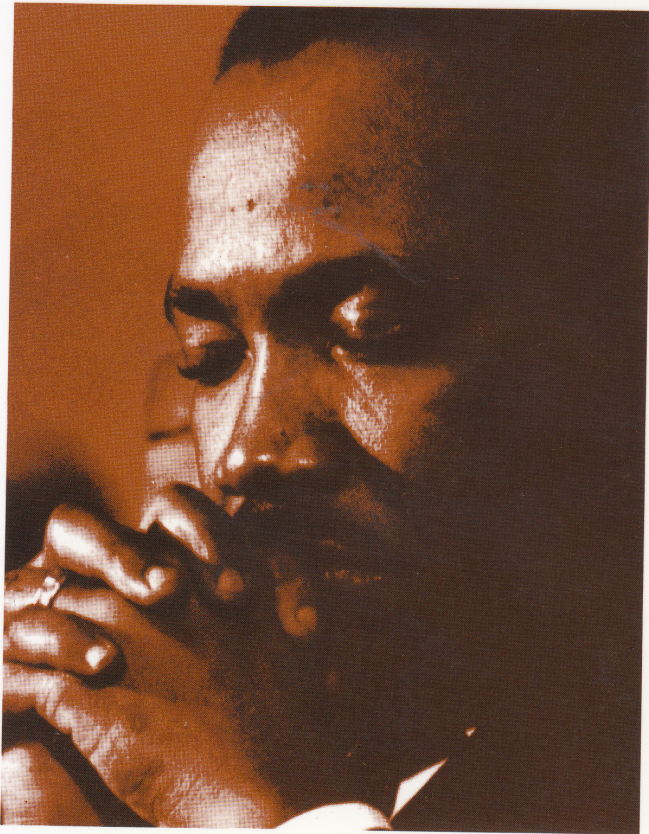


Martin Luther King, Jr. Strength to Love



CHAPTER FOUR

Love in action

*Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them;
for they know not what they do.*

Luke 23:34

Few words in the New Testament more clearly and solemnly express the magnanimity of Jesus' spirit than that sublime utterance from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." This is love at its best.

We shall not fully understand the great meaning of Jesus' prayer unless we first notice that the text opens with the word "then." The verse immediately preceding reads thus: "And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left." Then said Jesus, "Father, forgive them." *Then*—when he was being plunged into the abyss of nagging agony. *Then*—when man had stooped to his worst. *Then*—when he was dying, a most ignominious death. *Then*—when the wicked hands of the creature had dared to crucify the only begotten Son of the Creator. Then said Jesus, "Father, forgive them." That "then" might well have been otherwise. He could have said, "Father, get even with them," or "Father, let loose the mighty thunderbolts of righteous wrath and destroy them," or "Father, open the flood gates of justice and permit the staggering avalanche of retribution to pour upon them." But none of these was his response. Though subjected to inexpressible agony, suffering excruciating pain, and despised and rejected, nevertheless, he cried, "Father, forgive them."

Let us take note of two basic lessons to be gleaned from this text.

I

First, it is a marvelous expression of Jesus' ability to match words with actions. One of the great tragedies of life is that men seldom bridge the gulf between practice and profession, between doing and saying. A persistent schizophrenia leaves so many of us tragically divided against ourselves. On the one hand, we proudly profess certain sublime and noble principles, but on the other hand, we sadly practice the very antithesis of those principles. How often are our lives characterized by a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds! We talk eloquently about our commitment to the principles of Christianity, and yet our lives are saturated with the practices of paganism. We proclaim our devotion to democracy, but we sadly practice the very opposite of the democratic creed. We talk passionately about peace, and at the same time we assiduously prepare for war. We make our fervent pleas for the high road of justice, and then we tread unflinchingly the low road of injustice. This strange dichotomy, this agonizing gulf between the *ought* and the *is*, represents the tragic theme of man's earthly pilgrimage.

But in the life of Jesus we find that the gulf is bridged. Never in history was there a more sublime example of the consistency of word and deed. During his ministry in the sunny villages of Galilee, Jesus talked passionately about forgiveness. This strange doctrine awakened the questioning mind of Peter. "How oft," he asked, "shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?" Peter wanted to be legal and statistical. But Jesus responded by affirming that there is no limit to forgiveness. "I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven." In other words, forgiveness is not a matter of quantity, but of quality. A man cannot forgive up to four hundred and ninety times without forgiveness becoming a part of the habit structure of his being. Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude.

