"It's Hard to Be a Christian"

[5 February 1956]
[Montgomery, Ala.]

just a few days after his home in Montgomery was bombed, King delivered a sermon to his Dexter congregation that may have been based on this handwritten outline. He refers to the story of the Good Samaritan, noting, "The question of the Samaritan was: What will happen to this man if I [don't] stop to help him. Ultimately the thing that determines whether a man is a Christian is how he answers this question." King concludes, "Taking up the cross is the voluntary or deliberate choice of putting ourselves without reservation at the service of Christ and his kingdom, it is putting our whole being in the struggle against evil, whatever the cost."

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." Mt. 16:24

(1) One of the most prevalent illusions of modern life is the belief that it is easy to be a Christian. In so many quarter Christianity has been relegated to a bundle of sentimental teachings.

(2) The popular preachers of our day are men like [Norman Vincent] Peale.

(3) So Xn ends up little more than a glorified "aspin tablet" an opiate of the people.

(4) We have substituted a cushion for a cross. We have substituted the soothing lemonade of escape for the bitter cup of reality. We have a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds.

(5) We are regimenting men not regenerating them. This is seen quite clearly in so many of our churches.

The shouting church

The dignified church

(6) They do it every Sunday.

Quote E Stanley Jones

---

1 On 30 January 1956 the MIA filed a federal suit challenging the segregation of Montgomery buses. Later that evening, while King addressed a crowd of two thousand at a mass meeting at First Baptist Church, his home was bombed. He rushed home to find his wife, Coretta, and their daughter, Yolanda, unharmed. King then urged the crowd gathered outside his home to remain nonviolent. For more on this, see Joe Azbell, "Blast Rocks Residence of Bus Boycott Leader," 3 January 1956, in Papers 3:114-115. Dexter's program from 2 February 1956 indicates King preached "It's Hard to Be a Christian."

2 Matthew 16:24

3 Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Introduction" (1844).

4 King refers to a poem from Harry Emerson Fosdick's sermon "Christianity Not a Form But a Force," in A Great Time to Be Alive, p. 89. For this poem's text, see King, "A Religion of Doing," Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 4 July 1954, p. 172 in this volume.

5 King may refer to a quote by E Stanley Jones that King also used in an earlier sermon. "We are inoculating the world with a mild form of Christianity, so that it is now practically immune against the real thing." (see note 6 to King, "A Religion of Doing," 4 July 1954, p. 172 in this volume.)
Jesus never left men with such illusions. He made it crystal clear that his gospel was difficult.

I. It demands that we subordinate our clamoring egos to the pressing concerns of God's Kingdom. This is the meaning of self-denial. There is nothing vague and ambiguous about the word "deny." It is appallingly sharp and clear. It means what it says. It is saying "no" to

Jesus is hard because it demands a dangerous and costly altruism. It demands that the "I" be immersed in the deep waters of "thou"

your "self" in order to say "yes" to God. It is subjecting the whole structure of your ego to the demands of God's ego.

(a) Now this is not easy. This is where most of us miss the mark.

(b) Tell the story of the Good Samaritan. The question of the Levite & Priest. What will happen to me if I stop to help this man? The question of the Samaritan was, What will happen to this man if I don't stop to help him? Ultimately the thing that determines whether a man is a Christian is how he answers this question.

(c) Here is a boy or girl, confronted with some undesirable habit. To often the first question that is asked is, What will happen to me, my popularity, my social acceptance is I don't do this. How many times have we degraded our characters trampled over principles because we were more concerned about our selfish desires than about the transcendent principles of God.

(D) There are many white people who are for justice and fair play, but they are afraid to speak. (Give example of preachers.)

(E) Christianity is hard because it demands a dangerous and costly altruism. It demands that the "I" be immersed in the deep waters of the "thou".

II. There is a second point in this text which well illustrates the hardness of the Christian life. It is the word "cross."

(a) Jesus is not giving some mechanical scheme to be his disciple. Nor is he giving some ritualistic form such as wearing a cross.

(b) Jesus is not speaking of burdens we are forced to bear. A burden is the inevitable load which life lays on every man.

(c) Taking up the cross is the voluntary or deliberate choice of putting ourselves without reservation at the service of Christ and his kingdom, it is putting our whole being in the struggle against evil, whatever the cost.