

The First Mile



Teaching Letter
By Derek Prince

> "And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two." (Matthew 5:41)

Jesus here depicts a situation in which law, or social custom, gives a man the right to compel another to walk a mile together with him. Speaking to His disciples, Jesus says, in effect: "If this should happen to you, do not merely walk one mile with such a man, walk two miles with him. Go twice as far as he has aright to demand of you." We may say that the first mile represents duty, the second mile represents love. Love freely does twice as much as duty can demand.

These words of Jesus have given rise to the expression "going the second mile." However, they carry with them a simple, logical implication which is often overlooked. Many Christians speak and act as though the exercise of love automatically releases them from normal personal and social duties. But the truth is just the opposite. You can only go the second mile after you have gone the first. The expression of love can only begin after the demands of duty have first been met.

The same principle is expressed by Paul in Romans 13:8, Owe no man anything except to love one another. Here again, the order is important. The negative requirement comes first: Owe no man anything. This covers all our legal and ethical obligations. We must first fulfill all these, then we can move on to the positive requirement to love one another. Christian love is inconsistent with the failure to fulfill our legal and ethical duties. We might paraphrase this by saying: Genuine love first makes sure that all its debts are paid.

Sloppy Agape

Many Christians have a wrong concept of biblical love. Love of this kind is not a sentimental attitude expressed in religious clichés or honey-sweet phrases. Someone has characterized this unscriptural counterfeit of love as "sloppy agape." The apostle John warns us against this: let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth (1 John3:18). True biblical love is expressed primarily in acts, not in words.

In the book of Ruth we find a pointed contrast in the behavior of Naomi's two daughters-in-law: "Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her" (Ruth 1:14). Orpah

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exhibited the outward expression of love—a kiss; but Ruth loved in deed—she stood by her mother-in-law in her need. In my hour of crisis I am not so much interested in who will kiss me. I want to know who will stand by me. The book of Proverbs also has a warning concerning this: "Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful" (Proverbs 27:5–6). Counterfeit love will flatter us with sweet words when things are going well but betray us in the hour of need. Genuine love will tell us the truth and, if necessary, rebuke us, although at the time it may actually wound us. But love of this kind will not betray us later.

It is not without significance that Judas actually betrayed Jesus to His enemies by a kiss. Jesus Himself commented on this: "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" (Luke 22:48). The outward expression of love, without the corresponding actions, is betrayal.

In Ephesians 4:15 Paul describes the only way that we can grow to Christian maturity: "But, speaking the truth in love, [we] may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ." Any love that does not speak the truth is a counterfeit. Any fellowship of lasting value must be based on mutual honesty.

> "But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another" (1 John 1:7)

True fellowship is possible only in the light. We cannot have fellowship in the dark. The apostle John makes two simple, but profound, statements about the nature of God: "God is light" (1 John 1:5); and "God is love" (1 John 4:8,16). God's love can never be separated from God's light. God's love does not operate in the dark.

Love "Covers", Not "Covers Up"

The apostle Peter tells us that "love will cover a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).Here again, there is much misunderstanding among Christians. Peter says "cover," but he does not say "cover up." Peter is not talking about the custom prevalent in many Christian groups of sweeping sin under the rug and then pretending that it never happened and everything is all right. Christian love covers sin in the same way that God covers sin. First, sin must be brought out into the light. It must be acknowledged, confessed, repented of. If necessary, restitution must be made. Only after that can sin be covered with true biblical forgiveness.

From time to time, we are brought into contact with Christian groups who have only one theme—love. Experience has convinced me that in such groups there is either doctrinal error or unconfessed sin—or both. Love is used as a "cover-up." If sin is the problem, it is usually found in the lives of the leaders of the group. If we begin to get below the surface and lay bare the problem, we are immediately headed off with the accusation, "Now, brother, you're not being loving!" Let it be emphasized once again: *True biblical love is expressed primarily in acts, not in words*.

Let us return to the parable of the first and second mile—the relationship between love and duty. We have seen that true love begins only after we have fulfilled our legal and ethical obligations. Conversely, love that does not fulfill these obligations is a counterfeit. There are innumerable ways in which this principle applies to daily Christian living. In what follows I will briefly point out some of the most common inconsistencies that I myself have observed among Christians.

The Foreign Missions Idol

At one time I was associated with a church that was extremely proud of its foreign missions program. The congregation was fairly small, but it had a disproportionately large commitment for foreign missions. A preacher who specialized in the promotion of missions was invited to conduct a two-week campaign with the understanding that his honorarium would be ten percent of all offerings that were pledged for missions. In the course of two weeks, over $50,000 was pledged. Some of these pledges came in very tardily; others never came in at all. However, the preacher had no reason to complain about his honorarium of over $5,000 for two weeks' ministry!

