"How Believe in a Good God in the Midst of Glaring Evil"

15 January 1956

[Montgomery, Ala]

King delivered a version of this sermon to his Dexter congregation a few days after the MIA voted to boycott city buses indefinitely. He draws upon a Crozer paper, "Religion’s Answer to the Problem of Evil," to construct this handwritten outline.

King readily acknowledges the existence of evil as a force in the world and its deleterious effect on Christian faith but concludes by offering various rationales for belief in God despite the reality of evil.

I Introduction—We come face to face this morning with an old question: How can we believe in a good God in the midst of glaring evil? Many centuries ago Job confronted this problem. In the glorious days of Greek culture Sophocles wondered how the gods could look complacently down on so much suffering and pain. There is hardly a person here this morning who has not asked this question in some form. There are times when we all experience the heightening joy and soothing warmth of life’s summers. At such moments we don’t think about the problem of evil. But at other times we experience the bleak and desolate chill of life’s winter. At such a time we are prone to cry with the earnest believer Carlyle, “God sits in his heaven and does nothing.”

We seek to live by the faith that our God is all-good and all-powerful. But on every hand the facts of life seem to contradict this faith.

(1) Nature is often cruel with its floods and tornadoes, with the long ruthlessness of the evolutionary process, with dread diseases like cancer and ills like insanity. As John Stuart Mill said, “Nearly all the things which men are hanged and imprisoned for doing to one another are nature’s every day performances. Nature kills, burns, starves, freezes, poisons.”

(2) Nature is apparently non-moral. It makes no distinction between the evil
and the good. It is true that it sends its rain on the just and the unjust, but
the obverse is also true, it sends its floods and tornadoes on the good and
the evil.\(^6\)

(3) The world seems positively immoral at times. The innocent suffer for the
deeds of the evil

In the midst of all of this we are prone to ask where is God? How can we recon-
cile an all-good and all-powerful God with the glaring facts of evil? This is the
question the men have struggled to answered in every generation. The
answered to this problem can be broken down to about four

(1) Dualism is perhaps the simplest answer

(2) The second answer may be called the legalistic. It rests on the principle of re-
tribution. The universe rests on law and evil is simply the results of wrongdo-
ing. Judaism used this in its view that goodness brings prosperity\(^7\)

(3) There is the position absolute idealism in its various forms

(a) Looked at from the whole it is not evil\(^8\)

(b) Christian science view\(^9\)

(4) The disciplinary view. Pain and sorrow are here to develop character.\(^10\)

Now the real question is Why do we believe in a good God in the midst of glar-
ing evil?

(A) The first reason is because disbelief in a good God presents more problems
than it solves. It is difficult to explain evil the presence of evil in the world
of a good God, but it is more difficult to explain the presence of good in a
world of no God

1. The [vast\(^2\)] & orderly structure of the cosmic order
2. Michael Angelo
3. Handel
4. Plato
5. Shakespeare
6. A great person or a child where did it come from
7. Going out look at the stars

(B) The second reason why we believe in a good God is that all the suffer-
ning and pain we bear come from four factors, and all four of these factor are
necessary for the existence of a good world

\(^6\) Cf Matthew 5:45
\(^7\) King, "Religion's Answer to the Problem of Evil," in Papers 1:418. "A second view explains physical
evils as a punishment for moral evils. Such a view rests in the principle of retribution. This view goes back
to the old Deuteronomic idea that prosperity follows pious and righteous."

\(^8\) King, "Religion's Answer to the Problem of Evil," in Papers 1:420. "There is a fourth position which
explains evil as incomplete good. Absolute idealists like Hegel and his followers have been strong pro-
onents of this view."

\(^9\) The Church of Christ, Scientist teaches that sickness, evil, and sin are all merely illusions, with no
basis in reality. The Church's founder, Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910), espoused the benefits of spiritual
healing through prayer over the practices of medical science.

\(^10\) King, "Religion's Answer to the Problem of Evil," in Papers 1:419. "A third view explains nonmoral
evils as disciplinary rather than penal. Here the purpose of evil is to reform or to test rather than to pun-
ish. Character often develops out of hardship."
First, the freedom of will
Second, the evolutionary nature of the world
Third, the law-abidingness of the universe
Fourth, the intermeshed relationships of human life

AD CSKC Sermon file, folder 70, “Christ the Center of our Faith” / “How to Believe in a Good God in the Midst of Glaring Evil”

“Redirecting Our Missionary Zeal”
[22 January 1956]
[Montgomery, Ala]

In this handwritten outline King criticizes the hypocrisy of international missionary efforts in light of domestic racial injustice. “The paradox of it all is that the white man considers himself the supreme missionary. He sends [millions] of dollars to the foreign field And in the midst of that he tramples over the Negro.”

“Go ye therefore into all the world and preach the gospel”

I Intro—Ever since the dawn of the Christian era, Christians have considered it a serious part of their basic responsibility to carry the gospel of Jesus Christ into all the world and to every creature

II This is one of the things that distinguishes Christianity from the other great religions of the world. Most of the other great religions have had profound admiration for their founders, but they do not consider it a serious part of their responsibility to carry the message of their founders into all the world—Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Mohammedanism.

III Christianity has never been content to wrap itself up in the garments of any particular society.

IV If there is any one word that characterizes our creed it is go. It started with Jesus and continued with Paul.
Go ye into all the world
I must need you through [word illegible]

V Now, this demand to carry the gospel to every creature has long since been known as missionary work. From the beginning, Christians have been considered missionaries.

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1 Cf Matthew 28:19. Dexter’s 22 January 1956 program indicates that King preached this sermon.
2 In a similar sermon filed in the same folder, King followed this point with a reminder “Use the ill of something being so good to hold. (A secret or a piece of cake being so good that it must be shared) The Gospel is good news” (King, “The Mission of the Church,” 1933–1956). King also considered this illustration in “Propagandizing Christianity,” Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 12 September 1954, pp 184–187 in this volume.