

Going the “Second Mile”

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Matthew 5:38-41

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not 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; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”

Questions:

1. When have you set aside personal differences to go the second mile for someone?
2. How have you seen shame or pride prevent you or others from going the second mile?
3. What is the largest implication of Jesus’ insistence that we not resist the evildoer?
4. Who are the evildoer’s in your life for whom you struggle to go the second mile?

In the News

Over His Time on the Bench, Federal Judge Visited in Prison Some 400 Inmates He Had Sentenced

When Mark W. Bennett, who was appointed a federal judge of U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Iowa in 1994, retired recently from the bench, he had done something beyond his required court duties: He had visited in federal prison some 400 of the inmates he had sentenced, in the process, paying visits to 16 federal prisons.

The visits began in 2004, while Bennett was attending a conference in California, not far from Terminal Island men's prison, where he had recently sent four men who twice robbed a bank in Sioux City.

Since Bennett was in the area, he decided to visit the prison and was given a tour. Though not ready to see the four, it occurred to Bennett that he would learn a lot more if he just talked to inmates. So he requested an opportunity to

do that, and had a 90-minute meeting with three convicts. One broke into sobs, saying he could never have imagined a federal judge caring about his opinion.

"It just kept gnawing at me," Bennett said. "An inner voice said, 'Next time, I will interview people I've sentenced.'" So he began seeking out people he had imprisoned to see how they were doing. In his 24 years on the bench, Bennett sentenced 4,000 people. Starting in 2004, he visited 400 of them in prison. He says 95 percent responded positively.

"Mostly I asked, did they feel treated fairly, and (satisfied with) the quality of their court-appointed lawyers," said Bennett. He said that a large majority of inmates indicated they were satisfied, though about a fifth complained about their defense counsel and a fifth said the judge had been too harsh.

That harshness, said Bennett, was largely due to mandatory minimum sentences stipulated by federal law in drug cases. Nearly half of the inmates in federal prisons are there for drug offenses. In 2009, citing a U.S. Supreme Court directive that judges had the right to disagree with federal sentencing guidelines, Bennett deviated from them and challenged the differential sentencing of offenders using powder cocaine versus those offending with crack cocaine. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Bennett's favor in the case, *Spears v. United States*.

When forced by mandatory sentencing rules to impose a longer sentence than he felt was needed, Bennett tried to at least get the offenders into prisons with programs they could benefit from.

For one offender who had been employed at restaurants, Bennett suggested a culinary arts program at the Federal Correctional Institute in Oxford, Wisconsin. When Bennett later visited the inmate close to his release date, the man was looking forward to upcoming restaurant job interviews. He told the judge he was the only visitor he'd ever had in prison and said Bennett had saved his life by helping him get on the right track.

Another inmate Bennett had sentenced to 10 years -- the minimum for that crime in the Sentencing Commission guidelines -- was a recovering crack addict in her early 20s. When the judge visited her, she asked him to attend a drug treatment class with her. He did and told her he was proud of her.

Asked by the *Register* if he believes everyone is redeemable, Bennett said almost everyone is: "The vast majority of criminals are good people who made a bad decision, or a series, based largely on their upbringing and a variety of things. Nobody is as bad as their worst day."

In an article for *Vice*, Bennett himself wrote, "It is never an easy task -- nor should it be -- to deprive someone of their liberty. In 1994, when I was a new judge, I told another judge that I found it difficult to sentence people. He tried to reassure me by saying, 'Don't worry, Mark, it will get much easier.' But it hasn't, and I've always thought that if it does get easy, then it's time to resign. The collective weight of all those sentences is almost impossible to explain."

Commenting on Matthew 5:38-42, which includes Jesus' second-mile statement, George A. Buttrick (writing in 1951 before inclusive language was in common use) said: "In each case Christ insists that his followers must not resist the evildoer. What does such teaching mean? Our imagination recoils before it, and our everyday morality (our speedy recourse to law, for instance, and our ultimate dependence on force) flatly contradicts it. Christ has in mind the injured man. Such a man's concern for justice is never pure: It is subtly entangled with vindictiveness. Christ warns him against that revenge.

"Revenge is not sweet, despite the proverb: It is poison, strife breeding strife in endless circle. Has Christ in mind also the man guilty of inflicting injury? Do our law courts and jails really 'satisfy' the oppressed, or reclaim the oppressor? How often they confirm the oppressor in guilt, leave the injured unrequited, and thus hurt everyone! The wrongdoer must be brought to truer manhood, and that change is not wrought by retaliation.

"Above all, Christ has God's will in mind: He intends that the world shall be a home in which children dwell in mutual love. He is not pleading for any cowardly yielding, and the phrase 'passive resistance' is almost a parody of his teaching. The children of the kingdom must show good will, with no other strategy and no ulterior motive." (From *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol 7, pp. 301-302)

Mark 15:21

They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.

2 Corinthians 9:7

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

1 Corinthians 8:13

Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall

The prayer below is based on verses found written on the wall of *Mother Teresa's* home for children in *Calcutta, India*, and are widely attributed to her.

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Help us to forgive them anyway.

If we are kind, people may accuse us of selfish, ulterior motives. Help us to be kind anyway.

If we are successful, we will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Help us to succeed anyway.

If we are honest and sincere people may deceive us. Help us to be honest and sincere anyway.

What we spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Help us to create anyway.

If we find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Help us to be happy anyway.

The good we do today, will often be forgotten. Help us to do good anyway. Help us to give the best we have, though it may never be enough.

Help us to give our best anyway.