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## Rediscovering Lost Values

28 February 1954  
Detroit, Mich.

*During the trip to Michigan that included an address to the Lansing NAACP and a sermon at his uncle's church, King delivered this sermon at Detroit's Second Baptist Church. The Reverend Edward C. Simmons, an assistant pastor, introduced King, mentioning that "his father has preached for us several times." In this sermon King declares, "The great problem facing modern man is that the means by which we live have outdistanced the spiritual ends for which we live." Citing the biblical story of how Joseph and Mary had to return to Jerusalem because they left Jesus behind after the Passover feast, King tells the congregation: "If we are to go forward, if we are to make this a better world in which to live, we've got to go back. We've got to rediscover these precious values that we've left behind." King urges them to rediscover the moral laws of the universe, to be "honest and loving and just with all humanity." He warns them not to substitute possessions for God, proclaiming: "I'm not going to put my ultimate faith in the little gods that can be destroyed in an atomic age, but the God who has been our help in the ages past, and our hope for years to come, and our shelter in the time of storm, and our eternal home."*

Reverend Simmons, platform associates, members and friends of Second Baptist Church, I need not pause to say how happy I am to be here this morning, and to be a part of this worship service. It's certainly with a deal of humility that I stand in this pulpit so rich in tradition and history. Second Baptist Church, as you know, has the reputation of being one of the great churches of our nation, and it is certainly a challenge that, for me to stand here this morning, to be in the pulpit of Reverend Banks and of a people who are so great and rich in tradition.

I'm not exactly a stranger in the city of Detroit, for I have been here several times before. And I remember back in about nineteen forty-four or -five, somewhere back in there, that I came to Second Baptist Church for the first time—I think that was the year that the National Baptist Convention met here. And of course I have a lot of relatives in this city, so that Detroit is really something of a second home for me, and I don't feel too much a stranger here this morning. So it is a, it is indeed a pleasure and a privilege for me to be in this city this morning, and to be here to worship with you in the absence of your very fine and noble pastor, Dr. Banks.

I want you to think with me this morning from the subject: rediscovering lost values. Rediscovering lost values. There is something wrong with our world, something fundamentally and basically wrong. I don't think we have to look too far to see that. I'm sure that most of you would agree with me in making that assertion. And when we stop to analyze the cause of our world's ills, many things come to mind.

We begin to wonder if it is due to the fact that we don't know enough. But it can't be that. Because in terms of accumulated knowledge we know more today than men have known in any period of human history. We have the

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facts at our disposal. We know more about mathematics, about science, about social science, and philosophy, than we've ever known in any period of the world's history. So it can't be because we don't know enough.

And then we wonder if it is due to the fact that our scientific genius lags behind. That is, if we have not made enough progress scientifically. Well then, it can't be that. For our scientific progress over the past years has been amazing. Man through his scientific genius has been able to warp distance and place time in chains, so that today it's possible to eat breakfast in New York City and supper in London, England. Back in about 1753 it took a letter three days to go from New York City to Washington, and today you can go from here to China in less time than that. It can't be because man is stagnant in his scientific progress. Man's scientific genius has been amazing.

I think we have to look much deeper than that if we are to find the real cause of man's problems and the real cause of the world's ills today. If we are to really find it I think we will have to look in the hearts and souls of men. [*Congregation:*] (*Lord help him*)

The trouble isn't so much that we don't know enough, but it's as if we aren't good enough. The trouble isn't so much that our scientific genius lags behind, but our moral genius lags behind. (*Well*) The great problem facing modern man is that, that the means *by* which we live, (*Help him God*) have outdistanced the spiritual ends *for* which we live. (*That's right*) So we find ourselves caught in a messed-up world. (*Well*) The problem is with man himself and man's soul. We haven't learned how to be just and honest and kind and true and loving. And that is the basis of our problem. The real problem is that through our scientific genius we've made of the world a neighborhood, but through our moral and spiritual genius we've failed to make of it a brotherhood. (*Lord have mercy*) And the great danger facing us today is not so much the atomic bomb that was created by physical science. Not so much that atomic bomb that you can put in an aeroplane and drop on the heads of hundreds and thousands of people—as dangerous as that is. But the real danger confronting civilization today is that atomic bomb which lies in the hearts and souls of men, (*Lord have mercy*) capable of exploding into the vilest of hate and into the most damaging selfishness. That's the atomic bomb that we've got to fear today. (*Lord help him*) Problem is with the men. (*Yes, Yes*) Within the heart and the souls of men. (*Lord*) That is the real basis of our problem. (*Well*)

My friends, all I'm trying to say is that if we are to go forward today, we've got to go back and rediscover some mighty precious values that we've left behind. (*Yes*) That's the only way that we would be able to make of our world a better world, and to make of this world what God wants it to be and the real purpose and meaning of it. The only way we can do it is to go back, (*Yes*) and rediscover some mighty precious values that we've left behind.

