

Go the Second Mile

Jesus said those who follow Him must go out of their way to love people. Are you ready to GO THE DISTANCE?

It was a phone call any parent would dread: My youngest son had been admitted to a hospital in London, and the prognosis was grim. The doctors told us he might not survive and if he lived, he would be paralyzed for life.

When I received this devastating news, I was on the road ministering in the Chicago area. I had just returned from an exhausting ministry trip to Africa and was fighting a severe case of malaria. I didn't have my passport with me. My budget had been drained by the work in Africa, and I wasn't sure where I'd get the money to cover a trip to London.

But none of that mattered. My love for my son was so great I would have done anything to be with him.

One by one, I overcame each obstacle and cleared the way for my journey. My passport was sent via courier, and I canceled meetings and caught the first available flight to London. My plans and priorities were completely upended, but I had no regrets. I was eager to do whatever was necessary to assist him to recovery.

Ultimately, the Lord fully healed my son. But the distance I was willing to go to help him in his distress was directly proportionate to the measure of the love I have for him.

God showed us the measure of His love for fallen humanity when He gave us heaven's best, Jesus Christ. What a demonstration of incomprehensible generosity and sacrifice! John 3:16

describes it well: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (NKJV).

All of us know this verse. But few of us are as familiar with 1 John 3:16: “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”

John tells us that, following God’s example, we should place great value on our relationships within the family of God and be sacrificial in our care and love for one another. Such a lifestyle is not convenient: It will demand that we go out of our way. Yet all of us would agree that caring for and helping others are more rewarding than being selfish and indifferent.

Going the Second Mile

Several years ago I sponsored a leadership training conference for pastors in a volatile region of Africa. God had placed these people on my heart, and I refused to abandon them despite government warnings to stay away.

I arrived on the day an ongoing civil war escalated and the borders were shut. I witnessed people being slaughtered and buildings set ablaze. Marauding soldiers closed the streets to traffic, making safe passage impossible. The air reeked of smoke, and the silence was punctuated by the sound of gunfire and the screams of those under attack. Throughout that long, hot, uncomfortable night, I remember wondering, What am I doing here?

Before dawn I rose from the floor to silence. The violence had

ceased, at least for the moment. My driver arrived and we left the smoldering city for the rural area where the conference would be held. I had invested a lot of time and resources arranging these meetings, but would anyone show up? No public transportation was available because of the unrest, so how could those who wanted to attend possibly make it?

After several hours we arrived safely at our destination, where my fears and questions were put to rest when I was introduced to three smiling young pastors. They were dressed in torn trousers and threadbare shirts and two of the men were barefooted. I was astonished to learn these men had walked for nearly three weeks over 700 miles of rough and dangerous terrain to attend the conference!

Even more astounding, they had embarked on this perilous journey without assurance that the training conference would be held. What could have motivated these men to risk their lives for the mere possibility the training would take place?

I will never forget those men in their tattered clothing who walked an unthinkable distance and risked their lives for an opportunity. They didn't come out of a sense of obligation or guilt or loyalty to me as a leader. Rather, it was their intense love for God and their desire to be more effective in their ministry that provoked them to travel so far.

Such sacrificial love has both challenged and blessed me. Some lukewarm and passionless believers wouldn't bother getting into their cars to drive a few miles to church, but these three men were proof that genuine love for God will take you out of your way.

When the Son of God became a man, He traveled from heaven to Earth, leaving the glories of eternity to walk among us. On Earth, Jesus began a difficult journey, ultimately sacrificing His life upon the cross. What a great distance He traveled for us! Instructing His followers to do the same for others, He said: "And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two" (Matt. 5:41).

In Jesus' time, a Roman soldier had the right to press a person into service, forcing him to carry his load for one mile. It didn't matter if the person was on his way to a funeral or late for work there was no excuse. He had to comply with the soldier's request. Saying no meant imprisonment or even death.

Was this practice unfair and abusive? Absolutely. But consider Jesus' instruction: Regardless of the circumstance, do not merely fulfill the minimum requirement; go the extra mile!

If we should go the extra mile for an unjust government, how far should we go for God? Clearly, we should be willing to go far out of our way. Unfortunately, most modern believers don't want to be inconvenienced by the call for evangelism, training, worship or prayer.

There is always a core of devoted followers, but they make up only a small percentage of the church. Perhaps 20 percent of the people carry 80 percent of the load. Can you imagine what could be accomplished if every Christian were fully committed to and involved in the works of God?

Pastors are frustrated because their members have lost interest in serving in the church. Ask any Sunday school

leader how difficult it is to recruit new teachers.

Recent reports show that almost 13 million American believers are disconnected from local church life. Many times I've commiserated with leaders who cannot understand the lack of commitment in believers today. What does it take to motivate people to follow after the things of God?

A Lover's Journey

I know a young couple who wanted to be together, but because of the distance that separated them, they had to sacrifice to see each other. One day their schedules enabled them to be only 500 miles apart for one 24-hour period. The young woman canceled her plans, packed her car, and drove the 500 miles to spend less than four hours with her love and then drive all the way back home.

Why would she do this? She drove 14 hours to spend four hours in his company, forsaking sleep and the myriad of tasks that otherwise would have filled her day. When she told me what she had done, I realized hers was a love so powerful, so consuming, that no sacrifice was too great or distance too far.

If natural love will take a person 500 miles out of his way, how far should a believer's love for God take him to fulfill God's purposes and experience His presence?

Do you remember the sense of radical abandonment you had in pursuing the things of God when you were first born again and how far it took you from your old way of living? You discovered new priorities, and things that were never

important to you suddenly became important. You willingly gave yourself to these things.

Perhaps we must remember the joy, the sense of purpose and fulfillment that results from our personal relationship with God. We must get back in touch with our first love, as the church of Ephesus was encouraged to do in John's day:

"I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have ... persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.

"Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent" (Rev. 2:2-5).

The casual observer would call this a good church, but Jesus found them wanting. They were doing the right things but fell short because of their serious heart condition: They had left their first love and hadn't even realized it!

God has used such passages as well as numerous experiences in my life to teach me something I like to call 'The Law of the Journey.' "I have observed the law at work in both believers and unbelievers, and it is this: The measure of your love will determine the distance of your journey. If you are motivated by love, you will gladly go out of your way. In other words:

Little love = short journey

Great love = long journey

It was love that motivated Jesus to die for the sins of the world. It was love – not nails – that kept Him on the cross. He took an exceptional journey for us. Our gratitude for what He accomplished should motivate us to go out of our way for Him.

The Law of the Journey reveals why there is such a lack of commitment in the lives of many Christians today.

For years, I've ministered about the glory of serving and the importance of being dedicated to the local church. I've led countless altar calls during which people have recommitted their lives to God and promised to serve Him faithfully.

Commitment is good – and service needs to be a part of every Christian's life – but if it isn't rooted in a heart of passionate love for God, it won't last long. When we love Him, His priorities will be our priorities.

Are you still in the place of first love? Or has your walk with the Lord become one of habit? If you examine yourself and discover that you are neglecting the things God considers important, perhaps it is time to rediscover your first love.

Revelation 2:5 says, "Repent and do the first works." Make worship, studying the Word, prayer and giving a priority again. Restore your resolve to share the gospel. Take time to discover your unique gifts and calling, and use them to serve in your church and in your sphere of influence. Get rid of compromise and anything that takes away from the intimacy you once enjoyed with God.

Begin to travel out of your way become a second-miler for the things God deems important. Your love for Him will compel you to take the journey.

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