

Sept 1956

“Living Under the Tensions of Modern Life,”
Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue
Baptist Church

[September 1956]
[Montgomery, Ala.]

The emotionally and physically trying bus boycott was in its tenth month when King delivered a sermon with this title. He laments “Oh, I know all of us sometimes worry about our particular situation. We worry about the fact that we live now amid the tension of the Southland. We worry about what will, what’s going to happen in this whole struggle toward integration.” He appeals to them to draw on resources of strength and hope. “How is it that we can keep walking in Montgomery? How is it that we can keep burning out our rubber? How is it that we can keep living under tension? And we can cry out to the nation, ‘We can do it because we know that as we walk God walks with us.’” The following text is taken from an audio recording of the service.

[Gap in recording] use as the subject this morning, “Living Under the Tensions of Modern Life.”¹ We use as a basis for our discussion together the twenty-eighth verse of the eleventh chapter of the gospel as recorded by St. Matthew: “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

There can be no gainsaying of the fact that modern life is characterized by endless tensions. On all levels of life, men are experiencing disruption and conflict, self-destruction and meaninglessness. And if we turn our eyes around our nation, we discover that the psychopathic wards of our hospitals are filled today. Fear and anxiety have risen to the throne of modern life and very few persons escape the influence of their powerful domination. It is probably true to say that we live today in one of the most, if not the most, frustrated generations of all human history. Now what accounts for this tension, this anxiety, this confusion so characteristic of modern life? What is the causal basis for all of the tensions of our modern world? I will say that if we are to find the cause we must look for more than one cause and it’s a plurality of causes that have all conjoined to make for the tensions of our generation.

First, there is a tension that comes as a result of the competitive struggle to make a living. It is true to say that our whole capitalistic economy is based on the profit motive under more or less competitive conditions. And whether we want to or not, we all find ourselves engaged in the competitive struggle to make a living. Sometimes we come to the point of feeling that life is a sort of endless struggle to pay bills and to pay taxes and to buy food to eat. We go to work to make the money to buy the food to gain the strength to go back to work, and life sometimes seems to be an

¹ Harry Emerson Fosdick’s sermon “Living Under Tension” may have inspired the title of King’s sermon (Fosdick, *Living Under Tension*, pp. 1–10). King’s secretary Maude Ballou made a September 1956 entry in her diary, referring to a sermon with this title: “Went to hear Martin preach yesterday. Inspiring, meaningful and timely” (Ballou, *Diary*, July–26 November 1956).

Sept 1956

endless chain of monotony, an endless round of sameness. The competitive struggle to make a living makes for tensions throughout modern life, and that is why Karen Horney, the great psychologist, contends that it is this struggle to make a living in the competitive structure of our economic system that makes for the neurotic personality of our times.² There is some truth there, that tension grows out of the competitive struggle to make a living in this modern world.

Then again, we find that that tension grows out of the whole of modern urbanization and the industrial structure of our modern life. We live in an age in which men live in big cities and mass populations. It is a machine age in which we have vast industrial [orders?]. And there is a danger that men will feel in such a system that they are lost in the crowd. So men get in the big cities and feel a sense of lostness, feel that they are lost amid all of the vast numbers that they encounter every day. And then, there is a danger that men will feel that they are mere cogs in a vast industrial machine because it is an industrial world, and man so often becomes depersonalized, the machine becomes the end. This sense of not belonging, this sense of loneliness, characterizes modern life. And so many of us are lonely in a crowd because there is that basic drive that characterizes the whole of human nature to want to belong, to have a sense of status. And there is so much in our modern world that makes us feel that we don't belong, that we are merely cogs in a vast industrial wheel that moves on.