Our situation in the world today reminds me of a very popular situation that took place in the life of Jesus. It was read in the Scripture for the morning, found over in the second chapter of Luke's gospel.<sup>1</sup> The story is very

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1. Luke 2:41–52.

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familiar, very popular, we all know it. You remember when Jesus was about twelve years old, (*Well*) there was the custom of the feast. Jesus' parents took him up to Jerusalem. That was an annual occasion, the feast of the Passover, and they went up to Jerusalem and they took Jesus along with them. And they were there a few days, and then after being there they decided to go back home, to Nazareth. (*Lord help him*) And they started out, and I guess as it was the tradition in those days, the father probably traveled in front, and then the mother and the children behind. You see they didn't have the modern conveniences that we have today. They didn't have automobiles and subways and buses. They, they walked, and traveled on donkeys and camels and what have you. So they traveled very slow, but it was usually the tradition for the father to lead the way. (*Yeah*)

And they left Jerusalem going on back to Nazareth, and I imagine they walked a little while and they didn't look back to see if everybody was there. But then the Scripture says, they went about a day's journey and they stopped, I imagine to check up, to see if everything was all right, and they discovered that something mighty precious was missing. They discovered that Jesus wasn't with them. (*Yes*) Jesus wasn't in the midst. (*Come on*) And so they, they paused there, and, and looked and they didn't see him around, and they went on, and, and started looking among the kinsfolk, and they went on back to Jerusalem and found him there, in the temple with the doctors of the law. (*Yeah, That's right*)

Now, the real thing that is to be seen here is this, that the parents of Jesus realized that they had left, and that they had lost a mighty precious value. They had sense enough to know that before they could go forward to Nazareth, they had to go backward to Jerusalem to rediscover this value. (*That's right*) They knew that. They knew that they couldn't go home to Nazareth until they went back to Jerusalem. (*Come on*)

Sometimes, you know, it's necessary to go backward in order to go forward. (*Yes*) That's, that's, that's an analogy of life. I remember the other day I was driving out of New York City into Boston, and I stopped off in Bridgeport, Connecticut, to visit some friends. And I went out of New York on a highway that is known as the Merritt Parkway, it leads into Boston, a very fine parkway. And I stopped in Bridgeport, and after being there for two or three hours, I decided to go on to Boston, and I wanted to get back on the Merritt Parkway. And I went out thinking that I was going toward the Merritt Parkway. I started out, and, and I rode, and I kept riding, and I looked up and I saw a sign saying two miles to a little town that I knew I was to bypass—I wasn't to pass through that particular town. So, I, I thought I was on the wrong road. I stopped and I asked a gentleman on the road which way would I get to the Merritt Parkway. And he said, the Merritt Parkway is about twelve or fifteen miles back that way. You've got to turn around and go back to the Merritt Parkway, you are out of the way now. In other words, before I could go forward to Boston, I had to go back about twelve or fifteen miles to get to the Merritt Parkway. May it not be that, that modern man has gotten on the wrong parkway? (*Lord help him*) And if he is to go forward to the city of salvation, he's got to go back and get on the right parkway. (*Amen*)

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And so that was the thing that Jesus' parents realized, that, that they had to go back and, and, and find this mighty precious value that they had left behind, in order to go forward. They realized that. And so they went back to Jerusalem and discovered Jesus, rediscovered him so to speak, in order to go forward to Nazareth. (*Lord help him*)

Now that's what we've got to do in our world today. We've left a lot of precious values behind; we've lost a lot of precious values. And if we are to go forward, if we are to make this a better world in which to live, we've got to go back. We've got to rediscover these precious values that we've left behind.

I want to deal with one or two of these mighty precious values that we've left behind, that if we're to go forward and to make this a better world, we must rediscover.

