

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, March 5, 1995, by the Rev, W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MATTHEW 5:41

“If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”

THE MILE THAT MEANS THE MOST

Jesus uttered many “hard sayings,” as they have been called. People had a difficult time understanding some of them. He said, “If someone comes up to you and slaps you on the cheek; instead of putting up your fists in retaliation, just turn your other cheek! And if someone comes along and sues you to get your shirt, instead of defending yourself, just give him your coat also!” Then He said to them what must have been most repugnant of all. He said, “If a Roman soldier comes and says to you, ‘Carry my backpack for a mile,’ then you say to him, ‘Good, I’ll be glad to carry it two miles for you.’”

You see, the Jewish people lived under the domination of the hated invader, Rome. The Roman law said that a Roman soldier could, at any time, conscript a civilian to carry his pack (his “impedimenta” as it was called). These packs were very heavy. It included all of his clothing including extra footwear, his eating utensils, his sleeping bag, and all sorts of personal items. And maybe you were a good Jewish person, all dressed up and on your way to the synagogue. Or maybe you were a businessman starting off to some important business engagement. Or perhaps you and your family were ready to go on a family outing. And all of a sudden, there is a tap on your shoulder, and a soldier gruffly accosts you and says, “Hey, carry my pack.” You had to stop what you were doing, pick up this heavy load, and then carry it for a mile.

Now Roman law said that you could set it down at exactly one mile. You had performed your duty. What Jesus said is that when you finish that mile, say to the man, “Could I carry it an extra mile for you?” In this scenario Jesus taught one of the most basic principles of life that I would ask you to focus on with me this morning.

The second mile is the mile that means the most in life. This principle is true in the secular world and in the realm of the sacred as well. What I want to demonstrate to you is that the very principles that the Bible teaches are the most applicable principles with which to do business. In our secular society the strongest base for principles by which to operate successfully are found in this Book. This is certainly true with regard to our spiritual life as well.

1. The first thing I would like to suggest is that that second mile is the mile of PROGRESS.

Let me demonstrate that from the secular world. If you just take sales: All the studies show that in the business world the person who’s willing to put in the extra effort is the person who is going to be most effective at sales. The most recent figures for sales show that 48% of all salesmen made one call and one call only on a prospective customer. Another 20% made two calls and stopped. Another 12% made three calls, then quit. That’s 80%. Eighty percent of all

salesmen made only three calls last year on a customer. But the remaining 20% made either four or more calls, but they also sold 80% of all that was sold in this country. From just the secular point of view, from sales, if you want to know the mile that means the most, the mile of progress, it's the extra mile that the committed salesman is prepared to go.

The father of a high school valedictorian was asked how his daughter had done so well, and he said, "Well, whatever her teachers required, she always did a little extra." The students who make the best grades are generally the ones who do a bit more than the assignment calls for.

Or if you take sports: Any sports figure who is successful and achieves stardom is not the one who does just the minimum, but the one who goes the extra mile. One of the greatest athletes our country has produced in this century is Bob Matthias. When he was ten years old, he was an anemic, delicate child. He says that the doctor gave him so many liver shots that he could hardly sit down sometimes! When he was twelve years old, he said to the doctor, "Look, I don't want to go on like this. Could you write me out a physical therapy plan which will enable me to become a strong person?" And the doctor did that, and this young twelve-year old looked at the doctor and said, "Thank you, Sir. Would it be O.K. if I do twice as much of each of these exercises?" That was the spirit of that young boy. He turned from an anemic, sickly child into a world athlete who at 17 years old was 6'2" tall and weighed 190 pounds. He went to London, England, for the 1948 Olympics to compete for the U.S.A. in the decathlon, the most grueling test of an Olympic athlete. This once anemic boy who had learned the principle of the mile that means the most, ran the 100 meters in eleven seconds. He ran the 400 meters in 51 seconds. He broad jumped more than 22 feet and he threw the javelin 166 feet. He won the gold medal, the youngest winner of the gold in the decathlon in Olympic history. He came home and enrolled in Stanford University, started playing football, and led them to an undefeated season and a victory in the Rose Bowl. They say you can't repeat as a decathlon champion, but in 1952 at Helsinki, Finland, he won his second gold medal. Bob Matthias is the only athlete ever to win two golds in the Olympic decathlon, and he is a fine Christian gentleman. Do you know what he said? "Life is simple. Whether it's sacred or whether it's secular, if you're willing to do whatever it takes and go the extra mile, you'll discover that that's the mile of progress."

That second mile is also the mile where we make the most significant progress in our spiritual life. We don't become spiritual giants by just sitting back and hoping it will happen, any more than you become an athlete by sitting down and eating popcorn and watching T.V.

