
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1925–1968) was a civil rights leader, pastor, writer, and Nobel Laureate. The son and grandson of Baptist ministers, King was born in Atlanta and later graduated from Morehouse College in 1951. He earned a Ph.D. from Boston University in 1955. King was fundamentally shaped by his faith in Jesus Christ and his church background, but was also helped by the life and teaching of Mahatma Gandhi.

In 1955 King led a historic black boycott of Montgomery's bus system. In 1957 he organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as the basis of a new civil rights movement based on nonviolence. Over the next eleven years, he led many protests throughout the South. He was arrested and jailed frequently, his house was burned three times, and he was stabbed once.

King's historic speech, "I have a dream," at the civil rights rally on August 28, 1963 in Washington, D.C., has come to epitomize the civil rights movement at its crescendo. He was given the Nobel Peace Prize the next year, at age thirty-five the youngest person to receive it. In 1968 he was murdered in Memphis, Tennessee, most likely by a white man.

King's message grows in large part from the substance and style of traditional black preaching. The following passage, from a different speech, is therefore not a rhetorical, religious flourish to grace an otherwise secular, political message. It is the very heart of his call to justice and reconciliation.

Loving Your Enemies

Probably no admonition of Jesus has been more difficult to follow than the command to "love your enemies." Some men have sincerely felt that its actual practice is not possible. It is easy, they say, to love those who love you, but how can one love those who openly and insidiously seek to defeat you? Others, like the philosopher Nietzsche, contend that Jesus' exhortation to love one's enemies is testimony to the fact that the Christian ethic is designed for the weak and cowardly, and not for the strong and courageous. Jesus, they say, was an impractical idealist.

In spite of these insistent questions and persistent objections, this command of Jesus challenges us with new urgency. Upheaval after upheaval has reminded us that modern man is traveling along a road called hate, in a journey that will bring us to destruction and damnation. Far from being the pious injunction of a Utopian dreamer, the command to love one's enemy is an absolute necessity for our survival. Love even for enemies is the key to the solution of the problems of our world. Jesus is not an impractical idealist: he is the practical realist.

I am certain that Jesus understood the difficulty inherent in the act of loving one's enemy. He never joined the ranks of those who talk glibly about the easiness of the moral life. He realized that every genuine expression of love grows out of a consistent and total surrender to God. So when Jesus said "Love your enemy," he was not unmindful of its stringent qualities. Yet he meant every word of it. Our responsibility as Christians is to discover the meaning of this command and seek passionately to live it out in our daily lives. . . .

Let us move now from the practical *how* to the theoretical *why*: *Why should we love our enemies?* The first reason is fairly obvious. Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. . . .

Another reason why we must love our enemies is that hate scars the soul and distorts the personality. . . .

A third reason why we should love our enemies is that love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up. Love transforms with redemptive power.

Lincoln tried love and left for all history a magnificent drama of reconciliation. When he was campaigning for the presidency one of his arch-enemies was a man named Stanton. For some reason Stanton hated Lincoln. He used every ounce of his energy to degrade him in the eyes of the public. So deep rooted was Stanton's hate for Lincoln that he uttered unkind words about his physical appearance, and sought to embarrass him at every point with the bitterest diatribes. But in spite of this Lincoln was elected President of the United States.

Then came the period when he had to select his cabinet which would consist of the persons who would be his most intimate associates in implementing his program. He started choosing men here and there for the various secretaryships. The day finally came for Lincoln to select a man to fill the all-important post of Secretary of War. Can you imagine whom Lincoln chose to fill this post? None other than the man named Stanton. There was an immediate uproar in the inner circle when the news began to spread. Adviser after adviser was heard saying, "Mr. President, you are making a mistake. Do you know this man Stanton? Are you familiar with all of the ugly things he said about you? He is your enemy. He will seek to sabotage your program. Have you thought this through, Mr. President?" Mr. Lincoln's answer was terse and to the point: "Yes, I know Mr. Stanton. I am aware of all the terrible things he has said about me. But after looking over the nation, I find he is the best man for the job."