The first is this—the first principle of value that we need to rediscover is this—that *all* reality hinges on moral foundations. In other words, that this is a moral universe, and that there are moral laws of the universe, just as abiding as the physical laws. (*Lord help us*) I'm not so sure we all believe that. We, we never doubt that there are physical laws of the universe that we must obey. We never doubt that. And so we just don't jump out of airplanes or jump off of high buildings for the fun of it—we don't do that. Because we, we unconsciously know that there is a final law of gravitation, and if you disobey it you'll suffer the consequences—we know that. Even if we don't know it in its Newtonian formulation, we, we know it intuitively, and so we just don't jump off the highest building in Detroit for the fun of it—we, we, we don't do that. Because we *know* that there is a law of gravitation which is final in the universe. (*Lord*) If we disobey it, we'll suffer the consequences.

But I'm not so sure if we know that there are, are moral laws, just as abiding as the physical law. I'm not so sure about that. I'm not so sure we really believe that there is a law of love in this universe, and that if you disobey it you'll suffer the consequences. (*Yes*) I'm not so sure if we really believe that. Now, at least two things convince me that, that we don't believe that, that we have strayed away from the principle that this is a moral universe. (*Lord help him*)

The first thing is that we have adopted in the modern world a sort of a relativistic ethic. Now, I'm not trying to use a big word here. I'm trying to say something very concrete. And that is that, that we have accepted the attitude that right and wrong are merely relative to our. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Most people can't stand up for their, for their convictions, because the majority of people might not be doing it. (*Amen, Yes*) See, everybody's not doing it, so it must be wrong. And, and since everybody *is* doing it, it must be right. (*Yes, Lord help him*) So a sort of numerical interpretation of what's right.

But I'm here to say to you this morning that some things are right and some things are wrong. (*Yes*) Eternally so, absolutely so. It's *wrong* to hate. (*Yes, That's*

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2. Remainder of sentence and an unknown number of additional sentences are missing from the audio tape.

28 Feb 1954 *right*) It always has been wrong and it always will be wrong! (*Amen*) It's wrong in America, it's wrong in Germany, it's wrong in Russia, it's wrong in China! (*Lord help him*) It was wrong in two thousand B.C., and it's wrong in nineteen fifty-four A.D.! It always has been wrong, (*That's right*) and it always will be wrong! (*That's right*) It's wrong to throw our lives away in riotous living. (*Yeah*) No matter if everybody in Detroit is doing it. It's wrong! (*Yes*) It always will be wrong! And it always has been wrong. It's wrong in every age, and it's wrong in every nation. Some things are *right* and some things are wrong, no matter if everybody is doing the contrary. Some things in this universe are absolute. The God of the universe has made it so. And so long as we adopt this *relative* attitude toward right and wrong, we're revolting against the very laws of God himself. (*Amen*)

Now that isn't the only thing that convinces me that we've strayed away from this attitude, (*Go ahead*) this principle. The other thing is that we have adopted a sort of a pragmatic test for right and wrong—whatever works is right. (*Yes*) If it works, it's all right. Nothing is wrong but that which does not work. If you don't get caught, it's right. [*Laughter*] That's the attitude, isn't it? It's all right to disobey the Ten Commandments, but just don't disobey the Eleventh, Thou shall not get caught. [*Laughter*] That's the attitude. That's the prevailing attitude in, in our culture. (*Come on*) No matter what you do, just do it with a, with a bit of finesse. (*All right*) You know, a sort of attitude of the survival of the slickest. Not the Darwinian survival of the fittest, but the survival of the slickest—who, whoever can be the slickest is, is the one who right. It's all right to lie, but lie with dignity. [*Laughter*] It's all right to steal and to rob and extort, but do it with a bit of finesse. (*Yes*) It's even all right to hate, but just dress your hate up in the garments of love and make it appear that you are loving when you are actually hating. *Just get by!* That's the thing that's right according to this new ethic. (*Lord help him*)

My friends, that attitude is destroying the soul of our culture! (*You're right there*) It's destroying our nation! (*Oh yes*) The thing that we need in the world today, is a group of men and women who will stand up for right and be opposed to wrong, wherever it is. (*Lord have mercy*) A group of people who have come to see that some things are wrong, whether they're never caught up with. Some things are *right*, whether nobody sees you doing them or not.