Someone asked Mother Teresa, "How is it that your witness is so effective?" She said, "Well, all I do is simply to give everything I have to God every day, and I'm just totally sold out to Christ my Lord." I want you to understand this — the mile that means the most, the mile of steady progress, whether in the realm of the secular or the sacred, is that second mile.

2. The mile that means the most is the mile of PARTICIPATION.

It's not just the mile in which you satisfy the Law, but it's the mile in which you participate in what the Law is intended to accomplish. Jesus gave a great illustration of this in the matter of forgiveness. If you read Matthew 18:21-35, you will find there that one day He was talking about forgiveness, and Peter said, "Lord, I know exactly what you're talking about! Let

me tell you what happened to me. I have a friend who did me wrong. But I didn't lose my temper, Lord. wasn't resentful; I just said to him, Friend, I forgive you.' "And Peter was feeling pretty proud of himself as he narrated his story. "But," he said, "a second time that scoundrel did the same thing. But I didn't get mad and cuss him out. I just looked at him and said, 'I forgive you.' And Lord, a third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh time the creep did it, and not once did I lose my temper. You would have been proud of me, Lord! I just said, 'I forgive you.' That's what the Law says I'm to do forgive seven times." But Peter said all this in such a way as to say, "Now Lord, if he does it one more time, I'm goin' to bust his chops!" And Jesus knew what was in his heart. Now listen to me — The Law was there, and Peter fulfilled the Law, but he didn't participate in what the meaning of forgiveness really is. That's why Jesus said, "Peter, you've got to keep on forgiving." Peter said, "What do you mean?" Jesus said, "You forgive him seventy times seven." That's where the real participation in forgiveness is demonstrated.

Let me tell you what I believe to be the most important principle for our own mental and spiritual development. We aren't called upon just to fulfill the Law. We don't begin to experience what the intent of the Law is until we go beyond the Law.

Forgiveness is one of the areas where this principle can work so wonderfully to the advantage of Christians who are really serious about following Jesus all the way. Psychologists tell us that so many of our physical and mental problems result from the fact that we're not willing to forgive. We hold grudges; we have hostility in our hearts; and anger builds up in us as we contrive ways by which we can get back at someone. USA Today recently had a headline that said, "Hostility, as it is measured in a city, is directly related to the crime rate and the death rate of that *city*." In other words, when you have hostility instead of forgiveness, you're going to be in deep trouble.

Let me boil this down to where you and I live. There's not one of us here this morning who hasn't been wronged by someone. Some of you have been wronged terribly. We have one of two choices. We can look for ways to get back at that person, or we can simply forgive, at the same time courageously seeking lasting reconciliation with the offender. To harbor resentment only tears us up inside. Jesus says, "The mile of participation is when we're willing and anxious to go beyond what the Law demands.

We all know that when we forgive people, it's sometimes mighty hard to forget, but we don't need to be always reminding them of what they did!

A man did something wrong, and he asked his wife to forgive him, which she did; but every time after that that he did something that displeased her, she would needle him about his past indiscretion. One day he said, "I thought you said you had forgiven and you had forgotten." She said, "I did say that. I have forgiven you and I have forgotten, but I'm not ever going to let you forget that I've forgiven and forgotten"!

You see, participation in the mile that means the most is when we don't simply do what is expected of us, but when we magnanimously go beyond it.

Take the matter of faith and commitment to Christ. In Luke 9:57—62 Jesus said, in

essence, "Following me is stern business." One man said, "I am ready to follow You." Jesus said, "Let me remind you, the foxes have holes and the birds have nests, but I don't have a place to lay My head. If you're going to follow Me, it involves sacrifice and the second mile." The man said, "O.K., but first let me go and say 'goodbye' to my family." Another said, "Let me first go and bury my father." Jesus said, "No. You just haven't gotten it. You don't understand what following Me means." Faith and commitment mean sacrifice and the second mile.

The finest example of this kind of commitment is the cross itself. Jesus didn't just do what was expected of one person for another person. He died for you and me, and He says, "If you want to be My disciple, pick up a cross and come follow Me." The mile that Jesus walked was one in which He gave everything He had that you and I might have life. When we talk about faith and commitment, we don't really participate in it until we go that second mile with the Master.