And then, there is a tension that results from the fears accompanying a war-torn world. We find ourselves today standing amid the threat of war at every hand, and we often wonder what will happen. We feel at times that the future is uncertain, and we look out and feel that the future is shrouded with impenetrable obscurities, that we don't know how things will turn out. Every young man that grows up in this world has to face the fact that he just doesn't know how the future will turn out because there is the endless round of preparing for war. And we know today that through atomic development we have now come to the point that we tread a narrow [word *maudible*] that skirts a blazing inferno that Dante could never dictate.³ We know that we stand today at any moment to be plunged across the abyss of atomic destruction. And all of that causes us to fear and live in tension and agony, wondering how things will turn out. This is a part of the general fear and tension and anxiety of modern life.

Then, there is the tension that comes as a result of man's general finite situation. Man has to face the fact that he's finite, that he is inevitably limited, that he's caught up within the categories of time and space. And he faces this thing that he may not be. That's why one great school of modern philosophy, known as existentialism, cries out that the great threat of modern life is the threat of nonbeing and every man has to live under the threat of nonbeing, that he must face this fact soon or later in his life, that hovering over him is the threat of nonbeing.⁴ He finds his self asking with Shakespeare, "To be or not to be, that's the question," but he faces the

² Karen Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1937).

³ King refers to Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* (1314), the first volume of his epic poem *Divine Comedy*.

⁴ King may refer to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956).

Sept 1956

fact that he may not be.⁵ And he knows that there will come a moment that he will have to go into his room and pull down the shades and turn out the lights and take off his shoes and walk down to the chilly waters of death. And he confronts this *threat* of nonbeing that drives through the whole structure of modern life. And because of that he lives in tension and dismay and despair because he knows that hanging over him is the cloud of nonbeing, the threat of nothingness. He wonders, "Where does it go from here?" This is the tension of modern life, and these things account for the tension. These things all come together and leave all of us standing amid the tension of modern life.

But then in the midst of all of that, a voice rings out through all of the generations saying, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I'll give you rest." That voice cries out to us saying, "Come unto me, all ye that are laboring every day trying to make a living. You're caught in this round of life, in this chain of life. All of those who are laboring trying to explain life, all of those who are laboring under all of the problems of life, those who are heavy laden with burdens of despair, those who are laden with fear, those who are laden with anxieties and disappointment, *come* unto me and I will give you rest." That's the voice that comes crying out to modern life, which gives us a little solace to carry us on. And if we didn't hear that voice, we couldn't make it. That voice simply says to us that the answer to the tension of modern life is to sufficiently commit ourselves to Christ and to be sure that we have a truly religious bit of life. For until a man discovers a religious attitude of life, he lives life in eternal frustration, and he finds himself crying out unconsciously with Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that "Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."⁶ Until he gets some *religion*, he cannot stand up amid the tensions of modern life. That is why H. G. Wells can cry out and say that a man who is not religious begins at nowhere and ends at nothing.⁷ For religion is like a mighty wind that knocks down doors and breaks down walls and makes that possible, and even easy, which seems difficult and impossible. It is religion, it is a proper religious faith that is the answer to the tensions of life.

I have a statement here from a man you should know, the great psychiatrist Jung, who was greatly influenced by Sigmund Freud, but who went a little beyond Freud. But most of his life spent, had been spent counseling people who have confronted the problems of life, the agony of modern life. And this is what Jung says. He says:

During the past thirty years, people from all the civilized countries of the earth have consulted me. I have treated many hundreds of patients, the larger number being Protestants, the smaller number Jews, and not more than five or six believing Catholics. Among all my patients, in the second half of life—that is to say over thirty-five—there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life.⁸

⁵ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 3, sc. 1.

⁶ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, act 5, sc. 5.

⁷ Cf. Wells, *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, p. 442.

⁸ C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, p. 264. Fosdick also quoted Jung in his essay "The Principle of Self-Acceptance" (Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, p. 74).

Sept 1956

That's not a preacher talking, that's a psychiatrist talking. That's a psychoanalyst talking. He's saying, in substance, that people face the frustrations and bewildering experiences in life so often because they do not have the proper religious bent on life. So the experiences of life come before them as mighty winds and knock them down because they have nothing within to face them. Facing the tensions of modern life through the proper religious faith. That's what Jesus is saying, "Come unto me. Sufficiently commit yourself to religion, and you will make it."