All I'm trying to say is, (*Have mercy, my God*) our world hinges on moral foundations. God has made it so! God has made the universe to be based on a moral law. (*Lord help him*) So long as man disobeys it he is revolting against God. That's what we need in the world today—people who will stand for right and goodness. It's not enough to know the intricacies of zoology and biology. But we must know the intricacies of law. (*Well*) It is not enough to know that two and two makes four. But we've got to know somehow that it's right to be honest and just with our brothers. (*Yes*) It's not enough to know all about our philosophical and mathematical disciplines. (*Have mercy*) But we've got to know the simple disciplines, of being honest and loving and just with all humanity. (*Oh yes*) If we don't learn it, we will destroy ourselves, (*That's right*) by the misuse of our own powers. (*Amen*)

This universe hinges on moral foundations. (*Yeah*) There is something in this universe that justifies Carlyle in saying,

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No lie can live forever.<sup>3</sup>

There is something in this universe that justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying,

Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again.<sup>4</sup> (*My Lord, Amen*)

There is something in this universe that justifies James Russell Lowell in saying,

Truth forever on the scaffold,  
Wrong forever on the throne.  
With that scaffold sways the future. (*Lord help him*)  
Behind the dim unknown stands God,  
Within the shadow keeping watch above his own.<sup>5</sup> (*Amen*)

There is something in this universe that justifies the biblical writer in saying,

You shall reap what you sow.<sup>6</sup> (*Amen*)

This is a law-abiding universe. (*Amen*) This is a moral universe. It hinges on moral foundations. (*Lord help him*) If we are to make of this a better world, we've got to go back and rediscover that precious value that we've left behind. (*Yes*)

And then there is a second thing, a second principle that we've got to go back and rediscover. (*Help him*) And that is that all reality has spiritual control. In other words, we've got to go back and rediscover the principle that there is a God behind the process. Well this you say, why is it that you raise that as a point in your sermon, in a church? The mere fact we are at church, we believe in God, we don't need to go back and rediscover that. The mere fact that we are here, and the mere fact that we sing and pray, and come to church—we believe in God. Well, there's some truth in that. But we must remember that it's possible to affirm the existence of God with your lips and deny his existence with your life. (*Amen, Preach*) The most dangerous type of atheism is not theoretical atheism, but practical atheism—(*Amen*) that's the most dangerous type. (*Lord have mercy*) And the world, even the church, is filled up with

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3. King may have been paraphrasing Carlyle's *French Revolution* (1837), part 1, book 3, chapter 1: "No lie you can speak or act but it will come, after longer or shorter circulation, like a bill drawn on Nature's Reality, and be presented there for payments—with the answer, No effects."

4. *The Battlefield* (1839), stanza 9.

5. *The Present Crisis* (1844), stanza 8. The original lines from the poem, written as an antislavery statement at the time of the proposed annexation of Texas, read: "Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne,— / Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown, / Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own."

6. Galatians 6:7.

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people who pay lip service to God and not life service. (*That's right, Filled up with, Come on, Lord help him*) And there is always a danger that we will make it appear externally that we believe in God when internally we don't. (*Yes*) We say with our mouths that we believe in Him, but we live with our lives like He never existed. (*That's right*) That is the ever-present danger confronting religion. That's a dangerous type of atheism.

And I think, my friends, that that is the thing that has happened in America. That we have unconsciously left God behind. Now, we haven't consciously done it, we, we have unconsciously done it. You see, the text, you remember the text said, that Jesus' parents went a whole day's journey not knowing that he wasn't with them. They didn't consciously leave him behind. (*Well*) It was unconscious. Went a whole day and didn't even know it. It wasn't a conscious process. You see, we didn't grow up and say, now, good-bye God, we're going to leave you now. The materialism in America has been an unconscious thing. Since the rise of the Industrial Revolution in England, and then the invention of all of our gadgets and contrivances and all of the things and modern conveniences—we *unconsciously* left God behind. We didn't mean to do it.

We just became so involved in, in getting our big bank accounts that we unconsciously forgot about God—we didn't mean to do it.

We became so involved in getting our nice luxurious cars, and they're very nice, but we became so involved in it that it became much more convenient to ride out to the beach on Sunday afternoon than to, than to come to church that morning. (*Yes*) It, it was an unconscious thing—we didn't mean to do it.