3. The mile that means the most is the mile of PERSEVERANCE.

There are two great passages in the Gospels that illustrate and exemplify this truth:

(a) Luke 11:5-8 is the parable of the man who had guests arrive unexpectedly at this home late at night, and he had no food to offer him. In those days this was the greatest embarrassment one could experience. They had no refrigeration, so they could not lay in food days in advance; and all of a sudden, this man was confronted by these guests; so, while the wife entertained them, he high-tailed it over to his neighbor's house and hammered on the door, and shouted, "Do you have any bread?" Now the neighbor and his family had gone to bed. In fact, we are told that he had already bolted the door. In those days in Palestine the front door of houses was always left open during the day. But if you wanted privacy you closed the door and bolted it. In this case the man had locked the door. Now the point of the parable is that the man persevered so long in knocking on the door that finally the man from inside said, "Hey, I'll give you all the food in the house if you'll just go away!" Jesus was emphasizing the need for perseverance in our prayer life.

George Muller, that great Christian philanthropist of Bristol, England, was a mighty prayer warrior. In his biography it is told how for sixty years he prayed for the conversion of three of his friends; but he died without seeing one of them come to know Christ. However, within three months of Mr. Muller's passing, all three of them were gloriously born again by the Spirit of God! So, dear friend, persevere in your prayers for the salvation of those persons for whom God has given you a burden.

(b) Then in Luke 18:1-8 Jesus makes the same point in the parable about the persistent widow who made an absolute nuisance of herself in confronting an ungodly judge. He finally made sure that she received justice. His own words are almost amusing! He said, "Although I don't fear God and have no respect for men, yet this woman is such a nuisance that I shall give judgment in her favor, or else her continual visits will be the death of me!" (Phillips)

This woman was tireless; she was tenacious; she never gave up until she received what she was after. She went the second mile of perseverance. You know what happens in life so

often— people give up, often at the point where victory is right around the corner.

Here is a man who takes a sledge hammer to a large piece of rock. He strikes it twenty times, and it breaks in pieces. Suppose he had given up after nineteen blows of the sledge! The mile that means the most is the mile when you go beyond what's expected, and you never quit: You never give up: It's the mile of perseverance.

4. The mile that means the most is the mile that PAYS OFF.

The payoff comes to those who are prepared to go that extra mile. Never forget that God has a purpose for your life. God has something special for you to do. He has a ministry He wants you to perform that nobody else can perform. People who practice the mile that means the most, all of a sudden discover God's purpose as it is woven into this very basic biblical principle.

This afternoon read again the 24th chapter of Genesis where we find a beautiful example of this principle. Rebekah was the daughter of Bethuel. One evening she was out at the village well, and as she was drawing water for her family, she is approached by a man who has a lot of camels. He asked her if she would kindly give him a drink of water from the well. Now the Law said that a woman always had to draw water for a man! So, she fulfilled the Law by giving him a drink. But then she did a delightful thing. She lived by the principle of the second mile, so she said, "Sir, I shall be happy to draw water for your camels also." Can you imagine what that meant? Do you realize that those ornery critters after a trek across the desert can drink up to 25 gallons of water each?! This man had never seen anything like this before. He asked her what her name was. She said, "I'm Rebekah." He said, "I'm the chief servant of Abraham, and I'm looking for a wife for his son, Isaac. And I know that you would be a wonderful partner for this young man." To make a long story short, she returned with him to the land of Canaan and was married to Isaac; and that put her in the direct lineage of the Lord Jesus Christ. You know why? Because she didn't do just what the Law required. She went the extra mile.

I heard recently about a youth pastor in a church in the Southland who went out one evening with another young man to visit a teenager who had started coming to the youth group in the church. They went by his house about 7 p.m., rang the doorbell, and the boy wasn't home. They went back at 8 p.m., and he still wasn't home. They returned for the third time at 9 o'clock. Still he had not come home. They went down to the Dairy Queen and were drinking a milk shake when the youth pastor said, "Well, it's about time to go home." His friend said, "I thought we were going to visit Tom." "Oh, that's right," said the youth pastor, "but we've been three times and he's not home." "Oh, I didn't understand that," came the reply. "I thought we were going to visit. You know he's going to come home some time tonight. If we park in front of his house, we'll be there when he does come home." So that is what they did. And when that boy came home, they were the right people at the right place, at the right time. And God touched that young person's life and changed him as he received Jesus as his personal Savior. Fifteen years later, that same youth pastor presided at a great worship service at which that young man was commissioned as a missionary to South America! What if those two men had gone home from the Dairy Queen that night? Thank God they didn't. And look what happened! God's eternal purpose was worked out in a teenager's life. The mile that means the most ended in a glorious payoff!

You can always live just to fulfill the Law, but you'll never really enjoy it. The first mile is the mile of duty: The second is the mile of delight. The first is a personal requirement: The second is a glorious privilege because it's the mile that means the most.

AMEN.