

THE THIRD MILE

ONE DAY A SMALL GROUP OF DISCIPLES WHO HAD EMBRACED THE WAY OF JESUS EARLY IN HIS MINISTRY HEARD HIM PREACHING by the side of a dusty road. As they crowded round they heard Jesus say,

“The law requires that you carry a pack for one mile, but I say carry it freely for two.”

The disciples were deeply impressed by these words, for at that time a Roman soldier had the legal right to demand that a citizen carry his pack for a mile as a service to the Empire. This teaching not only allowed the disciples to turn this oppressive law into an opportunity to demonstrate kingdom values, but also presented them with an opportunity to suffer in some small way for their faith.

As it was common for soldiers to evoke this law, the small band of believers soon developed a reputation for their actions. Roman soldiers

would often hope that the citizens they asked to carry their packs would be among these disciples, and often a small bond of friendship would develop between a soldier and these followers of the Way.

After a year had passed this custom had become so established in the group that it became a defining characteristic of their shared life. The leaders would frequently refer to the teaching of Jesus and emphasize the need to carry a pack of the Roman soldier for two miles as a sign of one's faith and commitment to God.

It so happened that Jesus heard about this community's work, and, on his way to Jerusalem, took time to visit them. The leaders eagerly gathered all the members of the group to hear what Jesus would say. Once everyone had gathered, Jesus addressed them:

“Dear brothers and sisters, you are faithful and honest, but I have come to you with a second message, for you failed to understand the first. Your law says that you must carry a pack for two miles. My law says, ‘carry it for three.’”



COMMENTARY



To treat the Bible as a type of textbook providing us with an ethical blueprint concerning how we ought to live, requires that we approach it in a certain way. It means that we must attempt to excavate specific answers, or some system, from the text that will direct what we should do in particular situations. Once the answers are worked out, then we can choose whether or not to act accordingly and judge whether others are making the correct ethical decisions. Yet the question must be asked as to whether the Bible can be treated in this way without doing the teachings of Jesus a great injustice. In other words, we must ask whether the Scriptures really offer us concrete ethical answers that can be turned into some religious code of conduct, or whether Jesus was actually opening up a radically different approach to living.

What if Jesus was not offering his followers an ethical system to follow, but rather was inviting them to enter into a life of love that transcends

ethics, a life of liberty that dwells beyond religious laws? The difference between following an ethical system and being consumed by love can be seen in the way that ethical systems seek to provide a way to work out what needs to be done so that it can be carried out. In contrast, love is never constrained, it never sits back, it always seeks to do more than what is demanded of it. While the ethical individual does what is required, the lover moves beyond the basic requirement. To put this in concrete terms, if the law tells us that one ought to give a certain amount of money to charity, the one who loves those who are poor will give more than the required amount. Instead of waiting to find out what ought to be done, or how much should be given, the lover gives in excess of the law and will act in the absence of the law, thus fulfilling the law by dwelling beyond it.

The above story explores this idea by imagining what Jesus would say to those who had taken his teaching about carrying a pack two miles literally, seeing it as an ethical injunction and a religious law. In their very obedience to the teaching, the group described in the story fundamentally misunderstood and undermined the radical

nature of the message. Their literal rendering of the teaching, far from taking it too seriously, ended up failing to take it seriously enough.

It would be wrong to condemn the disciples in this story, for they were trying to do something rather than nothing. However, a real danger lurks in the sincere attempt to carry out the teaching of Jesus in a literal manner, namely the danger of absorbing his way of living in excess of the law back into the law. The radical way of Jesus provides a much more difficult challenge than that which is demanded by the law. For while the law gives us a bottom-line way to live, the way of love calls us beyond the law.

Love pushes us beyond duty, rather than stopping there, and acts when we don't know for sure what the ethical thing to do is. If the ethical question is, "What must be done?" love adds, "I will do more." If our ethical compass is not able to give us a clear direction to travel, love sets out anyway. The way of love provides a way when ethical demands have had their say or do not know what to say. Is this not what Jesus was calling us to?—to live beyond the law so as to fulfill it.

In this way this story attempts to draw out the truly radical nature of love as expressed in the life and teachings of Jesus. For he expressed a love that pushed further than any law could express or command dictate. He exuded a revolutionary life that always sought to be faithful to the law by outstripping it.