

WHY AMERICA MAY GO TO HELL



a sermon by

the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

to be given at

the Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta, Georgia

on

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(the Rev. Dr. King was assassinated on April 4 1968)

My dear friends, my dear friend James Lawson, and all of these dedicated and distinguished ministers of the Gospel assembled here tonight, to all of the sanitation workers and their families, and to all of my brothers and sisters, I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to be in Memphis tonight, to see you here in such large and enthusiastic numbers.

As I came in tonight, I turned around and said to Ralph Abernathy, “They really have a great movement here in Memphis.” You’ve been demonstrating something here that needs to be demonstrated all over the country. You are demonstrating that we can stick together. You are demonstrating that we are all tied in a single garment of destiny, and that if one black person suffers, if one black person is down, we are all down.

If you will judge anything here in this struggle, you’re commanding that this city will respect the dignity of labor. So often we overlook the worth and significance of those who are not in professional jobs, or those who are not in the so-called big jobs. But let me say to you tonight, that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity, and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth. One day our society must come to see

this. One day our society will come to respect the sanitation worker if it is to survive. For the person who picks up our garbage, in the final analysis, is as significant as the physician. All labor has worth.

You are doing another thing. You are reminding, not only Memphis, but you are reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages. I need not remind you that this is the plight of our people all over America. The vast majority of Negroes in our country are still perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. My friends, we are living as a people in a literal depression. Now you know when there is vast unemployment and underemployment in the black community, they call it a social problem. When there is vast unemployment and underemployment in the white community they call it a depression. But we find ourselves living in a literal depression all over this country as a people.

Now the problem isn't only unemployment. Do you know that most of the poor people in our country are working everyday? They are making wages so low that they can not begin to function in the mainstream of the economic life of our nation. These are facts which must be seen. And it is criminal to have people working on a full-time basis and a full-time job getting part-time income.

You are here tonight to demand that Memphis do something about the conditions that our brothers face, as they work day in and day out for the well-being of the total community. You are here to demand that Memphis will see the poor.

You know, Jesus reminded us in a magnificent parable one day that a man went to Hell because he didn't see the poor. And his name was Dives. There was a man by the name of Lazarus who came daily to his gate in need of the basic necessities of life. Dives didn't do anything about it. He ended up going to Hell.

But there is nothing in that parable that says that Dives went to Hell because he was rich. Jesus never made a universal indictment against all wealth. It is true that one day a rich young ruler came before him talking about eternal life. And he advised him to sell all. But in that instance Jesus was prescribing individual surgery, and not setting forth a universal diagnosis.

If you will go on and read that parable in all of its dimensions, and all of its symbolism, you will remember that a conversation took place between Heaven and Hell. And on the other end of that long distance call between heaven and Hell was Abraham in Heaven talking to Dives in Hell. It wasn't a millionaire in Hell talking with a multimillionaire in heaven. Dives didn't go to Hell because he was rich. His wealth was an opportunity to bridge the gulf that separated him from his brother Lazarus.

Dives went to Hell because he passed by Lazarus every day, but he never really saw him. Dives went to Hell because he allowed Lazarus to become invisible. Dives went to Hell because he allowed the means by which he lived to outdistance the ends for which he lived.

Dives went to Hell because he maximized the minimum, and minimized the maximum. Dives finally went to Hell because he wanted to be a conscientious objector in the war against poverty.

And I come by here to say that America too is going to Hell, if we don't use her wealth. If America does not use her vast resources of wealth to end poverty, to make it possible for all of God's children to have the basic necessities of life, she too will go to Hell. I will hear America through her historians years and years to come saying, "We built gigantic buildings to kiss the sky. We build gargantuan bridges to span the seas. Through our spaceships we were able to carve highways through the stratosphere. Through our airplanes we were able to dwarf distance and place time in chains. Through our submarines we were able to penetrate oceanic depths."

But it seems that I can hear the God of the universe saying, "even though you've done all of that, I was hungry and you fed me not. I was naked and ye clothed me not. The children of my sons and daughters were in need of economic security, and you didn't provide for them. So you cannot enter the kingdom of greatness." This may well be the indictment on America that says in Memphis to the mayor, to the power structure, "If you do it unto the least of these my brethren, you do it unto me."...

Now you're doing something else here. You are highlighting the economic issues. You are going beyond purely civil rights to questions of human rights. That is distinct...

Now our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality. For we know now, that it isn't enough to integrate lunch counters. What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't have enough money to buy a hamburger? What does it profit a man to be able to eat at the swankest integrated restaurant when he doesn't even earn enough money to take his wife out to dine? What does it profit one to have access to the hotels of our cities, and the hotels of our highways, when we don't earn enough money to take our family on a vacation? What does it profit one to be able to attend an integrated school, when he doesn't earn enough money to buy his children school clothes?

So we assemble here tonight. You have assembled for more than thirty days now to say, "We are tired. We are tired of being at the bottom. We are tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. We are tired of our children having to attend overcrowded, inferior, quality-less schools. We are tired of having to live in dilapidated, substandard housing conditions where we don't have wall to wall carpet, but so often we end up with wall to wall rats and roaches.

"We are tired of smothering in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society. We are tired of walking up the streets in search for jobs that do not exist. We are tired of working our hands off and laboring every day and not even making a wage adequate with daily basic necessities of life. We are tired of our men being emasculated, so that our wives and our daughters have to go out and work in the white ladies' kitchens, cleaning up,

unable to be with our children, to give them the time and the attention that they need. We are tired.”

