“Going the Extra Mile”

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Matthew 5:38–48

Leviticus 19:1–2, 9–18

Long ago, when I first started going to seminary in Richmond, Virginia, I was instructed in how important it was to be careful crossing the street. You see, the seminary was on this fairly busy four lane street called Brook Road. The main part of the seminary was on the East side of Brook. But a fair number of buildings belonging to the school, including married student housing, was on the West side.

So I was given this important proverb to remember:

There are two kinds of seminary students who cross Brook Road.

The quick and the dead.

It tends to be forgotten or even unknown in our times, in which our cultural ignorance is so great, in which our historical memory is often limited to the proverbial fifteen minutes. But so many common English expressions have their source in the Bible.

“The quick and the dead,” of course, most of us know from the Apostles’ Creed, and its way of speaking of those who are alive and those who have died (in the version most of learned, anyway) can be traced to the King James Version of two scriptures, Acts 10:42 and 1 Peter 4:3–5.

There are, to be sure, several others, sayings that either directly or with some slight modification clearly have their source in the Bible.

Here is a few of them:

“An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” (That one’s in today’s reading.)

“Scapegoat.”

“I escaped by the skin of my teeth.”

“Pride comes before a fall.”

And, of course, there’s this one: “Going the extra mile.”

That’s right: “going the extra mile” has its source in the Bible, moreover, in one of the passages I read a bit ago, the one from the Gospel of Matthew. It’s a little different in the scriptures than how we’ve come to know it, but that’s okay. The way it reads in the Bible is this way, with Jesus saying “if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”

So it is that, the phrase “going the extra mile” came into the English language. Yet I suspect that most people don’t usually remember the biblical origins of these words when they use them. They want to speak of someone who makes exceptional effort in a task; they want to describe responsibility and intentionality that exceed the norm. So they reach for this phrase. The fact that it comes from the Sermon on the Mount is hardly ever recognized.
The thing is, I believe not only are most people ignorant of the source of the phrase. More than that, most people, in using this phrase, do not mean the same thing as Jesus meant. When people speak of someone going the extra mile, they have in mind something different than Jesus intended when he spoke of that second mile.

Because, again, most people have in mind merely the good job someone may do by making a bit more effort than normal. They take on a task, and they do it with exceptional diligence and responsibility. And so that person is commended for going the extra mile.

But Jesus meant something different. Hear again that verse:

“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”

Hmm. Do we see it yet? Well, let’s throw in a few more of the things that Jesus is saying here.

“No resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.”

Ah. Now we’re starting to see it, aren’t we. Jesus isn’t talking about simply making a bit of additional effort in a task that is conventional and a matter of course. No, he’s talking about doing something completely outside the norm, something that is outrageous, perhaps even putting oneself in personal danger, an action that we would not expect of any normal individual, even those who are quite moral. He’s talking about the right way to act when you are under duress, the morality of the persecuted, the ethics of the martyr.

Now, to see how radical these words of Jesus are, we need look no further than our other Bible passage for today, drawn from the book of Leviticus. There we hear a description of exceptional morality, an upright and godly ethics:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God. You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another.

Do we see what’s going on? Perhaps we should hear a little more:

“You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

Leviticus tells us of the ethics God required of the people of Israel when they entered into the Promised Land. It describes a good and upright morality: care for the poor; care for the neighbor; speaking well and living uprightly, as befits those called to be the people of God.
And really, this is a good way to live. It truly is a fine morality, an irreproachable ethics. Who could criticize these ethics, except for those who don’t care about ethics?

But then Jesus comes along. And wouldn’t you know that he’d just want to mess things up. For the ethics he teaches, the morality he preaches, seems to stand in some contrast to the ethics of Leviticus.

Consider with me those contrasts.

Leviticus morality is balanced and fair. But Jesus’ ethics appears excessive and risky.