Now what does religion give us? What does genuine religion give us? What is it that Christ gives us to help us face the tensions of life and to stand up amid the tensions of life? What is it that he gives us to keep us going? What is it that genuine religion has to offer for us to live the difficult [*reign?*] of life? I think the first thing is that religion gives us a capacity to accept ourselves. And I think that is one of the first lessons that all of us should learn, the principle of self-acceptance.⁹ This accounts for one of the big problems in modern life. So many people have been plunged across the abyss of emotional fatalism because they did not learn this simple lesson, the lesson of self-acceptance. So many of us hide this tragic gap between our desired self and our actual self. We find ourselves living life trying to be what we are not and what we can't be. So genuine religion says to us in no uncertain terms, "Accept yourself." You cannot be anybody else. You can't be me and I can't be you. And your great prayer in life should be, "Lord help me to accept my tools. However dull they are, help me to accept them. And then Lord, after I have accepted my tools, then help me to set out and do what I can do with my tools." For there is a bit of latent creativity within all of us, seeking to break forth, and that creativity is often blocked because we are trying to be somebody else, trying to be what we aren't. There is nothing more tragic than to see an individual whose ambitions outdistance his capacity. That's a tragic sight.

So that we have in life this responsibility to be sure that we are willing to face our capacities as they are and do the best we can with them, and that's all God requires. That's all that stands before you is to do it well. And when you stand before the judgment of all eternity, there is a great reward. "Well done, thy good and faithful servant. You have been good, faithful over a few things. Come up high, and I'll make you rule over many."¹⁰ That is true for the two-talent man as well as the five-talent man, and it would have been true of the one-talent man if he had used it.¹¹

We must live by this principle of self-acceptance. Oh, I know a lot of things in life that I would like to have, and I just have to face the fact that I don't have them and live by it. That means accepting everything, even your looks. I wish the Lord had made me tall, tan, and handsome, and it would have been much better for my sake. I would have enjoyed that the mirror would have been much more meaningful to me. But I can't spend all of my life worrying because the Lord didn't make me that

⁹ Fosdick discussed religion's role in promoting self-respect in "The Principle of Self-Acceptance" (Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, pp. 73-78).

¹⁰ Cf. Matthew 25:21, 23.

¹¹ King refers to Jesus' parable of the talents, in which he praises those with five and two talents for using them constructively but condemns the person with one talent for burying it in the ground (Matthew 25:14-30).

Sept 1956

way We must come with that bit of humor to see that *we* must accept *ourselves* as we are That becomes the first lesson of life, and genuine religion gives us that so that we rise above the *competitive* tension of life because we accept ourselves as we are, and we begin to say like Moses said in *Green Pastures*, "Lord, I ain't much but I's all I got"¹² And we live by that principle, and you live through life with a harmony that men all around you can never understand because you learned a great secret, the secret and the principle of self-acceptance

But not only that, high religion, genuine religion, gives you the capacity to accept the realities of life, not only yourself but the external circumstances that beat up against you in life That is one of the things that makes, also, for a lot of the problems of modern life that so many people have not mastered this art of accepting life in a balanced perspective We must come to see that life is a pendulum swinging between two opposites—a pendulum swinging between disappointment and fulfillment, between success and failure, between joy and sorrow And that's life And we never mask the life, and we think that life must be only joyous and happy and that we must live in terms of fulfillment Disappointment is just as much a part of life as fulfillment Failure is just as much a part of life as success, sorrow as much a part of life as joy That is the thing that religion helps us to see That is the greatness of Jesus And he goes one day out, standing amid the Good Friday's light He knows that Good Friday much as a part, is as much a part of life as Easter, and life somehow is a pendulum swinging between Good Friday and Easter, swinging between agony and triumph, swinging between darkness and light. And he who learns that has learned the lesson of life, so that he doesn't break down when he faces the other side of the pendulum When the bitter moment of life come, he doesn't break down nor does he get overjoyous when the sweet moment of life come because he knows that this is the endless trend of life

