

“A Study of Understanding, Healing, and Hope”
A Look at the Writings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches

Session 6:

“An Address Before the National Press Club” (pages 99 - 105)

Isaiah 43:18-19

James 1:2-4

1 John 3:11-24

Background on the Speech:

Dr. Martin Luther King had many opportunities to deliver speeches to a variety of different audiences. World leaders, communities of supporters, staunch critics – he had the ability to craft the words needed to not just speak to the audience present, but to also speak through the audience to the individuals they would be carrying their message to. That is why I chose this specific speech to read for this week’s focus. In July of 1962, Dr. King was invited to deliver a speech to the National Press Club, a group of the leading journalists in the United States (and some from around the world). What better audience to address in bringing your message of nonviolent resistance and integration to the world? Dr. King speaks out about his hope for race relations in America, while addressing controversial issues like tokenism, complacency, violence, and rioting.

Questions to Reflect on as we Journey Through our Texts:

- (1) Dr. King addressed the issue of “change across the South” in his address to the National Press Club. Do you find “change” an easy thing to handle in your life? What about “change” in your faith life?
- (2) Dr. King shared in his address that discontent can be sound and healthy in a person’s life, but how one chooses to act on the discontent can be helpful or harmful. Have you ever felt that discontent could be healthy? Have you ever used discontent to be helpful? Have you ever thought “discontent” could be the Spirit moving within you?
- (3) While most of Dr. King’s speech focused on the injustice found in the South, he also spoke of the hidden and subtle injustice in the North. What are some of the subtle or hidden injustices that you see in our community today? What are some of the subtle of hidden injustices in the world today? What are we (the Christian Church) called to do about it?

Diving Into the Speech...

The Present State of Affairs

Dr. King begins his speech to the National Press Club sharing that his presence with this distinguished group of journalists was not a guarantee just a week ago. He, along with other peaceful protesters, had been arrested in Albany, Georgia, for marching against segregated conditions in that community. Dr. King, along with another minister, chose to accept the 45-day stint in jail, rather than pay the fine as another form of protest. An anonymous donor paid their fine, and as a journalist shared they had reached a new point in race relations, “we witnessed persons being kicked out of jail.” (p. 99)

Dr. King shared that, at this point in America, time has come. Time for racial justice has come. Not will it come, but how will segregation and discrimination pass away. Leadership in the South recognize it. While others fight in vain to stop it (through violent means), others have moved on recognizing that it is inevitable. Instead, these communities have shifted to partial integration.

Recognizing the audience that he was speaking to, Dr. King honed in on the danger of this partial integration, specifically the tactic of tokenism. Basically, the South recognized that the laws were going to change and they must follow the “law”, but only to a minimal point. Allow a few African American students in to an all-white school. Hire one African American employee in an all-white factory. Dr. King shared that this approach will work in vain just as segregation did. It will ultimately fail.

A Future Approach

Dr. King shared that the future cannot be clearly seen with precision. Resistance will continue but it will ultimately fail because it is antiquated. Dr. King shares a list of reasons why change in the South will happen. First, the South must grow economically and it must grow through industrialization. With these industries, the folkways of the old South will pass away. As these “old South” ideas pass, the purchasing opportunities for the African American will increase as well. With these increases, education, medical, and housing opportunities will accompany this growth. All of these changes will weaken segregation.

Second, federal action – legislation, court orders, and executive orders – will change the South. While it may not change the heart, these actions can regulate behavior. “The law may not change the heart, but it can restrain the

heartless.” (p. 100). The habits of people have been changed by federal action, if not the hearts. Eventually, this cumulative effect will shift a larger segment of life.

Third, Dr. King shared that education and religion are helping to change the internal attitudes across the South. He began by sharing the hurt that the most segregated hour in the week is 11:00 am for worship. He also shared that Sunday School was the most segregated school of the week. (These are two painful facts to hear...) However, the church’s voice was beginning to be heard in this movement. Congregations were beginning to shake off the apathy and gaining a voice, not just within their congregations, but also outside their walls.

Fourth, Dr. King shared the most powerful voice breaking down the barriers of segregation is the new view of the African American individually, a new self-respect. Once willing to accept segregation, the breakdown of isolation, the ability to travel, the growth of industry, educational advancement, and growth in economy, has enabled the African American to reclaim a new sense of worth and determination. No longer seeing oneself as inferior, a new perspective of value, worth, and human dignity who deserves freedom no matter the cost.

A United Front through Nonviolent Resistance

Dr. King shared with the collection of journalists that with this new perspective of the African American community that “it is ultimately more honorable to suffer in dignity than accept segregation in humiliation.” (p. 101) Every social status and every age group was now involved – united in one cause. The Montgomery bus boycott was a rallying cry, not just to the nation, but the African American community. The same was happening in Albany, Georgia. Nonviolent resistance can and should be embraced by everyone. However, Dr. King shared that it does not replace litigation and legislation. Nonviolent resistance and legislation must work together. Legislation declares rights, while nonviolent resistance helps deliver them. Nonviolent resistance breathes life into a declaration.