Jesus also admonished his followers to love their enemies and to pray for them that spitefully used them. This teaching fell upon the ears of many of his hearers like a strange music from a foreign land. Their ears were not attuned to the tonal qualities of such amazing love. They had been taught to love their friends and hate their enemies. Their lives had been conditioned to seek redress in the time-honored tradition of retaliation. Yet Jesus taught them that only through a creative love for their enemies could they be children of their Father in heaven and also that love and forgiveness were absolute necessities for spiritual maturity.

The moment of testing emerges. Christ, the innocent Son of God, is stretched in painful agony on an uplifted cross. What place is there for love and forgiveness now? How will Jesus react? What will he say? The answer to these questions bursts forth in majestic splendor. Jesus lifts his thorn-crowned head and cries in words of cosmic proportions: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." This was Jesus' finest hour; this was his heavenly response to his earthly rendezvous with destiny.

We sense the greatness of this prayer by contrasting it with nature, which, caught in the finality of her own impersonal structure, does not forgive. In spite of the agonizing pleas of men trapped in the path of an onrushing hurricane or the anguished cry of the builder falling from the scaffold, nature expresses only a cold, serene, and passionless indifference. She must honor everlastingly her fixed, immutable laws. When these laws are violated, she has no alternative except to follow inexorably her path of uniformity. Nature does not and cannot forgive.

Or contrast Jesus' prayer with the slowness of man to forgive. We live according to the philosophy that life is a matter of getting even and of saving face. We bow before the altar of revenge. Samson, eyeless at Gaza, prays fervently for his enemies—but only for their utter destruction. The potential beauty of human life is constantly made ugly by man's ever-recurring song of retaliation.

Or contrast the prayer with a society that is even less prone to forgive. Society must have its standards, norms, and mores.

It must have its legal checks and judicial restraints. Those who fall below the standard and those who disobey the laws are often left in a dark abyss of condemnation and have no hope for a second chance. Ask an innocent young lady, who, after a moment of overriding passion, becomes the mother of an illegitimate child. She will tell you that society is slow to forgive. Ask a public official, who, in a moment's carelessness, betrays the public trust. He will tell you that society is slow to forgive. Go to any prison and ask the inhabitants, who have written shameful lines across the pages of their lives. From behind the bars they will tell you that society is slow to forgive. Make your way to death row and speak with the tragic victims of criminality. As they prepare to make their pathetic walk to the electric chair, their hopeless cry is that society will not forgive. Capital punishment is society's final assertion that it will not forgive.

Such is the persistent story of mortal life. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of revenge. Man has never risen above the injunction of the *lex talionis*: "Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." In spite of the fact that the law of revenge solves no social problems, men continue to follow its disastrous leading. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path.

Jesus eloquently affirmed from the cross a higher law. He knew that the old eye-for-an-eye philosophy would leave everyone blind. He did not seek to overcome evil with evil. He overcame evil with good. Although crucified by hate, he responded with aggressive love.

What a magnificent lesson! Generations will rise and fall; men will continue to worship the god of revenge and bow before the altar of retaliation; but ever and again this noble lesson of Calvary will be a nagging reminder that only goodness can drive out evil and only love can conquer hate.

II

A second lesson comes to us from Jesus' prayer on the cross. It is an expression of Jesus' awareness of man's intellectual and

spiritual blindness. "They know not what they do," said Jesus. Blindness was their trouble; enlightenment was their need. We must recognize that Jesus was nailed to the cross not simply by sin but also by blindness. The men who cried, "Crucify him," were not bad men but rather blind men. The jeering mob that lined the roadside which led to Calvary was composed not of evil people but of blind people. They knew not what they did. What a tragedy!

History reverberates with testimonies of this shameful tragedy. Centuries ago a sage named Socrates was forced to drink hemlock. The men who called for his death were not bad men with demonic blood running through their veins. On the contrary, they were sincere and respectable citizens of Greece. They genuinely thought that Socrates was an atheist because his idea of God had a philosophical depth that probed beyond traditional concepts. Not badness but blindness killed Socrates. Saul was not an evil-intentioned man when he persecuted Christians. He was a sincere, conscientious devotee of Israel's faith. He thought he was right. He persecuted Christians, not because he was devoid of integrity, but because he was devoid of enlightenment. The Christians who engaged in infamous persecutions and shameful inquisitions were not evil men but misguided men. The churchmen who felt that they had an edict from God to withstand the progress of science, whether in the form of a Copernican revolution or a Darwinian theory of natural selection, were not mischievous men but misinformed men. And so Christ's words from the cross are written in sharp-etched terms across some of the most inexpressible tragedies of history: "They know not what they do."