At the time that these pledges were being paid to foreign missions, the church was grievously in arrears with its own local obligations—its telephone bill, fuel bill, etc. Eventually, I challenged the congregation about this way of doing things. "If we say that we are offering all this money to missions, we are deceiving ourselves," I told them. "The people from whom this money really comes are our creditors. We are taking the money due our creditors to support missions. But that is dishonest and unfair. Our creditors may be Catholics and the missions we are supporting are Protestant. We have no right to take money belonging to our creditors to support something of which they themselves may not even approve."

In reality, in that particular situation, foreign missions was the church "idol." The members sacrificed to their idol, while blatantly failing to fulfill their own obligations at home. Sometimes it is much easier to be occupied with a "foreign

field" than to demonstrate the validity of our faith among our neighbors. "The eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth" (Proverbs 17:24).

Alcoholics or Charismatics?

At one time I found myself in the position of being landlord over a number of houses adjacent to each other. In one of these houses, I had as tenants a couple who made no profession of being Christians and who were, in fact, alcoholics. They paid their rent regularly and kept the property in good condition. During their tenancy, a lady in one of the adjacent houses was suddenly bereaved of her husband. The first person to show practical sympathy was the alcoholic lady. She came over the next morning with a check for $200.

In due course, this alcoholic couple moved out and new tenants moved in—a family who was active in charismatic circles. This family made quite extensive purchases for themselves, but rarely paid their rent on time. They so failed to care for their children and the property that some of the neighbors complained to me and threatened to take the matter to the city authorities.

One day I found myself reflecting over this situation. Suppose I myself were not a Christian and someone were to ask me: "Which kind of tenants do you prefer, alcoholics or charismatics?" There would be no doubt about my answer: *Give me alcoholics any day!*

"Just to Get the Word Out, Brother"

At one period in my ministry, some fellow Christians duplicated and sold large numbers of tapes of messages that I had preached. This was done without information being given to me or permission requested from me. After a while I realized that there must be a very substantial margin of profit involved. I began to request some kind of accounting and to suggest that some royalty could reasonably be offered to me. I was met with protestations of love and the assurance that the whole thing was being done "just to get the Word out, brother!" But I received no accounts and no royalty.

Later, the very people who were profiting from my ministry accused me of being "mercenary" in my motives. Worse still, they did not make this accusation to my face, but circulated it behind my back. I asked myself: *Can God really be satisfied that His Word is distributed on this basis?*

Efficiency Is Christian

In 2 Peter 1:5–7 we are given a list of seven stages of spiritual development that should follow our initial faith in Christ. To "faith" we are exhorted to add the following: virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, love. This brings us back to the parable of the first and second mile. Love must be built on a foundation of orderly spiritual development. Where this foundation is not laid, true Christian love can never come into operation.

The first thing we must add to faith is virtue. This latter word could be translated "excellence" or "efficiency." How few Christians seem to realize that efficiency is a necessary Christian virtue! On the other hand, the Bible has not one good word to say about laziness or foolishness. In fact, both are more severely condemned, and more deadly in their consequences, than drunkenness. For five years in East Africa, I was in charge of a college for training teachers for African schools. During their training, many of our students came to know Christ and were also baptized in the Holy Spirit. I discovered that once they had become Christians, they expected me to show them special favor—to be less exacting in my judgment of their written tests or their practical teaching. I had to explain to them that it was just the other way round.

"Now that you are a Christian," I would say, "you have all sorts of resources that you did not have before. You have God's peace in your heart, and the power of prayer and of the Holy Spirit to call upon. If you could pass your tests or succeed in your teaching without these resources, you should be twice as successful now that you are a Christian. I do not expect less of you, but more. And God does the same!"

The same principle applies in every field of activity in which a Christian serves and earns his living. A Christian may serve as a teacher, a doctor, a nurse, a waitress, a technician, or a janitor. No matter what the field, a Christian should always excel in his service. He should be more faithful, more reliable, more efficient than the non-Christian.

I have observed that the Lord never calls a person out of failure in a secular job or profession to "full time" spiritual ministry. A person must always prove himself in his secular employment before God will ever commit enlarged spiritual responsibility to him. Faithfulness begins in the small and the secular; then it is more fully worked out in the great and the spiritual. Jesus very firmly establishes this principle in Luke 16:10–11:

> “He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore if you [religious people] have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon [your secular and material obligations], who will commit to your trust the true riches [enlarged spiritual ministry]?”

Family Obligations Come First

In 1 Timothy 5 Paul deals systematically with the obligations of Christians toward the members of their own families. In this connection he says, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8).