Dr. King shared that nonviolent resistance has the ability to disarm the opponent. (We have seen this in our previous week’s studies.) This method weakens the morale and their defenses. This approach also challenges the opponent to find a way to use “moral means” to result in “moral ends”. (Dr. King talked about this last week in his sermon about peace.) Dr. King emphasized that

the means must justify the ends. While other approaches of the past might disagree, nonviolent resistance lives up to that possibility – means can justify the ends.

Nonviolent resistance provides an avenue for individuals to deal with their discontent in a health way. Discontent is sound and healthy. However, the way an individual deals with discontent can be helpful or harmful. Dr. King argues that hatred, bitterness, and violence scars the soul. Nonviolence provides the avenue of struggling without hating, fighting the war without violence.

Temptation may lure the African American towards violence, but this will lead to bitter consequences for the generations to come. Nonviolence is the only means to reestablish a broken community. (The ultimate goal is a beloved community...) The hope is that through these means that the conscience of the majority will be woken up to the blindness of the injustice that is being practiced.

Dr. King, recognizing the audience that he was speaking to, laid out the simple and straightforward actions of the nonviolent movement that was being practiced by African Americans and supporters of the Civil Rights movement. He knew these words would be printed and distributed across the country. This was his message: “We will take direct action against injustice without waiting for other agencies to act. We will not obey unjust laws or submit to unjust practices. We will do this peacefully, openly, cheerfully, because our aim is to persuade. We adopt the means of nonviolence because our end is a community at peace with itself. We will try to persuade with our words, but if our words fail, we will try to persuade with our acts. We will always be willing to talk and seek fair compromise, but we are ready to suffer when necessary and even risk our lives to become witnesses to the truth as we see it.” (p. 103)

Working Hand in Hand

The nonviolent movement had historical precedence with Gandhi in India and more recently the African American college students in the United States. One day the nation will be proud of their courage. With the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1960, now federal officials and the law are beginning to work hand in hand on the side to insure the rights of all citizens are enforced, even in places where they are being blatantly denied.

Dr. King shared that while his words had focused primarily on the South, subtle and hidden forms of injustice existed across the country. In the North, housing and employment discrimination are still dividing points.

One thing that Dr. King also wanted to make clear is that while things were moving in a positive direction, one could not assume that the problem is solved now or assume that it will be solved. He shared that often times this is when complacency can set in. “Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable.” (p. 104) Advancement requires the hard and tireless work of many individuals. To delay puts off the civil rights struggle that has been delayed for far too long.

Dr. King shared that the ultimate goal is freedom – complete freedom, not just in pieces. Not because of pity, but because our destiny is intertwined with the destiny of this nation. “We are simply seeking to bring into full realization the American dream – a dream yet unfulfilled.” (p. 105)

Scriptural Foundations for the Text...

Isaiah 43:18-19...

Dr. King referenced the prophet Isaiah in describing the changing of the South from the old into the new. As we have seen in the past readings, he was a fan of the prophet Isaiah. In these two verses, Isaiah talks about the Babylonian Empire being destroyed and a new rule being established. Dr. King talked about the South being made into something completely different, despite opposition. Isaiah says to not look back on the past, but to look at the new. God will make “a roadway in the wilderness”; “rivers in the desert”. These are things we cannot begin to imagine. How can we start looking ahead to see how God may be making things new?

James 1:2-4...

Dr. King does not specifically address this passage in his speech, but he touches on the elements of these verses in the letter of James. Dr. King addressed the numerous trials the African American community has faced throughout the centuries. These trials have led the African American to realize their value and self-respect, a revelation that has emerged during this Civil Rights movement. James 1 talks about trials leading to endurance and endurance

leading to a perfect result – this perfect result being found in Christ. Dr. King knew that Christ was leading him in this movement. After you face trials in your life, do you look back and see these as “endurance” builders? Who is your “go to” in the midst of trials?

1 John 3:11-24...

Dr. King outlined in many of his writings that love was the underlying emotion to the nonviolent resistance movement. When he spoke against hate in this speech to the journalists, he was essentially speaking for love. The words from 1 John 3 could be heard in his speech. “Love one another...” “Do not be surprised if the world hates you...” “Let us love in deed and in truth.” 1 John emphasizes that God knows what our heart says. Dr. King emphasized repeatedly that hate is too heavy a burden to bear. Is it easier to love or not to hate? How do we live out 1 John 3:18 on a daily basis?

Next Week – Wednesday, August 12 6:30 PM

“Letter from Birmingham City Jail” (pages 289 - 302)

Daniel 3

Galatians 6:11-18

Matthew 5:43-48

New Study...

“God and The Pandemic:

A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath”

A Book by Christian Scholar N.T. Wright

We will begin a five-week study on the importance of NOT jumping to knee-jerk solutions, but taking time of restraint to reflect on the emotions that this time has brought to the surface and, most importantly, to lament!

Study Begins Wednesday Night, August 19 at 6:30 PM on Facebook Live