Leviticus morality tells us what we need to do to live right and well. Jesus’ ethics, however, seems to tell us that we must give up all hope of living well, that personal wellness is not the supreme moral value for the follower of Jesus, and that we must plunge headlong into giving ourselves away.

Leviticus morality is the ethics of those who would care for others who need help. But Jesus’ ethics seems to be the morality of the weak in service to those who would abuse and take advantage of them.

In short, Leviticus gives us a morality that we recognize as useful, helpful, and realistic. But Jesus teaches what seems to be a morality for chumps and weaklings.

I think it’s clear which morality we would prefer.

But I think we need to stay in this tension a little bit longer. For I’m afraid that, if I resolve it too quickly and neatly, then we won’t truly understand what Jesus is telling us. We must “go the extra mile,” in our conventional understanding of the phrase, so that we may discern the “extra mile” of which Jesus speaks.

So let’s dip back into that contrast for a bit, and recall this: Leviticus talks of holiness, while Jesus speaks of perfection. Did you notice that? In Leviticus we read “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” But Jesus says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Now, I think it’s too easy to say that these passages mean the same thing, that holiness and perfection are two terms pointing to the same reality. I think that’s a bit of a stretch. Jesus could have simply quoted Leviticus. But he did not. He alludes to it. But he doesn’t simply echo it. He extends it. He goes farther with it.

For the holiness highlighted in Leviticus is achievable, expected, a quality that can exist on the human level as a matter of course, simply out of the obedience that is expected and within reach for those who would draw near to God. But perfection: well, I don’t know how that can be anything but something out there, the completeness for which exceptionally good people may strive but cannot truly reach until the end.

So if Leviticus holiness and Christ’s perfection are not the same thing, what is Jesus getting at? Well, try this on for size. The Leviticus morality, the “holiness” of which it speaks, is about living rightly: in balance, with justice, taking the high road in all we do. When we live the Leviticus way, we live humbly yet confidently doing what is right. Who could object to that? Yet, it seems to me that Jesus is talking about a morality that is more than confidently doing what is right. He is seeking from his followers a morality that goes beyond that. He is calling his followers to go the extra mile.
It’s as if he is telling his followers, telling us, that it is not enough for us to be good, upright people. We must go beyond the balanced, measured, fair-minded approach to life that, for so many, can’t see beyond one’s own personal comfort, can’t imagine a morality higher or deeper than “the good life,” with all its rosy self-interest, can’t get out of the bubble of self-concern in which our typical ethical calculations too often trap us.

Jesus wants us to live, not with moral self-control, but with perfect self-abandon, with a freedom that doesn’t so much reject the morality of Leviticus as builds on it and moves ahead of it.

He wants us to live his new morality, which is certainly not an ethics for chumps and weaklings, but which can assuredly be a morality only for those who are, truly, exceptionally strong, spiritually speaking.

For Jesus knows this so deeply, and he wishes to teach it to us: only the strong can, willingly and effectively, suffer for others. This is not physical strength, nor is it the false strength of coercion and violence. No, it is spiritual strength, the strength of holiness, indeed, of perfection, the kind of strength that finds its beginning and ending, its source and goal, in God.

Jesus knows this, for this new morality of his, in all its strength made known in apparent weakness, is his own story: that by his service we are blessed, by his death we shall live, by his stripes we are healed.

This is the way of Jesus. And it is the way that he calls us to live, indeed, that he empowers us to live.

He asks us to take up this morality of the extra mile, this martyr’s ethics, this grace of giving away, this life of strength made known in weakness.

He invites us to rely on him, and thereby to see our in him meaning and our strength.

He urges us to lay down our fear, for truly we are afraid, many of us anyway: of the unknown, of suffering, of loss.

He challenges us to see goodness as more than the Leviticus morality, more than the measured, balanced, upright life, as good as this is.

Jesus shows us, in his own person, the perfection that builds on and extends holiness, the strength of the one who, in obedience to God, gives of one’s very self.

Guided by the Spirit, graced by Christ, let us go the extra mile.