So Stanton became Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of War and rendered an invaluable service to his nation and his President. Not many years later Lincoln was assassinated. Many laudable things were said about him. Even today millions of people still adore him as the greatest of all Americans. H. G. Wells selected him as one of the six great men of history. But of all the great statements made about Abraham Lincoln, the words of Stanton remain among the greatest. Standing near the dead body of the man he once hated, Stanton referred to him as one of the greatest men that ever lived and said "he now belongs to the ages."

If Lincoln had hated Stanton both men would have gone to their graves as bitter enemies. But through the power of love Lincoln transformed an enemy into a friend. It was this same attitude that made it possible for Lincoln to speak a kind word about the South during the Civil War, when feeling was most bitter. Asked by a shocked bystander how he, could do this, Lincoln said, "Madam, do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?" This is the power of redemptive love.

We must hasten to say that these are not the ultimate reasons why we should love our enemies. An even more basic reason why we are commanded to love is expressed explicitly in Jesus' words, "Love your enemies . . . *that ye may be children of your Father*

which is in heaven.” We are called to this difficult task in order to realize a unique relationship with God. We are potential sons of God. Through love that potentiality becomes actuality. We must love our enemies, because only by loving them can we know God and experience the beauty of his holiness. . . .

Of course, this is not *practical*. Life is a matter of getting even, of hitting back, of dog eat dog. Am I saying that Jesus commands us to love those who hurt and oppress us? Do I sound like most preachers—idealistic and impractical? Maybe in some distant Utopia, you say, that idea will work, but not in the hard, cold world in which we live.

My friends, we have followed the so-called practical way for too long a time now, and it has led inexorably to deeper confusion and chaos. Time is cluttered with the wreckage of communities which surrendered to hatred and violence. For the salvation of our nation and the salvation of mankind, we must follow another way. This does not mean that we abandon our righteous efforts. With every ounce of our energy we must continue to rid this nation of the incubus of segregation. But we shall not in the process relinquish our privilege and our obligation to love. While abhorring segregation, we shall love the segregationist. This is the only way to create the beloved community.

To our most bitter opponents we say: “We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because non-co-operation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is co-operation with good. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.”

Love is the most durable power in the world. This creative force, so beautifully exemplified in the life of our Christ, is the most potent instrument available in mankind’s quest for peace and security. Napoleon Bonaparte, the great military genius, looking back over his years of conquest, is reported to have said: “Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have built great empires. But upon what did they depend? They depended on force. But centuries ago Jesus started an empire that was built on love, and even to this day millions will die for him.” Who can doubt the veracity of these words. The great military leaders of the past have gone, and their empires have crumbled and burned to ashes. But the empire of Jesus, built solidly and majestically on the foundation of love, is still growing. . . .

Jesus is eternally right. History is replete with the bleached bones of nations that refused to listen to him. May we in the twentieth century hear and follow his words—before it is too late. May we solemnly realize that we shall never be true sons of our heavenly Father until we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

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Questions

1. In the opening paragraph, what two criticisms does King cite of Jesus' command to "love your enemies"? Which of the two is the strongest? Why? What is the most prevalent objection to "loving your enemies" in today's world?
 2. What three answers does King give to the question of why we should love our enemies? Which do you find the most persuasive? Why? Which of the three reasons have you seen "fleshed out"? Describe the situation.
 3. What is your reaction to the story of Lincoln and Stanton? What risk was Lincoln taking in choosing Stanton as his Secretary of War? Why do you think he took this risk anyway? What was the result? Do you know an example of "enemies transformed into friends" by love?
 4. What is the ultimate reason for loving our enemies, according to King? Is this reason strictly about private spirituality or does it have wider, societal implications? If so, what are they?
 5. King says that loving our enemies is both "our privilege and our obligation." How is it a privilege? Can you give examples? How is it an obligation? To whom is this obligation owed?
 6. Read the third to last paragraph. How do you feel when you read King's examples of violence and persecution being met with love? In the modern world, where is such love needed? What might be the result if such love were offered instead of hatred or anger?
 7. What did Napoleon say distinguished Jesus' empire from those of Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and himself? Why do you think the power of love would endure beyond the power of force?
 8. How does Martin Luther King, Jr.'s position differ from most activists crusading for justice and reform?
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