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That Extra Mile

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"And whosoever shall compel thee to go one mile, go with him twain" (Matthew 5:41).

The idea in this exhortation had itself taken a long journey. It originated among the Persians, was taken over by the Romans, and then applied by the Romans to the Jews during their (the Romans) occupation of Palestine. In the beginning it was the prerogative of a Persian envoy to call upon any man to assist in carrying the envoy's burden; and he could 'compel' such a man to help him for a mile. The said man had no option. The Romans thought this to be a good idea, and so they applied it to the Jews. Jesus was familiar with this practice and took it over for His teaching, but added a second mile to the first. No doubt Jesus was broadening the meaning from the literal to the spiritual, and had much more in mind. Indeed, this exhortation contains the very essence of Christianity.

The second mile represents a very vital transition.

The first mile is the rule of law, of obligation, of "Thou shalt", of "You must", of duty. The second mile is what is voluntary, spontaneous, free, gracious.

The first is: "*Must I?*" The second is: "*May I?*"

The first is: "Am I obliged, compelled?" The second is: "Can I not do more?"

Look at the two travellers! The legal one says: 'Pick up that load and carry it for me for this next mile.' Not even 'Please!' The commanded one obeys and they walk silently, sullenly, and begrudgingly. At the end of the mile - which has been measured carefully by the second man - the load is dropped and he turns back abruptly and without a word.

But Jesus is thinking of another second man. He receives the same order; he is under the same obligation; his is the same duty. But he tackles it in a different spirit. He goes at it with a different disposition. He is gracious in his manner and spontaneous in his undertaking. When he has reached the limit of duty and necessity, he says: 'Let me help you further.' The first man is taken aback. He has not met people like that. Something gives way and they talk freely for the second mile. Something has happened which, at least, makes number one think; maybe he asks some questions. A door fast closed on the first mile is now wide open. What has happened? The answer is: Grace has triumphed over Law!

So in its first and broadest meaning the word of Jesus as to the extra mile means the great transition from Law to Grace. It may be only a step from the end of mile number one to the beginning of mile number two, but it marks the frontiers of two worlds, two dispensations, and two dispositions.

What immensities meet and part at that point; and what a change in the atmosphere!

Then, how many other areas of life are affected by this transition across this bridge! This change would bring about an industrial revolution. The Christian is involved in this. Industry, business, work are very largely characterized by the first mile of obligation. 'How much *must* I do?' 'How soon can I leave off?' An eye on the clock. As little work and as much remuneration as possible. The second mile man, who stays a bit longer and does a bit more, is suspect, disliked, and persecuted.

But in the discourse from which our verse is taken, Jesus was not saying that those who did what He said would have all the good time and be universally popular. What He did say was that these would be the people who would inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, and that they are "the salt of the earth"; which means - among other things - that they would offset the corruption to which we have just referred. The coming Kingdom will belong to the people of the second mile in this respect. Others who ask to be of the Kingdom of Heaven will have been drawn to Christ by those who have paid the price of the extra mile of grace. So, business is a sphere, and a very practical sphere, for the law of the second mile.

Another area which often challenges to this law of grace is that of family life, or home life. It is so easy in the home and family life to keep just to duty, if even that. Just how much is obligation and compulsory: the least that can be done, and how much can be got out of. The sharing may be so unequal, the burden so unbalanced. If, for decency's sake, the first mile is taken, it is with no good spirit, no cheerful disposition, no spontaneous voluntariness. It is a *must*, not a pleasure. Perhaps there is no place where a true Christian testimony means more than in the home. Homes are an object of satanic dislike and disruptive activity more than anywhere else. So it is here that the testimony of Divine grace matters so much, and therefore the home is a place where second mile people are so much needed.

Along this line may we mention one more connection in which the extra mile is of such importance. It is the area of Christian fellowship. In the relation of Christians to one another there can be just the first mile of the common recognition, ordinary courtesy, a nod of acknowledgment, the glance of

acquaintanceship. There may be the coming and going of congregational 'Public Worship'. It is possible to attend the same meeting-place for years and not to be known. Within the limits of the first mile the degree of community and relatedness may differ in its real meaning, and many a heart which "knows its own sorrow" has to carry that sorrow in loneliness, even in a crowd. There is large room for the extra mile people in the area of Christian fellowship. It may make demands, but it pays large dividends. Not that what may accrue in dividends should be the motive. One of the laws of life is, however, the ministering of life to others. A sure way to spiritual death is to keep to ourselves and not go out to others. True moral and spiritual character is to be measured by the law of the extra mile.

Jesus had very much greater and deeper thoughts and meanings in what He said than just platitudes and axioms.

This apparently simple word about going beyond compulsion had in it a whole realm and wealth of potential and actual values. If duty, necessity, obligation, contract, covenant, demand so much, do not - says Jesus - stop at that; put at least as much again upon it. This is grace with God.