

# Heart Matters: Second Mile

## Ruth 2:3-13; Mt 5:38-48; Romans 2:14-24



We often talk of going the second mile, but at times, we fail to recognize what we are really saying. What does the second mile really mean? What does it look like? Is it really an excessive, aberrant version of spirituality? Do we water down the significance of Jesus words to the point that they lose their meaning?

When Jesus spoke about the reign of God, He confronted people with the inadequacy of their attitudes of superiority and self-interest. He spoke of a type of lordship and servanthood that would sit no better among our current society than it did in His own. Jesus couched his teaching on the central tenets of the good news of God's reign in phrases like "if someone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." He spoke of loving our enemies and doing good to those who wish us nothing other than harm. They were strange words in His day, even as they are rather strange in our own.

Ruth had no reason to follow Naomi back to Israel. There was nothing for her there. She had no future to look forward to, nor hope of finding a husband to care for her within Israelite society. She struck out with Naomi, refusing to be left behind, even though following Naomi was not likely to be in her own best interest. We might speak of the faith she placed in *Yahweh* as centering her direction. We could speak of her setting out on a new direction and casting her all in the hands of an unknown and untried *Yahweh*—the God of Israel. We may just as easily look to the attitude she displayed in laying her own concerns aside to help care for her widowed mother-in-law.

Ruth decided to think less of herself and more of her mother-in-law. Rather than asking what she would get out of the bargain, she focused on Naomi's needs. She looked beyond the limits of her specific responsibility and sought to meet Naomi's needs. Ruth chose to keep her own in second place. Rather than focus of what awaited her in the land of Israel, she looked at what awaited Naomi. Her own lot would be no better than Naomi's, but Naomi would fare worse without her.

Ruth's subjecting her own needs to those of her mother-in-law are a prime example of the selflessness that we find in Jesus' words on "going the second mile." Ruth went above and beyond the expected call of duty, for she had been released from her responsibilities and yet remained faithful. We commend Ruth for her example. We highlight her shouldering Naomi's burden and staying with her as they walked together into the unknown. Is that not "going the second mile?"

For those of us who have grown up in the church, we glibly speak of "going the second mile," as if it were a matter of surpassing the expectations of others. We read it in the context of a society that attempts to "get by" with a minimum of investment in others. We couch it in the amiable interactions in our society. We think of those we pay for their services or friends who have exceeded what we felt comfortable to request of them. We think of doing more than expected, yet without real sacrifice.

Jesus' message had an entirely different tone. His words find context in violence and oppression. They are the embodiment of Jesus' message of non-resistance. They are not the words

we long to hear. In Matthean passage, Jesus is teaching that to accept God's reign over our lives is to set aside our desire to resist evil and oppression. While we speak of fighting fire with fire, Jesus speaks of fighting oppression with love. He speaks of confronting enemies, oppressors, and those who take advantage of position or power with joyful service. He set them up to be abused and taken advantage of in order that they might demonstrate the character of God's love. Jesus called the disciples to set the pace for changing the world. The world is to know that we are Christians by the quality of our love—love that encircles those whose currency is oppression and violence.

Paul wrote the Roman Christians, reminding Jews and Gentiles both that they were under Christ together, with no true differentiation between them. He reminded Jews that there were Gentile examples for them to follow in obeying Jesus' ethic. Paul spoke of some Gentiles naturally understanding and following God's instructions in the Torah, warning Jews not to gloat in their ownership of their religious tradition. He reminded them that obedience to God's reign condemned the inconsistent application of their heritage.

We could just as easily point to the many examples of non-Christians around us who fulfill Jesus' commands to "go the second mile." We see Mahatma Ghandi, leading a peaceful movement in India that seeks open acceptance, reconciliation, forgiveness, and respect for life. We find non-Christians feeding the homeless or giving two years to serve in the Peace Corp, meeting the needs of people cut off from the material blessings we take for granted.

As the Jewish Christians in First Century Rome, we try to believe that only Christians act with the kind of love and acceptance that Jesus preached. We are still confronted by many non-Christians who come closer to fulfilling the demands of the gospel that we are wont to do ourselves. After all, it was only after the "USA for Africa" campaign by non-Christian vocal artists that Southern Baptists began to actively participate in alleviating world hunger. The non-Christian nation of Japan sent about \$10 million to the UN Food Programme last month. The SBC cut Baptist World Aid out of its budget. Is that the quality of our trend-setting pace? Americans spend more on dog food than feeding a hungry world. Are we any exception?

How can we sit back and allow non-Christians to be more Christlike than those of us who claim to follow Jesus? Non-Christians know to meet the needs of the hungry, give shelter, clothing, and invest in drug rehabilitation programs. Non-Christians give money to health research programs and Habitat for Humanity. Too often we sit back and focus on ourselves. We become too preoccupied with our own petty issue to worry about those outside our own circle.

Jesus' words are difficult to take to heart. They make us uncomfortable if we pay too much attention to them. We can learn to hear them. We can learn to listen. We can learn to take the initiative in answering violence and oppression with love. We can perhaps begin as Ruth, by placing the needs of others first. We can support others who are working to relieve oppression and violence, poverty and hunger. We can accept our responsibility to set the pace in our own community. Rather than talking about God's love, we can allow it to flow through us. Are we willing to have our generosity abused in order to share God's love?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*