These words are part of the “Sermon on the Mount”. Matthew collects a number of Jesus' sayings into one speech or “sermon”. Many begin with His words, “You have heard that it was said...but I say to you...”. This is what the Old Testament says. This is what the Law says. But *what I say* is going to stretch you beyond the demands of the Old Testament law!

So, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth’” (Matthew 5:38). These words appear in the earliest known code of laws, the Code of Hammurabi (c. 2285 B.C.). That law became an integral part of the Old Testament. It appears in three places – in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. That law was actually a *step forward* in terms of mercy. Instead of savage and bloodthirsty retaliation, it meant to *limit our vengeance* against someone.

But Jesus says no, we are to go beyond an eye for eye, tooth for tooth! *Don't resist an evildoer. If someone hits you on the right cheek, turn your other cheek and let them hit that! If someone sues you and takes your coat, give them your cloak too.* The “coat” here was a tunic, a long, inner garment. The “cloak” was a long, blanket-like outer garment. Jewish law said a man's tunic may be taken as a pledge, but not his cloak. Legally, a man's cloak could not be taken permanently from him. Jesus says we are to give a person our cloak! We are not to hang on to our legal rights!

*And if someone forces you to go a mile, go an extra mile also.* Palestine was occupied by Roman troops. Troops marching through a certain place might compel a person to help carry baggage, or act as a guide. The Jews hated this. But Jesus says, if they make you go a mile, go an extra mile! *Good grief Jesus! You expect us to do that? Really?*

Then Jesus throws in another one of those “You have heard that it was said...but I say to you...” phrases. It's in Matthew 5:43-44: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.’” Now the words “love your neighbor and hate your enemy” do not occur in the

Old Testament. But a spirit of retaliation against one's enemy and wiping out one's enemy is there! But Jesus says, *love your enemies, pray for them!*

What do we do with these difficult, radical words of Jesus? How shall we interpret them? ***We need to understand these radical words of Jesus in the context of the kingdom of God.*** Jesus is saying, "Things are different now, since I've come. God's kingdom, God's rule, is breaking into the world." And if you are going to follow Me, you have to start living by *kingdom standards and values* – a new way of treating people – because the kingdom of God is a kingdom of *love*. And even though My kingdom hasn't come yet fully, *you've got to begin to live as citizens of this kingdom now!* Then too, this is the way *God* is, the way *God* acts: "But I say, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous'" (Matthew 5:44-45).

***But how? How can we follow these radical commands of Jesus in a world where people can be mean and ruthless? In a world where people will take advantage of you if you let them?*** Does this mean I'm to be completely passive, and let people do to me whatever they want? Hurt me? Take advantage of me? And I never put my foot down to stop it? If someone comes at me with a knife, I don't try to protect myself? If someone steals my credit card information and charges hundreds of dollars on my credit card, I should "go the extra mile" and let them buy more stuff, on me? Does "turning the other cheek" mean our country shouldn't have an Army or a Navy or defend itself? Or that a Christian shouldn't serve in the military? Some Christians believe that. Some years ago on a vacation Sunday Nancy and I went to the Church of the Brethren in our town for Sunday services. The pastor spoke that morning on the Church of the Brethren's pacifist stance and why they held to that. It was a good sermon, but it didn't convince me to believe our country should offer no resistance to any kind of military attacks.

Some Christians say that these words of Jesus on the Sermon on Mount represent the ideal – what it's like in the kingdom – but we can't do them completely in our world marked by sin and man's inhumanity to man. So, you need to protect yourself if you're attacked by a violent person. You have the right to sue someone if your legal rights have been violated. Our nation must protect itself against terrorists and other aggressors. Even Jesus, some say, didn't allow people to do to Him whatever they pleased! And, frankly, this is pretty much where I'm at in my thinking and belief.

***But we need to be careful that we don't water down these radical words of Jesus and suggest that He didn't mean what He said! And the reality is, the only way to stop the cycle of hate, and violence, and ill will is to turn the other cheek...to return good for evil...to love our enemies!***

If you struggle to know how to live out these radical words of Jesus, I want you to know I struggle with this too. I first began to see how difficult this was when I was a teenager, a new Christian. There was one kid at school who picked on me. He called me a name I hated. He did it in joking way, but it hurt. It was bullying. How do you love a bully? How can you bless a cruel and obnoxious classmate? But I tried. – I prayed for him.