This is the way it moves This is what carries life on Why it is that way maybe we do not fully understand, but it is Religion says, "Yes, there is a crown you wear, but before the crown you wear there is a cross you must bear" We learned that when we learned to live close to Jesus, and we go unto Christ He gives us the rest that comes for learning, from learning this lesson, that life is a pendulum, and it can throw us around and throw us [*wild when we let it?*] But one day we might be rich, and that doesn't bother us One day we might be poor, and that doesn't bother us One day we might be happy, and that doesn't particularly bother us, and one day we might be unhappy, and that doesn't particularly bother us because we know that life is going to swing right back to the other opposite

We learned that and we learned then to live with a harmony, with an inner peace, that the world can't understand That is why Jesus says, "My peace I leave with you, not as the world giveth."¹³ The world can't understand this peace for it is an inner peace, it is a tranquil soul amid the external accidents of circumstance. Christ gives us that If we will only come unto Him, He gives us the capacity to accept the oppo-

¹² Cf. Marc Connelly, *The Green Pastures A Fable* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1929), p. 68. See also Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, p. 78. "Says Noah in the play *Green Pastures*, 'I ain' very much but I'se all I got'."

¹³ John 14:27

Sept 1956

sites of life Not only that Religion at its best, and when we go unto Christ we discover this, that there is something called forgiveness for the sins we commit That too is a great release, isn't it? That is another lesson that we must all learn if we are to live amid the tensions of modern life

The psychologists tell us on every hand that a lot of people are frustrated and disillusioned today because they have inner guilt feelings, and these inner feelings of guilt begin to accumulate You know enough about psychoanalysis, I'm sure, to understand what they're talking about, for when they talk about this thing they're talking about something realistic Freud used to talk about this thing in his psychological system about [*words inaudible*] man here having an impression, and if it doesn't become an expression it becomes a repression But all of the psychologists tell us that it's dangerous to repress our emotions, that we must always keep them on the forefront of consciousness And we must do something else—not repress but sublimate That's another big psychological word that we use in the modern world sublimation But religion gives you the art of sublimation, and so you don't repress your emotions, you substitute the positive for the negative of repression You sublimate instead of repressing, and that is what religion gives us when we go unto Christ There is something saying to us at all times that you can be forgiven If you commit a sin you don't have to give your life in a long state of worrying about it because you're going to make mistakes That's normal It's altogether human to sin and to make mistakes and to fall short of the mark But what religion says that when you fall short of the mark, if you will humble yourself and *bow* before the feet of Jesus and confess your sins, then he gives you a sense of forgiveness, and you can stand up with it and keep going And you no longer get bogged down in the past, but you move on in the future That's the way to live life

I was talking with a young lady some few weeks ago who had made a grave mistake she felt in life, and she hated to face [*the public?*] She hated to face anybody, and she hated to face herself And here she was with this guilt feeling deep down within her, afraid to face herself and afraid to face life And I said to her, "You must see something else You made a mistake, yes, but all of us make them Maybe ours are not seen as much as yours Maybe yours is glaring, and it's a mistake that everybody could see, but in our private lives all of us make them just as bad " And if I say to you this morning, "Bow down before the feet of Jesus, and there is your God, of Jesus, with the grace of God expressed in his being that will forgive us and say to us, 'Rise up and go on ' " That's what Jesus said to that woman when those men stood around her to cast their stones and they wanted to [*words inaudible*] Jesus looked at them and said, "He who is without sin cast the first stone " They began to drop their stones and run from that situation because they knew deep down within that they too were involved in the guilt of life But then Jesus looked at that lady and said, "Go and sin no more," as if to say, "Don't get bogged down in the path and worry because you've committed adultery Everybody has committed it, but turn around into the future and move on out, and you will become somebody because you have accepted my grace and my forgiving power"¹⁴