In each family the primary obligation for provision normally rests upon the father. This includes much more than the mere provisions of food, clothing and money. In Ephesians 5:25–28 Paul compares the relationship between Christ and the church to that between husband and wife. As Christ sanctifies the church with the pure water of the Word, so the husband is responsible to minister the cleansing, sanctifying truth of God’s Word to his wife and children. The father should be the source of spiritual truth to his family.

In Ephesians 6:4 Paul places the responsibility for the spiritual education of the children directly upon the fathers: “And you fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition [education] of the Lord.”

We may sum this up by saying that in every home the father has two God-given ministries from which he cannot abdicate: he is both prophet and priest to his family. As prophet, he represents God to his family; as priest, he represents his family to God. The faithful discharge of these duties demands a certain minimum amount of time devoted to the family.

Among the many men who fail to devote sufficient time to these family obligations, professional ministers are probably the most common offenders. This applies both to resident and to itinerant ministries. The resident pastor is frequently so taken up with board meetings, committees and church-centered functions that he hardly has any time at home with his family. The itinerant minister traverses the world like a knight errant for Christ, but leaves behind him at home a wife and children torn apart by frustration, bitterness and rebellion—caused primarily by his neglect of them. I always remember a comment once made by a young person whose parents had served many years as missionaries in Africa: “Our parents sure loved the Africans, but they didn’t love us!

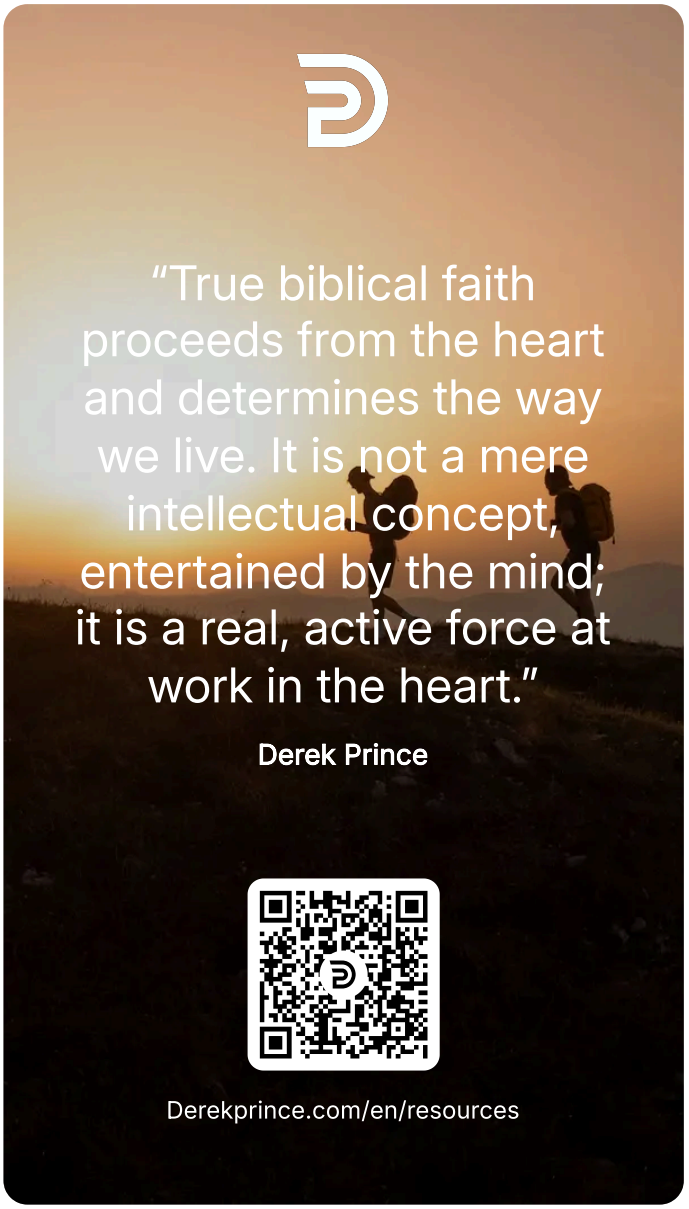
“The verdict of Scripture on a parent who fails in these primary obligations is that “he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever”

“Does a man who is “worse than an unbeliever” have any business preaching the Gospel?”

Writing to (charismatic) Christians at Corinth, Paul says: Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Prove yourselves (2 Corinthians 13:5). Many of us need to heed this warning today. Before we use religious clichés about “going the second mile,” let us make sure that we have really “gone the first mile.” Before we make a large display of love, let us make sure that all our debts have been paid.

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