So in Memphis we have begun. We are saying, “Now is the time.” Get the word across to everybody in power in this town that now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to make an adequate income a reality for all of God’s children, now is the time to make the real promises of democracy. Now is the time to make an adequate income a reality for all of God’s children, now is the time for city hall to take a position for that which is just and honest. Now is the time for justice to roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. Now is the time.

Now let me say a word for those of you who are on strike. You’ve been out now for a number of days. But don’t despair. Nothing worthwhile is gained without sacrifice. The thing for you to do is stay together. Say to everybody in this community that you’re going to stick it out to the end until every demand is met. And that you’re going to say, “We ain’t going to let nobody turn us around.” Let it be known everywhere that along with wages and all of the other securities that you are struggling for, you’re also struggling for the right to organize and be recognized...

We can all get more together than we can apart. This is the way to gain power. Power is the ability to achieve purpose. Power is the ability to effect change. We need power...

Now the other thing is that nothing is gained without pressure. Don’t let anybody tell you to go back on your job and paternalistically say, now, “You’re my man, and I’m going to do the right thing for you if you’ll just come back on the job.” Don’t go back on the job until the demands are met. Never forget that freedom is not something that must be demanded by the oppressor. It is something that must be demanded by the oppressed. Freedom is not some lavish dish that the power structure and the white forces imparted with making positions will voluntarily hand down on a silver platter while the Negro merely furnishes the appetite.

If we are going to get equality, if we are going to get adequate wages, we are going to have to struggle for it. Now, you know what, you may have to escalate the struggle a bit. If they keep refusing, and they will not recognize the union, and will not decree further check-off for the collection of dues, I’m telling you what you ought to do, and you’re together here enough to do it. In a few days you ought to get together and just have a general work stoppage in the city of Memphis.

If you let that day come, not a Negro in this city will go to any job downtown. And no Negro in domestic service will go to anybody’s house, anybody’s kitchen. And black students will not go to anybody’s school, and black teachers, and they will hear you then. The city of Memphis will not be able to function that day. All I’m saying is you’ve got to put the pressure on.

This is why we have decided that we're going to Washington. We are going to the seat of government, starting out in April. We are going around the question of jobs or income. We aren't going to Washington to beg, we are going to Washington to demand what is ours. I read in newspapers and other places questions: "Why are you going to Washington?" My only answer is that anybody who lives in America with open eyes and open mind knows that there is something wrong in this nation. I'm going to Washington to pick up my check.

You know, many years ago, America signed a huge promissory note which said, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." It didn't say "some men," it said "all men." It didn't say "all white men," it said "all men," which includes black men.

It said another thing which ultimately distinguishes our form of government from other totalitarian regimes. It said that every person has certain basic rights that are neither derived from nor conferred by the state. In order to discover where they came from, it is necessary to move back behind the dim mist of eternity. They are God-given.

America hasn't lived up to this. She gave the black man a bad check that's been bouncing all around. We are going to demand our check, to say to this nation, "We know that that check shouldn't have bounced because you have the resources in the federal treasury." We are going to also say, "You are even unjustly spending five hundred thousand dollars to kill a single Vietcong soldier, while you spend only fifty-three dollars a year per person for everybody categorized as poverty-stricken." Instead of spending thirty-five billion dollars every year to fight an unjust, ill-considered war in Vietnam and twenty billion dollars to put a man on the moon, we need to put God's children on their own two feet.

I ask you to make this the beginning of the Washington movement, to go in by the thousands. And help us stand up nonviolently yet militantly. We are going to plague Congress. Documents have been written. They say what ought to be done. But nothing has been done. Nothing is ever done until you put the pressure on.

We have great challenges ahead, and great possibilities. And let us not lose hope. When you lose hope you die. We've got to keep going. I know how difficult it is. We've got to have that kind of 'in spite of' quality, to say that we are going on anyhow. We will keep the kind of hope alive that will make us know that if we will unite, if we will organize, we will be able to dramatize these issues to the point that something will be done.

"I know that some of you are probably tired, tired of the injustices. We get tired of having to fight for our rights on a day to day basis. It reminds us of some words that Jeremiah uttered, "is there no balm in Gilead, is there no physician there?" Jeremiah looked and saw the injustices of life, and he raised that question. Centuries later our slave foreparents came along. They had a hard time. They didn't have anything to look forward to. Day after day it was long rows of cotton, sizzling heat, and the rawhide whip of the overseer. Women knew that so often they were forced to yield to the biological urgings of the mean boss. As soon as

their children were born, they were snatched from their hands like a hungry dog snatches a bone from a human hand. So many things happened to them that could have caused them to lose hope.

I thank God tonight that our foreparents didn't lose hope. They did an amazing thing. They looked back across the centuries. They took Jeremiah's question mark, and straightened it into an exclamation point. They could say, "There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul."

Then they came to another stanza that means so much to me, "Sometimes I feel discouraged." I'm not going to be untrue to you tonight, sometimes I feel discouraged, having to live under the threat of death every day. Sometimes I feel discouraged having to take so much abuse and criticism, sometimes from my own people. Sometimes I feel discouraged, having to go to bed so often frustrated with the chilly winds of adversity about to stagger me. Sometimes I feel discouraged, and feel my work's in vain.

But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again. In Gilead, we make the wounded whole. If we will believe that, we will build a new Memphis, and bring about the day when every valley shall be exalted, every mountain and hill will be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. We will be able to build right here a city which has foundations.

If we will believe this, we will do this; we will win this struggle and many other struggles. I close by saying, "Walk together, children."