14 Cf John 8 3-11

Sept 1956

There is a man lost in the foreign country of life, but then something comes to him and it says he came to himself. But he didn't stop there, that passage says that he got up and decided to walk up the dusty road that he had once come down. And as he started up that road, there was at the end of that road a father with an outstretched arm saying, "Come home, and I will accept you." And he reaches back and gets the fatted calf and said, "Come on into the fold, and you can be made all over again."¹⁵ And that is the meaning of repentance. It means a right about-face, not only feeling sorry for your sins but turning around and deciding to move on and not do it anymore. And if you make the same mistake again, you try to turn around again and go on. And that is the joy, and that is the great example that the Christian religion gives to us. Christ says, "I will forgive you seventy times seven. I'll keep on forgiving you if you will keep on repenting."¹⁶ This saying gives you a balanced life. That's just good psychology that Jesus discovered years ago. He is saying simply what psychiatrists are saying today: keep your emotions on the forefront of conscious, and don't repress them because if you keep on doing that you will have a deep sense of guilt that will make a morbid personality and you will become a civil war fighting against yourself. "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden with sin, and I will give you the rest of forgiveness."

And then finally, I must conclude now. There is something else that religion does. There is something else that Jesus does. It reminds us that at the center of the universe is a God who is concerned about the welfare of his children. Religion gives us that. High religion gives it in terms of a great personality. Religion at its best does not look upon God as a process, not as some impersonal force that is a mere moral order that guides the destiny of the universe. High religion looks upon God as a personality. Oh, it's not limited like our personalities. God is much higher than we are. But there is something in God that makes it so that we are made in his image. God can think, God is a self-determined being. God has a purpose. God can reason. God can love.

Aristotle used to talk about God as "Unmoved Mover," but that's not the Christian God. Aristotle's God is merely a self-knowing God, but the Christian God is an other-loving God. He reaches out with His long arm of compassion and love and embraces all of His children. It gives life a meaning and a purpose that it could never have without Him. I say that if there is not a God, there ought to be one, and since there ought to be a God, there is a God, and if man doesn't find the God of the universe, he'll make him a God. He's got to find something that he would worship and give his ultimate allegiance to. And I say this morning that the Christian religion talks about a God, a personal God, who's concerned about us, who is our Father, who is our Redeemer. And this sense of religion and of this divine companionship says to us, on the one hand, that we are not lost in a universe fighting for goodness and for justice and love all by ourselves. It says somehow that although we live amid the tensions of life, although we live amid injustice, no matter what we live amid, it's not going to be like that always.

¹⁵ King refers to the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32.

¹⁶ Cf. Matthew 18:21-22.

Sept 1956

There's a good dose of psychology there. And I'm glad the slaves were the greatest psychologists that America'd ever known, for they learned something that we must always learn. And they said it in their broken language, "I'm so glad that trouble don't last always."¹⁷ They had learned something in their lives. And that's what real, determined faith in God gives you. Gives you the conviction that although trouble is rampant, that although you stand amid the forces of injustice, it will not last always because God controls the universe. And you can live without tension then. You can live under it.

Oh, I know all of us sometimes worry about our particular situation. We worry about the fact that we live now amid the tension of the Southland. We worry about what will happen, what's going to happen in this whole struggle toward integration. We hear those who will come on the television and say that the brain of the Negro is less than that of white, that it is inferior. We hear those who say that they will use any means to block the Negro from his advance. They attempt to keep the Negro segregated and exploited and keep him down under the iron yoke of oppression. And we begin to wonder, and sometimes I know we ask the question, "Why is it? Why does God leave us like this? Seventeen million of his children here in America, leaving us under these conditions, why is it?" But then there is something that comes out on the other side and says to us that it ain't gonna last always. There is that conviction that grows, "I'm so glad that segregation don't last always." And there is something that cries out to us and says that Kasper and Engelhardt and all of the other men that we hear talking—grim men that represent the death groans of a dying system—and all that they are saying are merely the last-minute breathing spots of a system that will inevitably die.¹⁸ For justice rules this world, love and goodwill, and it will triumph. They begin to wonder over the nation, how is it that we can keep walking in Montgomery? How is it that we can keep burning out our rubber? How is it that we can keep living under tension? And we can cry out to the nation, "We can do it because we know that as we walk God walks with us." [*Congregation*] (Yes)