This tragic blindness expresses itself in many ominous ways in our own day. Some men still feel that war is the answer to the problems of the world. They are not evil people. On the contrary, they are good, respectable citizens whose ideas are robed in the garments of patriotism. They talk of brinkmanship and a balance of terror. They sincerely feel that a continuation of the arms race will be conducive to more beneficent than maleficent consequences. So they passionately call for bigger bombs, larger nuclear stockpiles, and faster ballistic missiles.

Wisdom born of experience should tell us that war is obsolete. There may have been a time when war served as a negative good by preventing the spread and growth of an evil force, but the destructive power of modern weapons eliminates even the possibility that war may serve as a negative good. If we assume that life is worth living and that man has a right to survival, then we must find an alternative to war. In a day when vehicles hurtle through outer space and guided ballistic missiles carve highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can claim victory in war. A so-called limited war will leave little more than a calamitous legacy of human suffering, political turmoil, and spiritual disillusionment. A world war—God forbid!—will leave only smoldering ashes as a mute testimony of a human race whose folly led inexorably to untimely death. Yet there are those who sincerely feel that disarmament is an evil and international negotiation is an abominable waste of time. Our world is threatened by the grim prospect of atomic annihilation because there are still too many who know not what they do.

Notice, too, how the truth of this text is revealed in race relations. Slavery in America was perpetuated not merely by human badness but also by human blindness. True, the causal basis for the system of slavery must to a large extent be traced back to the economic factor. Men convinced themselves that a system which was so economically profitable must be morally justifiable. They formulated elaborate theories of racial superiority. Their rationalizations clothed obvious wrongs in the beautiful garments of righteousness. This tragic attempt to give moral sanction to an economically profitable system gave birth to the doctrine of white supremacy. Religion and the Bible were cited to crystallize the status quo. Science was commandeered to prove the biological inferiority of the Negro. Even philosophical logic was manipulated to give intellectual credence to the system of slavery. Someone formulated the argument of the inferiority of the Negro according to the framework of an Aristotelian syllogism:

All men are made in the image of God;
 God, as everyone knows, is not a Negro;
 Therefore, the Negro is not a man.

So men conveniently twisted the insights of religion, science, and philosophy to give sanction to the doctrine of white supremacy. Soon this idea was imbedded in every textbook and preached in practically every pulpit. It became a structured part of the culture. And men then embraced this philosophy, not as the rationalization of a lie, but as the expression of a final truth. They sincerely came to believe that the Negro was inferior by nature and that slavery was ordained by God. In 1857, the system of slavery was given its greatest legal support by the deliberations of the Supreme Court of the United States in the Dred Scott decision. The Court affirmed that the Negro had no rights which the white man was bound to respect. The justices who rendered this decision were not wicked men. On the contrary, they were decent and dedicated men. But they were victims of spiritual and intellectual blindness. They knew not what they did. The whole system of slavery was largely perpetuated by sincere though spiritually ignorant persons.

This tragic blindness is also found in racial segregation, the not-too-distant cousin of slavery. Some of the most vigorous defenders of segregation are sincere in their beliefs and earnest in their motives. Although some men are segregationists merely for reasons of political expediency and economic gain, not all of the resistance to integration is the rear-guard of professional bigots. Some people feel that their attempt to preserve segregation is best for themselves, their children, and their nation. Many are good church people, anchored in the religious faith of their mothers and fathers. Pressed for a religious vindication for their conviction, they will even argue that God was the first segregationist. "Red birds and blue birds don't fly together," they contend. Their views about segregation, they insist, can be rationally explained and morally justified. Pressed for a justification of their belief in the inferiority of the Negro, they turn to some pseudo-scientific writing and argue that the Negro's brain is smaller than the white man's brain. They do not know, or they refuse to know, that the idea of an inferior or superior race has been refuted by the best evidence of the science of anthropology. Great anthropologists, like Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Melville J.