Of course I struggle with Jesus' words as an adult, too. For instance, in recent years Nancy has had been involved in several auto accidents. One young man rammed her car from the rear as she was sitting still in traffic. We found out he was underinsured, and we wound up praying for some of the car's damage ourselves. To follow through legally would have cost more money than it was worth. Not too long after that she was again hit from the rear by a young man who had no car insurance. We wound up paying the deductible again – and as far as I know he got off the hook. Now the human unconverted part of me wanted revenge. How do you go the extra mile with persons like that? *Yet, this little bit of injustice Nancy and I experienced was nothing compared to the suffering of some at the hands of other people!*

Turn the other cheek...don't resist an evildoer...go the extra mile. Is it really possible to act out this radical, kingdom love Jesus speaks about? ***Yes, it is. Every generation, including ours, produces role models for this kind of amazing, extra mile behavior!***

It was December 21, 1990. Mount Vernon, Missouri. It was a cold day. Outside a hospital, protestors maintained an around-the-clock vigil. They were protesting the court-granted right of Nancy Cruzan's parents to let the 33 year old woman die after being comatose for 7 years. Nancy's father went outside the hospital to meet briefly with the protestors. He could have resented their presence, but he did something different. He brought a coffee pot, cups and an extension cord for the people who were protesting what he had done.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a sterling example of nonviolent resistance to evil. Some years back I read Coretta Scott King's book, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.* It was a very moving account of Martin's life, written by the wife of this slain civil rights leader. Coretta tells of the night he was murdered, and of receiving the news of his death. Weary and numb, it was late in the evening, and she was coming home to face the children. What should she do, and what should she say to them, now that their dad was dead? Yolanda was still awake. She came into the bedroom with Mrs. King. The daughter said she was not going to cry, all the while tears slowly trickling down her cheek. Then she said, "Mommy, should I hate the man who killed my daddy?" Coretta said, "No, darling, your daddy wouldn't want you to do that." This is probably true – for it was Dr. King who time and again when a sheriff and deputies would come to arrest him, would pray for the sheriff and his deputies, or King and his followers would sing a hymn.

Winston Churchill once received a letter attacking him viciously. The writer called him a murderer and a liar. Sir Winston wrote back these words: "I am very sorry to receive your letter with the evidence it gives of your distress of mind. The fact that you do for me the greatest injustice does not deprive you of my sympathy, since you obviously have suffered so much."

When Michael Weisser was the rabbi at his synagogue in Lincoln, Nebraska he found himself the target of interest of the local Klu Klux Klan Grand Dragon, Larry Trapp. For some reason, Trapp took it upon himself to harass, intimidate and threaten Michael Weisser in hopes of driving this Jewish man out of town. There were chilling late night phone calls, and a barrage of hate mail. Weisser knew where it was coming from and he was afraid. Yet he decided to act back without hate or fear. He called his tormentor back and got his answering machine. After

listening to its pre-recorded anti-semitic message, he calmly offered to take Trapp, who was confined to a wheel chair, out to the grocery store. For weeks Weisser kept at it, leaving recorded messages that offered help for this Grand Dragon of the KKK.

Finally, Klansman Trapp called him back, complaining, "What do you want? You're harassing me." But Trapp soon called Weisser with another question. He confessed, "I want to get out of this and I don't know how." Weisser immediately responded, "I'll bring dinner and we'll talk." His wife brought along a silver ring as a peace offering. When they met face-to-face, the Klansman and the Jewish cantor, Larry Trapp burst into tears. A follow up report on National Public Radio tells that Trapp eventually moved in with the Weissers, who cared for him as his health declined. In time, Trapp converted to Judaism.

Listen to what Jesus says: "For if you love those who love you, what reward to you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and your sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"(Matthew 5:46-47). It's really not hard to love the people who love us and do good to us, is it? The love that we share with our best friends, the camaraderie we enjoy with teammates or people in our club, is great and makes us feel good. But what are we doing that most anyone else couldn't or wouldn't do? We're nice to people who are nice to us. *So what!*

***But it's this radical, second mile love that makes the difference! This is the only hope for our world!*** An aged man was being interviewed by a reporter because this man had reached his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. He said to the reporter, "Yes sir. I'm 100 years old today and I don't have an enemy in the world." "That's wonderful," the reporter responded, "you must be proud of yourself." "I am," the old man said, "my last enemy died about a year ago."

Well...there's another way of getting rid of at least some of our enemies besides outliving them! That is to not respond in a hateful, vengeful, vindictive way! To be kind and forgiving to our enemies!

Who are the difficult people in your life? People who have done you wrong? Persons you find it hard to love, or forgive? Maybe someone in your family. Someone at work. Maybe a neighbor. Perhaps someone here at church. Can you and I go the extra mile? Can we love that person who might be called our enemy? You say, "No. I don't have it in me." You're right. Neither do I. *But Christ in us* can enable us to do what we can never do on our own.

Can I challenge you, and myself, to put this sermon into action. Let's ask this question: What specific thing will I do this week to go the extra mile with someone, to demonstrate this radical love of Jesus we're talking about?

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.*  
*Community United Methodist Church*  
*June 2, 2019*

