Life Is What You Make It

Modern psychology affirms that vital religious faith is unequaled in its resources to make life worth living. The church holds before us this fact—confirmed in the lives of Paul, Augustine, John Wesley, Tolstoy, Schweitzer in Africa—that you can be more than a conqueror, and that can be what you choose to make it.26

[signature]

M. L. King Jr.

AHDS. CSKC: Sermon file, folder 36, "Sermon Notes."

26. Cf. Romans 8:37. King refers to Augustine (354–430 CE), bishop of Hippo and Father of the Church; John Wesley (1703–1791), the founder of the Methodist Church; Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), the Russian author of War and Peace (1869–1869); and Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), a medical humanitarian and Nobel Peace Prize winner. Keighton underlined the word "that" and inserted "antecedent?"

This 1949 message, an early example of one of King’s most consistent themes of his lifelong ministry, was probably preached while he was serving during the summer as Ebenezer’s associate pastor.1 “On the whole our material and intellectual advances have outrun our moral progress,” he asserts. In a closing prayer, handwritten at the end of this typed message, King implores God, “Help us to work with renewed vigor for a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brotherhood that transcends race or color.”

The greatest need of civilization today is not political security; the greatest need of civilization today is not a well rounded United Nations Organization; the greatest need of civilization today is not a multiplicity of material goods; the greatest need of civilization today is not the superb genius of science as important as it is; the greatest need of civilization today is moral progress. On the whole our material and intellectual advances have outrun our moral progress. Who can argue with any degree of logic that we have not progressed scientifically. Science can point to so many remarkable achievements, such tangible and amazing victories. It has freed

1. King was ordained and appointed associate pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church in February 1948. He functioned in this capacity during summer vacations and school holidays.
man from many of his physical limitations. It has equipped man to see further, reach higher, travel faster, and communicate more speedily. One of my colleagues from China related to me that He flew from Shaghai to San Francisco in only three days. As late as 1709 it took five days for a letter to go from New York to Washington. Yes science has dwarfed time and placed distance in chains. It has stamped out many of man’s dread plagues and diseases, alleviated his pain, prolonged his life and given him greater security and physical well-being.

Let us turn to the realm of education. Certainly man’s progress educationally has been astounding. Illiteracy stands at a very ebb today, and is likely to vanish within a few generations. Our colleges and universities have more students today than ever before in their history. We know more about mathematics, chemistry, social science, and philosophy than we have ever known. Yes the scientific and educational means by which we live can hardly be surpassed, but the moral and spiritual ends for which we live stand almost in a state of oblivion. Thoreau was not indulging in wishful thinking when he wrote the phrase: “Improved means to an unimproved end.” This phrase could well characterize our modern life.

Truly it seems that our moral standards are lagging behind, in fact they are breaking down. Homes are disinteigrating. The purity of family life is disappearing. Gambling, drunkenness, prostitution, and all sorts of pathological vices flourish as never before. Human brotherhood seems to be something foreign to the peoples of the world. Races stand against races, nations against nations, religions against religions.

Truly I sometimes cry “where are the moral and spiritual ends for living.”

Unless we can reestablish the moral and spiritual ends of living in personal character and social justice, our civilization will ruin itself with the misuse of its own instruments. As Dr. Trueblood states in his book, “The Predicament Of Modern Man,” Modern man has built up a complex civilization, but he may loose it, because in his proud hour of achievement he has failed to apply moral direction to his modern advances.” Our [knowledge?] [Scientific means] alone will not save us at this moment. With the most amazing means of production in history we have unemployment. With the most amazing world contacts on record we make world wars. With all of our knowledge and training, we hardly know enough to avoid sowing the seeds of another war. I tell you it is not enough to have the power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate. It is not enough to have the accumulated knowledge of the race, but also the accumulated experiences of social liv-

2. Henry David Thoreau, Walden; or, Life in the Woods (1854), p. 57: “Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York.”
3. D. Elton Trueblood, The Predicament of Modern Man (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), p. 16: “This is the predicament of Western man. He has built up a complex civilization, but he may lose it because, in his proud hour of achievement, he has so largely lost or never developed the inner resources that are needed to keep a possible boon from becoming a calamity.” At Crozer, King was required to read a portion of this text for Kenneth Smith’s course Christianity and Society (Smith, Syllabus, Christianity and Society, 20 February—4 May 1951). Trueblood, a professor of philosophy at Earlham College from 1946 until 1966, hosted a visit by King on 23 April 1959 as one of the speakers in the college’s Convocation series (King to Trueblood, 18 May 1959).
ing. It is not enough to know truth. We must love truth and sacrifice for it. We need not only knowledge which is power but wisdom which is control.

I warn you this morning my friends, we of 1949 A.D. will not escape the question of our Lord. What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world of means—airplanes, automobiles, skyscrapers, and subways—and lose the end the soul? The words that the apostle Paul wrote in a letter to the church of Phillippi are still pertinent today. Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. If civilization is to survive she must rediscover the moral and spiritual ends for living.

{Eternal God Out of whose mind this great cosmic un we bes thee. Help us to seek that which is high, noble and Good Help us in the moment of difficult discision. Help us to work with renewed vigor for a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brotherhood that transcends race or color.}

TAD. CSKC: Sermon file, folder 119, "Civilization's Greatest Need" / "Faith in Man."


"Facing Life’s Inescapables"

[3 March 1949?]
[Chester, Pa.?]

Preaching a few days after Joe Louis announced his retirement from boxing, King cites Louis, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, and Roland Hayes as examples of those who confronted and overcame the inevitable challenges of life.1

One of the tragic tendencies that has characterized man ever since the dawn of recorded history has been his attempt to escape his moral responsibilities. Man is forever trying to escape the realities of life. He is forever trying to make the false seem true; the evil seem good; the ugly seem beautiful; and the unjust seem just.

1. The sermon’s date is based on King’s reference to Joe Louis’s announcement of retirement from boxing, a well-publicized event that occurred on 1 March 1949. Louis would return to boxing for financial reasons in 1950 and 1951. King may have delivered this sermon at J. Pius Barbour’s Calvary Baptist Church in Chester, Pennsylvania. Barbour, a graduate of Crozer, was the editor of the National Baptist Voice. He hosted King in his home and frequently invited him to preach at his church while King attended Crozer (Barbour, "Meditations on Rev. M. L. King, Jr., of Montgomery, Ala.," National Baptist Voice [March 1956]; King to Alberta Williams King, October 1948, in Papers 1:161–162).