

The Second Mile

Matt. 5:38-48

My favorite seminary professor was my preaching professor. Dr John Shouse was gifted in positive encouragement and gave the most fledgling preachers confidence beyond what they deserved which is what they needed most. In some classes, he was sometimes challenging to follow as he did not always think in a straight line. But I loved him and took all of the classes that I could from him. One "J" term I was his only student and so I had a one on one tutoring experience which I think was a blessing to each of us. (Just imagine what it would be like if you could hear me preach a couple sermons a day for two weeks) Anyway, in the process of interpreting and preaching scripture passages, I ran into some difficult verses and it was my task to take them on. Dr. Shouse encouraged me -that is what he does- by pointing out that it is often the difficult verse that becomes the key to unlocking the spiritual insights waiting to be found in many passages of scripture. This premise led us to an experience of discovery during our two week journey.

So I bring this expectation to the Sermon on the Mount. The difficult verses are the keys to unlocking many of the spiritual insights that Jesus intended for us when He spoke these words. There are many such verses in the sermon but some of the most challenging are these in Matt. 5:38-48.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you turn not away."

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use

you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect."

Last week I shared my interpretation of the principle of going the second mile. Roman soldiers were allowed to commandeer a person to carry their pack for one mile. After

the mile the person was released and freed from this obligation. So, what Jesus taught was that after serving for one mile, you were to voluntarily carry the pack for an extra mile. During the first mile, a man would be forced to comply. There was no alternative but to do so. The natural attitude of the first mile would be resentment, anger, and other negative emotions. Going the second mile was Jesus' method for freeing the oppressed. The oppressed are helpless, they have no option, no choices. So the way out of this is not resistance but to give or offer more than was demanded. When you start on the extra mile you are free. You have joy. You are empowered. You have become the equal of the oppressor. He had dehumanized you but now he is face to face with your humanity, a humanity that is superior to his own.

Having said that, I have to confess that I have never had a similar explanation for turning the other cheek, giving away your cloak or giving or loaning to anyone who asks you. I have tried to channel my Dr Shouse who taught that the difficult verse is the key to a passage. Going the extra mile is such a verse and so if we have answered this question then the other pieces of the puzzle should also fall into place. So let's try to go where I have never gone before...

If someone slaps your cheek, what are they trying to do? How does having your cheek slapped affect a person? Slapping is not as damaging as a punch. It will not knock you out. You are unlikely to lose a tooth or be cut. It is painful, It will sting. Many times a slap expresses disdain, indignation, or disrespect. A slap is perpetrated by the powerful upon the powerless. It intimidates. It humiliates. It threatens. If I have slapped you once then you know that I can do it again. A slap intends to generate fear and control another by means of that fear. Have you heard of the question, what is the worst thing that could happen? It is a question that can help when you are paralyzed by fear. If you confront your boss because he has been cutting your hours and you cannot afford to lose the income, what is the worst thing that can happen? If you ask your landlord to replace the sorry carpet in your living room, what is the worst thing that could happen? If you confront your husband about his affair, what is the worst thing that could happen? In almost every situation the worst thing that could happen is something we could manage if that became necessary. Often the worst thing that could happen might end a bad situation and open you up to a new beginning. What we fear most may not actually be that bad. If you "turn the other cheek" you then freed from the intimidation and fear that first slap caused. The person who slapped you intended to control you by fear and intimidation. When you "turn the other cheek" you face that fear and say to your adversary, "do your worst." Whatever it is, it is nothing you can't handle.

The lesson for giving away your cloak is the same. If your tunic is taken in a lawsuit, what is the worst thing that could happen? They might sue you again and take your coat. Offering your coat is a way to face that fear so that it will not control you. Jesus

wants to free us from the coercive tactics of our oppressors. The things that they can take from us actually don't amount to much. If you face what you fear then you will be able to move on. There is a whole world of possibilities waiting but you will never discover that world if you do not face your fears.

What about, "Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away."? Have you ever had this experience, where someone, even a stranger, asks you for money and when you do not give it to them, they get mad at you? It's as if they have a sense of entitlement that believes that you are obligated to give them what they demand. They have an argument: you are a Christian right? And Jesus taught that you should give to the poor, I am poor, therefore, if you really are a Christian then you will pay for my motel tonight. And tomorrow...

So what did Jesus intend when He said, "Give to him who asks you..." If someone asks you for help, what are the reasons that you might be reluctant to help them? Maybe you are afraid that they would use your gift for alcohol or drugs. You might be at the end of the month and you need to stretch what is left just to make it yourself. You may worry about the limits of your obligation, how many people can I be expected to help? If I say yes to this one, what will happen with the next one?

But Jesus said, "Give to him who asks you..." Behind these other fears, there may be something else, do you fear losing control of your money? Can you follow Jesus and remain in control of your money or is your control of your money something that also must be surrendered to God? "Give to him who asks you..." Is the money you have limited to known sources? Have you ever received an unexpected check? Is the God who says, "Give to him who asks," also able to supply your own need as He sees fit? Asking is not always the path to moral advantage. You may sometimes ask the Lord, should I help this person who is asking for help and the Lord may answer, "not this time." But, if you are not willing to surrender to yes, then you will never hear the Lord say, "No."

Jesus closed this section of His sermon with "Love your enemies..." If as a Christian, my inclination is to bless, to do good and to wish well for all others, why should a wrong that is done to me change my mind? If I allow the wrong done to me to change my mind then have I not given control of my spirit to my adversary?

In relationships, the people close to us are often able to push our buttons. They can know just what to say to get a rise out of you. And this is not fun. They have the ability to make you miserable. Jesus' answer is to love your enemies. An enemy is anyone who does not have your best interest in mind in any given moment. By this definition in a moment of time your spouse or your parent or child or close relative or friend can act as an enemy who is seeking to harm rather than help you. Love your

enemies... Do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you. Stay in control of your own spirit and do not allow another person to alter your course. When Paul applied this teaching in his letter to the Romans he wrote, "Do not be overcome by evil but

overcome evil with good." So hang onto to your Christian inclination to bless, to do good, and to wish well for others. Do not allow the behavior of another human to change your mind.

Following Jesus' teaching will free you from fear, from oppression, from greed, and from hate. Will you do it?