Herskovits, agree that, although there may be inferior and superior individuals within all races, there is no superior or inferior race. And segregationists refuse to acknowledge that science has demonstrated that there are four types of blood and these four types are found within every racial group. They blindly believe in the eternal validity of an evil called segregation and the timeless truth of a myth called white supremacy. What a tragedy! Millions of Negroes have been crucified by conscientious blindness. With Jesus on the cross, we must look lovingly at our oppressors and say, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

III

From all that I have attempted to say it should now be apparent that sincerity and conscientiousness in themselves are not enough. History has proven that these noble virtues may degenerate into tragic vices. Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity. Shakespeare wrote:

For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

As the chief moral guardian of the community, the church must implore men to be good and well-intentioned and must extol the virtues of kindheartedness and conscientiousness. But somewhere along the way the church must remind men that devoid of intelligence, goodness and conscientiousness will become brutal forces leading to shameful crucifixions. Never must the church tire of reminding men that they have a moral responsibility to be intelligent.

Must we not admit that the church has often overlooked this moral demand for enlightenment? At times it has talked as though ignorance were a virtue and intelligence a crime. Through its obscurantism, closedmindedness, and obstinacy to new truth, the church has often unconsciously encouraged its worshipers to look askance upon intelligence.

But if we are to call ourselves Christians, we had better avoid intellectual and moral blindness. Throughout the New

Testament we are reminded of the need for enlightenment. We are commanded to love God, not only with our hearts and souls, but also with our minds. When the Apostle Paul noticed the blindness of many of his opponents, he said, "I bear them record that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge." Over and again the Bible reminds us of the danger of zeal without knowledge and sincerity without intelligence.

So we have a mandate both to conquer sin and also to conquer ignorance. Modern man is presently having a rendezvous with chaos, not merely because of human badness, but also because of human stupidity. If Western civilization continues to degenerate until it, like twenty-four of its predecessors, falls hopelessly into a bottomless void, the cause will be not only its undeniable sinfulness, but also its appalling blindness. And if American democracy gradually disintegrates, it will be due as much to a lack of insight as to a lack of commitment to right. If modern man continues to flirt unhesitatingly with war and eventually transforms his earthly habitat into an inferno such as even the mind of Dante could not imagine, it will have resulted from downright badness and also from downright stupidity.

"They know not what they do," said Jesus. Blindness was their besetting trouble. And the crux of the matter lies here: we do need to be blind. Unlike physical blindness that is usually inflicted upon individuals as a result of natural forces beyond their control, intellectual and moral blindness is a dilemma which man inflicts upon himself by his tragic misuse of freedom and his failure to use his mind to its fullest capacity. One day we will learn that the heart can never be totally right if the head is totally wrong. Only through the bringing together of head and heart—intelligence and goodness—shall man rise to a fulfillment of his true nature. Neither is this to say that one must be a philosopher or a possessor of extensive academic training before he can achieve the good life. I know many people of limited formal training who have amazing intelligence and foresight. The call for intelligence is a call for openmindedness, sound judgment, and love for truth. It is a call for men to rise above the stagnation of closedmindedness and the paralysis of gullibility. One does not need to be a

profound scholar to be openminded, nor a keen academician to engage in an assiduous pursuit for truth.

Light has come into the world. A voice crying through the vista of time calls men to walk in the light. Man's earthly life will become a tragic cosmic elegy if he fails to heed this call. "This is the condemnation," says John, "that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light."

Jesus was right about those men who crucified him. They knew not what they did. They were inflicted with a terrible blindness.

Every time I look at the cross I am reminded of the greatness of God and the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. I am reminded of the beauty of sacrificial love and the majesty of unswerving devotion to truth. It causes me to say with John Bowring:

In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.

It would be wonderful were I to look at the cross and sense only such a sublime reaction. But somehow I can never turn my eyes from that cross without also realizing that it symbolizes a strange mixture of greatness and smallness, of good and evil. As I behold that uplifted cross I am reminded not only of the unlimited power of God, but also of the sordid weakness of man. I think not only of the radiance of the divine, but also of the tang of the human. I am reminded not only of Christ at his best, but of man at his worst.

We must see the cross as the magnificent symbol of love conquering hate and of light overcoming darkness. But in the midst of this glowing affirmation, let us never forget that our Lord and Master was nailed to that cross because of human blindness. Those who crucified him knew not what they did.