We know that God is with us in all of the experiences of life. And we can walk and never get weary because we know that there is a great camp meeting in the promised land of freedom and justice.¹⁹ Then it gives us this faith in God, gives us the assurance that in nothing we confront in life do we stand alone, for there is cosmic companionship. As we face our individual troubles, as we face our individual problems, there is a God that stands with us. And isn't that consoling that at last long we can find something permanent, for we live in life and life is so elusive. As I've said it

17 In the published version of King's sermon "Knock at Midnight," King attributed this quote to Howard Thurman (King, *Strength to Love*, pp. 49, 144; Thurman, *Deep River: Reflections on the Religious Insight of Certain of the Negro Spirituals* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955], pp. 28–29).

18 King refers to vocal segregationist John Kasper, who aggressively opposed integration in Clinton, Tennessee in the fall of 1956, and Alabama State Senator Sam Engelhardt, Jr., who was chair of the Central Alabama Citizens' Council and authored the 1956 Alabama Placement Act, designed to circumvent the implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education* (see Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert E. DuBose, H. J. Palmer, H. H. Hubbard, S. S. Seay, and Ralph Abernathy to the Montgomery County Board of Education, 28 August 1959, in *Papers* 5:272).

19 King paraphrases the spiritual "There's a Great Camp Meeting."

Sept 1956 is this pendulum swinging between joy and sorrow, between disappointment and fulfillment, but there is something beyond all of that which is permanent. If we put our ultimate faith in that, we don't worry about anything. Oh, when we get our ultimate faith in God, everything in life can come to us, and yet we don't despair because we know that there is something permanent.

And I say to you this morning I'm not going to put my ultimate faith in these little gods that are here today and gone tomorrow. I'm not going to put my ultimate faith in a few dollars and cents and a few Cadillac cars and Buick convertibles. I'm going to put my ultimate faith in the God of the universe who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.²⁰ When all of these gods have passed away, He's still standing. And He is the eternal companion.

And now I can understand what the old people meant. They cried out in their poetic manner, not being able to talk about God in philosophical and theological categories. They could only talk about him in terms of their particular poetic imaginations expressed in the scripture. They could cry out throughout all the ages, "He's a rock in a weary land and a shelter in the time of storm. He is a lily of the valley and a bright and morning star." And then when they gave out they wouldn't stop there because they gave out a language and they just started crying out, "He's my everything. He's my sister and my brother, He's my mother and my father. He's all together lovely, He's fairest among ten thousand. And I'm going to worship Him forever because I believe that He can guide us throughout life."²¹ Come unto me, all ye that are laborers, beat down and burdened down because of the problems of modern life. Come unto me and I will give you the rest that will carry you through the generations. I will give you a peace that the world can never understand. My peace I leave with you, not as the world giveth, but a peace that passeth all understanding.²² God grant, if we will discover this, we will be able to live amid the tensions of modern life.

Oh God, our gracious heavenly [*recording interrupted*] Grant, oh God, that we will accept ourselves and accept the realities of life. And learn to come to thee for forgiveness so that we can wash our guilt away, then devote our whole lives to Thee. Grant, oh God, that as we do this, we will rise out of the tensions of modern life. We can live in the world, and yet above it. We can live in the tension, and yet beyond it. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

At MLKEC ET-32

20 Cf Hebrews 13:8

21 King cites Charles W. Fry's hymn "The Lily of the Valley" (1881)

22 Cf Philippians 4:7 and John 14:27