

Two Miles Without a Cloak or Tunic

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“And if anyone would...take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.” (Matthew 5:40-42)

What do you do in the situation when your agreement to help someone becomes more than you figured it would be? How do you react the moment you realize that committing to help a brother or sister is going to take longer, or cost more, or require greater effort, or (groan) needs to be re-done? What about those times when you were sure you had “counted the cost” of helping someone, but you find yourself over budget, so to speak, and unable to back out?

This summer a Christian brother asked me to help him transport some furniture that he and his wife had acquired for homeschooling. Sympathetic to fellow home educators everywhere, and always glad to get to use my truck for more than commuting to an office, I agreed to help load and transport the furniture with him. We made arrangements to meet on a sunny Friday after work, and exchanged some details in advance regarding the type and number of items to be moved. I expected some light-duty particle-board bookcases and a petite IKEA desk. I told my wife to expect me home by 7:00 P.M., and she even made plans to have friends over for a late dinner that evening.

But when we arrived at the home of the woman selling the furniture, we were greeted by a pair of bookcases taller than me and a massive oak armoire desk that seemed to be snickering “Good Luck” under its breath before we even started. I am not exaggerating when I describe it as massive. It was the type of solid wood construction that seems to have secret linings of lead—it probably could have doubled as a fall-out shelter for a small family. As we brought the bookcases out of the seller’s back room, I complimented my friend on the great furniture he had obtained, and cheerfully pointed out, “At least our path out to the truck goes *down* all these steps.” But in my own mind I was wondering how on earth the two of us were going to get the armoire out of that room and down those stairs, let alone up onto my tailgate. After all, the thing was massive and neither I nor my friend would ever be confused for a bodybuilder or former nose tackle.

We spent the better part of an hour getting that armoire out of that room, 10 more minutes getting it down the stairs to the truck, and another 20 minutes sizing and planning and loading it onto my truck. We used a hand truck, we used sliders, and we used a screwdriver, a hammer, and twine. We disassembled the armoire into two parts, and we took a hallway door off its hinges. We pinched our fingers in door frames more times than I can remember, and we knocked over a lamp despite our best efforts. We used every single muscle and ligament in our not-so-young-anymore legs and backs, and we stretched the spatial capabilities of our brains to the absolute max trying to plan every twist and lift and shift and turn of the armoire’s path to my truck.

More than once my friend wrinkled a sweaty brow and humbly admitted, “I should have asked someone else to meet us here to help lift this,” or “You know, it looked much more manageable in the pictures on Craig’s List!” After we brought the bookcases out, I discretely texted my wife to say, “Start dinner without me.” And then, after the first part of the armoire was loaded, “Not going to be home for dinner.”

With the last light of a summer twilight fading to the black of night, we finally had all the furniture in the truck. To save us making a second trip to and from the seller’s house, we had piled it all rather precariously and lashed it all down with every strap and tie-down I owned. The bookcases were sticking up so high and on such an odd angle, that (for the first time in my 14 years as a truck owner) I stopped to measure my overhead clearance before we left—just in case we encountered any low overpasses!

I plopped into my driver’s seat a sweaty mess and my friend started his little sedan. I put the truck in gear and slowly inched away from Point A wondering how many sets of stairs were involved at my friend’s house at Point B. I wondered if it was too late to call someone to ask for help on the unloading end. Then somewhere in those first few miles of driving, the Holy Spirit started softening and soothing my troubled heart.

I called my wife to give her an update on our status and to see how she was making out playing hostess while mothering four children alone on a Friday evening. Our call was brief so as to not be rude to her guests. The call ended before I could convey the Herculean effort we two men had just exerted and the magnitude of our accomplishment. I was left alone with the silence of the road and the hum of straps vibrating behind the back window. I wasn’t able to tell her how much work we had just done, and she didn’t affirm my attitude or emotions. I kept the radio off and kept driving.

Then in the quiet solitude of the drive to Point B, the Holy Spirit brought to mind Matthew 5:40-42, in which our Savior says to his disciples, “And if anyone would...take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”

The plain simplicity of the familiar text both cut me to the heart and was balm on my soul. I was convicted of my pride and felt bare before the Lord—He who should have been my only audience and motivation. I realized that I had been more than merely satisfied at a job well done and a difficult task accomplished. In my heart I felt like I had put in overtime and really earned some ambiguous spiritual equity—a selfish, juvenile attitude.

The good deed that I had performed and pridefully considered “extra credit” Jesus described merely as the bare minimum and the standard of care for a disciple. I had agreed to help my friend because I viewed it as a “one mile” favor. When the task demanded a “second mile” from me, I acted like I should have been rewarded when I was only fulfilling what was commanded of me.

And now as I look up Matthew 5 while writing this reflection on The Great Armoire Transport of Summer 2018, I am reminded that the verses I quoted above are in the context of our relationship to those we count as *enemies*—how much more should we give sacrificially to our brothers and sisters in the Lord!

Now, in anticipation of the valid objection some might have, let me state that I am (of course) not advocating recklessness or striving full throttle toward burn-out. But I know that I do need the reminder that giving in comfort is just that—comfortable. We often sanitize or mindlessly exaggerate the word “sacrificial” when we refer to our own sacrificial giving. After all, “sacrificial” is not a word we like to hold close to the chest. But we need to embrace it and live it out the same way that an athlete strains his body and even subjects it to pain and discomfort. He stresses his muscles and runs until his lungs burn—willingly, with the higher goal in mind.

Jesus praised the widow who gave all she had and he scorned the offerings of those who gave without feeling the slightest pinch. In the Old Testament, the widow fed the prophet Elijah from the bottom of her jars what was going to be her last meal. The Lord, who saw these cheerful, sacrificial givers and what they did in secret, rewarded them.

There is a difference between giving out of one’s abundance and abundantly giving. The former can be hollow, but the latter brings in its wake the blessings of obedience. The Lord mercifully showed me how my external giving to my friend was lacking a sincerity of heart and true generosity. He showed me how far short I fall of the standard of the one who “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant...” (Philippians 2:6,7a). And just in time, too—because the bookcases and massive armoire needed to be unloaded and brought into my friend’s house once we got there!