

11 Aug
1957

“Conquering Self-Centeredness,”
Sermon Delivered at
Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

[11 August 1957]
Montgomery, Ala.

*The following sermon was the fourth in a series concerning the “Problems of Personality Integration.” The previous Sunday King preached “Factors That Determine Character,” which was preceded in the series by “Overcoming an Inferiority Complex” and “The Mastery of Fear.”¹ In developing these sermons, King drew upon liberal clergyman Harry Emerson Fosdick’s *On Being a Real Person*. King made extensive notes in his personal copy of the book, and several of this sermon’s central themes and illustrations are taken from Fosdick’s fourth chapter, “Getting Oneself Off One’s Hands.”²*

Using Matthew 10:39 as the sermon text, King outlines the negative effects of being self-centered, and prescribes cures. He concludes by acknowledging his own struggles with self-centeredness: “I can hardly go into any city or any town in this nation where I’m not lavished with hospitality by peoples of all races and of all creeds. . . . Living under this it’s easy. . . . to feel that I’m something special, that I stand somewhere in this universe because of my ingenuity and that I’m important.” King prays, “Help me, O God, to see that I’m just a symbol of a movement. . . . Help me to realize that I’m where I am because of the forces of history and because of the fifty thousand Negroes of Alabama who will never get their names in the papers and in the headline.’ . . . Because if I don’t see that, I will become the biggest fool in America.” The following text is taken from an audio recording of the service.

I want to make two or three announcements as quickly as possible so that we can move on with our worship service and not stay here too long in the midst of extreme heat. Unfortunately, we do not have an air-conditioned church, so we find ourselves suffering the consequences. And I will try to keep that in mind this morning and make our services as brief as possible.

You will notice on your bulletin that Deacon [S. D.] Turner, who was a deacon in this church for many, many years, passed this past week. And the funeral will be held tomorrow morning at eleven o’clock at the Ross-Clayton Chapel, the funeral home there, the chapel at the funeral home. Now I’m urging each member to respond by being present at the funeral tomorrow. Especially, I am asking the choir to be there, as many of you as possibly can, and all of the deacons. I would like to ask the deacons to serve as the pallbearers. As you probably know, Brother Turner does not have any relatives. I understand that he has a son but we have no way of getting in touch with him. He hasn’t heard. I remember when I visited him, so often he mentioned the son, but the son had not, he had not heard from his son for more than twenty or thirty years. So that we don’t know how to get in touch with his son. So I had to do the arranging of the funeral. And I want to urge

1. *Dexter Echo*, 7 August 1957; King, “Overcoming an Inferiority Complex,” 14 July 1957.
2. Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943).

11 Aug
1957

every deacon of this church to be present tomorrow and to serve as pallbearers. I hope you will get that word around to the deacons who are not here this morning. That is, at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning at the chapel of the Ross-Clayton Funeral Home. And as many members as possible, as can come out, we're expecting you and also the choir. For Brother Turner served here many, many years. Most of you do not know him because he has been ill for about fourteen years. He's been out at Fraternal Hospital where he passed the other day. So that is probably why you do not know him. But he was an active deacon here until the time that he went into the hospital and has been there ever since.

The financial statement will be out after the morning worship. You can receive copies. And I would like to say that I noticed several members are behind in their pledges for some reason. I don't know why that is, but I would like to urge you to catch up in your pledges, for our responsibilities are the same. We have a budget to carry out in the summer months, just as in any other period of the year. And I'm urging you to do that and to bring those pledges up before too long, so that we can face the many responsibilities that we have ahead in our church.

[*Here King continues his announcements and welcomes visitors to the service.*]

Will the ushers come forward now for the morning offering? Let us prepare to give liberally with open hearts and open spirits for the causes ahead. I said just a few minutes ago that many of our members are behind in their pledges for some reason and I hope you will not get too far behind, that you will keep up. Because this is of vital importance, in order to be sure that our budget balances at all times. Let us remember that as the ushers come forward now.

O God, our Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for life and we thank Thee for health. We thank Thee for the ability to work and to live in this society. Help us to realize that as we make our money that we owe a portion of it to Thee. And help us to give it with open hearts and spirits, realizing that as we give, we give for the ongoing of Thy kingdom here on earth. Amen. [*recording interrupted*]

Blessed thou!
O words with heavenly comfort fraught!
Whate'er I do, whate'er I do, where'er I be,
Still 'tis God's hands that leadeth me!
He leadeth me, He leadeth me,
By His own hands He leadeth me.
His faithful follower, I will be,
For by His hand He leadeth me.³

Let us sing stanzas one, two, and three. [*congregation sings "He Leadeth Me"*]

I want to continue the series of sermons this morning that I started several weeks ago. The series dealing with problems of personality integration. This morning our subject is: "Conquering Self-Centeredness." "Conquering Self-Centeredness." I probably will not have time to do justice to this many-sided subject because of the heat. And I don't want to preach too long. But for the moments left, I at least want

3. King recites from the Christian hymn "He Leadeth Me."

11 Aug 1957 to suggest certain ways to conquer self-centeredness and at least place the subject before you. So that you can go out and add the meat and try, in some way, to make it meaningful and practical in your everyday lives.

We turn to the New Testament for our text this morning, a very familiar passage, a passage that I read in the morning lesson. It's found throughout the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke: "He that findeth his life, shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake, shall find it."⁴

An individual has not begun to live until he can rise above the narrow horizons of his particular individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity. And this is one of the big problems of life, that so many people never quite get to the point of rising above self. And so they end up the tragic victims of self-centeredness. They end up the victims of distorted and disrupted personality.

Life has its beginning and its maturity comes into being when an individual rises above self to something greater. