"First Things First"

2 August 1953
[Atlanta, Ga.]

In this typed manuscript prepared as a radio sermon and later used at Dexter, King elaborates upon Harry Emerson Fosdick’s sermon “Righteousness First.” King comments on domestic and international affairs, including American race relations and the recent conflict in Korea. “So long as America places ‘white supremacy’ first we will never have peace. Indeed the deep rumbling of discontent in our world today on the part of the masses is [actually] a revolt against the imperialism, economic exploitation, and colonialism that has been perpetuated by western civilization for all these many years.” He maintains that “only through placing love, mercy, and justice first can we have peace.”

This mystery called life is so constructed that there are certain material goods that man has to have. The Socialists and Psychologists tell us that there are certain basic drives inherent in the very nature of man which must inevitably be satisfied. Jesus himself realized this. Throughout the Gospels of Jesus is pictured as wanting men to have physical well-being, economic security, food, clothing and health. There are some who are so dipped and dyed in extreme spirituality that they would have us believe that Jesus placed no emphasis on these earthly needs. They are the people who are so absorbed in a future good “over yonder” that they are content with the present evils over here. The Communists are right in calling this type of religion the opiate of the people. Far from saying that the basic necessities of life are not important, what Jesus really says is this “your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.”

Here we human beings are wanting the good things of life. We are saying, “I want what I want when I want it, and Jesus is saying you ought to have them. But they will never come until you fulfill a prior condition—righteousness first. Unless first things are placed first then and only then will these things be added unto you.”

So this afternoon I will speak to you about two things we want that we will never get unless we follow the path that was set forth by Jesus—righteousness first.

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2 In another version of this sermon that King titled “God’s Kingdom First,” he mentioned specific human drives: food and drink, intellectual development, security, sexuality, and love (“God’s Kingdom First,” 2 August 1953).
3 Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right Introduction" (1844).
4 Matthew 6:32–33.
5 Fosdick, A Great Time to Be Alive, p. 22. “Here we human beings are wanting the good things of life and trying to get them by anxiously pouncing on them like leopards, saying, I want what I want when I want it, and Jesus says, You ought to want such things but you will never enduringly get them until you fulfill a prior condition—righteousness first, then, and only then, shall these things be added unto you.”
So let us turn first to the domestic scene. We all want a happy marriage life and happy family life. Throughout our nation there is the unrelenting cry for less divorces. People have come to see that divorces rarely ever bring about the happiness and emotional freedom expected of them. People have come to see that divorces make for maladjustment within men and women. They have come to see that divorces cause broken homes, and often lead perfectly normal children into juvenile delinquency. But why is it that the family seems to be disintegrating like a stack of cards? At least one reason is that newly-weds have failed to see that righteousness must be placed first. In our age of distorted values we place such things as economic security and physical attraction first, failing to see that money and physical attraction alone cannot make a marriage permanently successful.

If some one would ask most of us what we expect out of marriage, we would probably answer, security and peace, happy children and beautiful home life that grows with the years. The master would say to us, "your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things." But if you do not place righteousness first what a wreckage can come to all of these. My friends, the foundation of any great home life is built upon righteousness. Romance can start a home but romance alone cannot sustain a home. Righteousness must be placed first. One of the wisest statements ever made is that solemn assertion in the Bible, "except the Lord build the house they labor in vain that build it." It simply states the irrevocable fact that you cannot build a successful marriage upon any other basis than the principles of love, beauty, natural respect and faith. Unless the house of marriage is built upon the rock of righteousness the storms and winds of disagreement will blow it apart.

Now let us turn for the moment to our great desire in the National and International scene. For one thing we want peace. Today the cry that is ringing in the ears of the peoples of the world is peace, peace, peace. I think that the peoples of the world have come to realize that there are no gains from war. They realize that war sends men home physically handicapped and psychologically upset. They realize that war piles up a national debt higher than a mountain of gold and fills our nations with orphans and widows. So everybody is crying for peace. Yet we have no peace. Even the temporary let us in Korea is far from an assurance of peace. A Truce is not a peace. And there is the danger that the flames of war might arise at any time to redden the skies of our dark and dreary world. Why is it that we have no peace in the world today? It is because we have failed to follow the principles of that gentle Prince of Peace who died on a Roman cross atop a Judean hill centuries ago.

In other words we have failed to place righteousness first. So long as we place our selfish economic gains first we will never have peace. So long as the nations of the

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6. Fosdick, *A Great Time to Be Alive*, p. 23. "The things they want, they ought to want—security and peace, happy children, and lovely memories accumulating with the years. The Master would say to them again, 'Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.' But what wreckage can come to homes that forget the rest of what he said! The ultimate foundations of a great home are ethical. Romance can start a home but romance alone cannot sustain one—only fidelity can maintain a fine family.

7. Psalm 127:1

8. The Korean conflict effectively ended with the signing of an armistice agreement by the United Nations and North Korea on 27 July 1953, six days prior to the delivery of this sermon.
world are contesting to see which can be the most imperialistic we will never have peace. So long as America places “white supremacy” first we will never have peace. Indeed the deep rumbling of discontent in our world today on the part of the masses is actually a revolt against the imperialism, economic exploitation, and colonialism that has been perpetuated by western civilization for all these many years. All of these injustices must be eliminated if we are to have peace. When will a stupid world rise up to see that a “get tough” policy cannot bring peace, universal military training cannot bring peace, the threat of the atomic bomb cannot bring peace, but only through placing love, mercy, and justice first can we have peace.

Our civilization may possess all knowledge of power. We may know all about atomic energy and radar. We may be able to use our minds to probe into the storehouse of nature. We may know all about the science of genetics and psycho-physical changes within human nature. All of these are fine, but if we do not place righteousness first these very things which are capable of being used constructively will be used destructively.

My friends if you would look through the long corridors of human history you will see that major tragedies that have come to nations and individuals have come chiefly because they failed to place righteousness first. The historic Arnold Toynbee tells us that some twenty two civilizations have risen upon the face of the earth all but about have ended in destruction. Close observation will reveal that most of these civilizations fell because they did not place righteousness first. The Roman Empire decided to place her military power first. For years she boasted of her superior roads, her great economic system, and her powerful political machinery. But in the fifth century A.D., Alaric, with his hordes of Visigoths, swept across Italy and finally captured Rome. And so the mistress of the world which had boasted so much of its military power had fallen before the barbarians. She failed to place righteousness first. Moussalini decided to place his Fascist government first, but today Italy is defeated and Mussolini dead, killed by the very people whom he once ruled. Hitler placed Germany and the idea of the master race first. He boasted that Germany would one day rule the world. As the German armies marched through many of the smaller nations of Europe the bands played and the crowds cheered in honor of Hitler. But today this same Germany and this same Hitler have been defeated and the German nation is just now through a state of reconstruction. They failed to place righteousness first. The British empire placed

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9 In “God's Kingdom First,” King reversed the order of the sermon, first considering the international scene and then highlighting the family. In his transition between the two sections, King wrote: “We cannot stop with the obligation of the nation as a whole, but we must think of the individuals that make up the nation. If the nation and the world ever place righteousness first it will be because enough individuals have done it. We can never have peace so long as the minds of men are at war. The greatest peace table is not at Lake Success, neither will it be found massive assemblies in Paris or Moscow. The greatest peace table in the world is the breakfast table. Until we place righteousness first in our individual lives, our families, and our communities we will never have peace” (King, 2 August 1953).


11 Alaric (ca 370–410 CE), king of the Visigoths, led his troops to capture Rome in 410 CE.
empiricism first. For years she stood as an island no larger than the State of Georgia, ruling almost a third of the world. She boasted that “the sun never sets on her empire.” But today the British empire with all of her massive power is diminishing to such a state that we can almost say, “the sun never rises on her empire.” America is placing economic power first. We are boasting that we are the richest nation in the world and that we possess the power of the atom bomb. But if we do not place something deeper than this first we will be plunged across the abyss of destruction.

The voice of Christ is sounding yet. Ah, Christ, you have been saying it a long time. God help us as individuals and as a world to hear it now before it is too late. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these other things shall be added unto you.”

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TAD CSKC Sermon file, folder 112, “First Things First.”

“Communism’s Challenge to Christianity”

9 August 1953
[Atlanta, Ga.]

King wrestles with the relationship between communism and Christianity, arguing that they are ultimately incompatible. Influenced by Riverside Church pastor Robert J. McCracken, he encourages the Ebenezer congregation to learn from communism, noting “It should challenge us first to be more concerned about social justice.”

I hope that all of you will listen to me very attentively this afternoon as I humbly attempt to speak to you about one of the most important issues of our day. There are at least two reasons why I as a Christian Minister feel obligated to talk to you about Communism.

The first has to do with the widespread influence of Communism. It is believed in by more than 200,000,000 people covering one fifth of the earth’s surface. Multitudes have embraced it as the most coherent philosophy and the greatest single emotional drive they know.

A second reason why the Christian minister should speak about it is that