We became so involved and fascinated by the intricacies of television that we found it a little more convenient to stay at home than to come to church. *It was an unconscious thing.* We didn't mean to do it. We didn't just go up and say, now God, you're gone. (*Lord help him*) We had gone a whole day's journey, (*Yes*) and then we came to see that we had unconsciously ushered God out of the universe. A whole day's journey—didn't mean to do it. We just became so involved in things that we forgot about God. (*Oh yes*)

And that is the danger confronting us, my friends. That in a nation as ours where we stress mass production, and that's mighty important, where we have so many conveniences and luxuries and all of that, there is the danger that we will unconsciously forget about God. I'm not saying that these things aren't important, we need them, we need cars, we need money, all of that's important to live. But whenever they become substitutes for God, (*Yes*) they become injurious. (*Amen*)

And may I say to you this morning, (*Lord help him*) that none of these things can ever be real substitutes for God. Automobiles and subways, televisions and radios, dollars and cents, can *never* be substitutes for God. (*Amen*) For long before any of these came into existence, we needed God. (*Amen, Yes*) And long after they will have passed away, we will still need God. (*Oh yeah*)

And I say to you this morning in conclusion (*Lord have mercy*) that I'm not going to put my ultimate faith in things. I'm not going to put my ultimate faith in gadgets and contrivances. As a young man with most of my life ahead of me, I decided early (*Oh yeah*) to give my life to something eternal and

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absolute. (*All right*) Not to these little gods that are here today and gone tomorrow. (*Come on*) But to God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. (*Amen, Amen*)

Not in the little gods that can be with us in a few moments of prosperity. (*Yes*) But in the God who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death, (*That's right*) and causes us to fear no evil. (*All right*) That's the God. (*Come on*)

Not in the god that can give us a few Cadillac cars and Buick convertibles, as nice as they are, that are in style today and out of style three years from now. (*All right*) But the God who threw up the stars, (*Come on*) to bedeck the heavens like swinging lanterns of eternity. (*All right, Oh yes*)

Not in the god that can throw up a few skyscraping buildings, but the God who threw up the gigantic mountains, kissing the sky, (*Yes*) as if to bathe their peaks in the loftitudes. (*Yes*)

Not in the god that can give us a few televisions and radios, but the God who threw up that great cosmic light, that gets up early in the morning in the eastern horizon, (*Oh yes*) who paints its technicolor across the blue, (*Oh yes, Come on*) something that man could never make. (*All right, Yes*)

I'm not going to put my ultimate faith in the little gods that can be destroyed in an atomic age, (*Yes*) but the God who has been our help in ages past, (*Come on*) and our hope for years to come, (*All right*) and our shelter in the time of storm, (*Oh yes*) and our eternal home.<sup>7</sup> That's the God that I'm putting my ultimate faith in. (*Oh yes, Come on now*) That's the God that I call upon you to worship this morning. (*Yes*) Go out and be assured that that God is going to last forever. (*Yes*) Storms might come and go. (*Yes*) Our great skyscraping buildings will come and go. (*Yes*) Our beautiful automobiles will come and go, but God will be here. (*Amen*) Plants may wither, the flowers may fade away, but the Word of our God shall stand forever, and nothing can ever stop Him. (*Bring it down*) All of the P-38s in the world can never reach God. All of our atomic bombs can never reach Him. The God that I'm talking about this morning (*Come on*) is the God of the universe and the God that will last through the ages. (*All right*) If we are to go forward this morning, (*Well*) we've got to go back and find that God. (*All right*) That is the God that *demand*s and *command*s our ultimate allegiance. (*Right*)

If we are to go forward, (*Oh yes*) we must go back and rediscover these precious values (*Well*)—that all reality hinges on moral foundations (*Lord have mercy*) and that all reality has spiritual control. (*Yes*) God bless you. (*Amen, Amen, Amen*)

[*Hymn and invitation to join church omitted*]

The Lord bless thee and keep thee,  
The Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee,  
The Lord lift up the light of his countenance unto thee,  
And be with thee in thy going out and thy coming in,  
In thy labor and in thy leisure,

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7. King alludes to a familiar hymn, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past."



## The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

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In thy moments of joy and in thy moments of sorrow,  
Until the day when there shall be no sunset and no dawning.<sup>8</sup>

At. SdBCC.

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8. King's benediction is a liturgical variant on an ancient Jewish benediction, the Mizpah. See Numbers 6:24–26.