Questions for reflection:

In Section I, Rev. Dr. King talks about Christian love as aggressive love, love in action. What does he mean? How is that different than the usual or "ordinary" way in which we understand love in both human relationships and in the world?

In Section II, Rev. Dr. King talks about how the very things that seem to demonstrate human vision (religion, science, philosophy) in fact reveal our blindness. What is he talking about? How have you experienced good people doing evil things because of tribalism, political persuasion, patriotism, or race relations? How does it that only love - demonstrated by Jesus praying on the cross for forgiveness for those that have crucified him - can reveal our blindness to us?

In Section III, Rev. Dr. King talks about how all too often human noble virtues degenerate into tragic vices, principally because of sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity. What is he talking about? How have you experienced or seen that? Dr. King exhorts the follower of Jesus to be reminded of the redemptive power of the cross which subverts and gives vision, turns right side up and makes clear. A love stronger than hate, more transformative than vengeance, a light that overcomes all darkness.

How does the example of the love of Christ, up to and through the cross, model for us aggressive love? How do we then love in that same way, because we have first been loved by Christ, in our world of today?

Introduction to the sermon collection entitled *Strength to Love*

As Martin Luther King prepared for the Birmingham Campaign in early 1963, he drafted the final sermons for *Strength to Love*, a volume of his most well known homilies that would be published later that year. He originally proposed the book in early 1957 to Melvin Arnold, head of Harper & Brothers' Religious Books Department. Arnold welcomed King's "proposed collection of sermons; we hope that they will have a heavy emphasis on permanent religious values, rather than on topical events" (Arnold, 5 February 1957). Despite King's best intentions and Arnold's repeated urging for a manuscript, however, King had not produced the promised sermon book by mid-1962.

Although circumstances were far from ideal, King was finally able to start working on the sermons during a fortnight in jail in July 1962, during the Albany Movement. Having been arrested for holding a prayer vigil outside Albany City Hall, King and Ralph Abernathy shared a jail cell for 15 days that was, according to King, "dirty, filthy, and ill-equipped" and "the worse I have ever seen" (King, "Reverend M. L. King's Diary"). While behind bars, he was able to spend a fair amount of uninterrupted time preparing the drafts for the sermons "Loving Your Enemies," "Love in Action," and "Shattered Dreams," and continued to work on the volume after his release. King sent the first part of the manuscript to his publisher in the early fall, including several sermons that had become King standards, such as "Paul's Letter to American Christians" and "What Is Man?"

His editors praised the first results, seeing *Strength to Love* as the words of a minister who addressed his congregation with messages of "warmth, immediate application, and poetic verve" (Wallis, 3 October 1962). In the process of editing the book, however, many familiar King phrases were removed by

Arnold and Charles Wallis. King's assessment of segregation as one of "the ugly practices of our nation," his call that capitalism must be transformed by "a deep-seated change," and his depiction of colonialism as "evil because it is based on a contempt for life" were stricken from the text (Papers 6:480; Papers 6:471; Papers 6:530). In particular, many of King's vivid anti-military and anti-war statements were deleted. In his draft sermon of "Transformed Nonconformist," for example, he characterized the early Christian church as anti-war: "Its views on war were clearly known because of the refusal of every Christian to take up arms" (Papers 6:473). These statements were absent in the sermons' published versions.

King worried that the force of his spoken words would not make the transition to the printed page and wrote in the book's preface that his reservations had "grown out of the fact that a sermon is not an essay to be read but a discourse to be heard. It should be a convincing appeal to a listening congregation." Even as the book went to press, he conceded: "I have not altogether overcome my misgivings" (King, x).

As the first volume of sermons by an African American preacher widely available to a white audience, *Strength to Love* was a landmark work. Despite omissions and changes to the original manuscript, *Strength to Love* remains a concrete testament to King's lifelong commitment to preach the social gospel. His fusion of Christian teachings and social consciousness remains in print and continues to promote King's vision of love as a potent social and political force for change, the efficacy of religious faith in surmounting evil, and the vital need for true human integration, or, as he defined it, "genuine intergroup and interpersonal living" (King, 23). This volume brought to the forefront King's identity as a compelling, well educated, and compassionate preacher at a time when many whites knew him only as a civil rights leader.

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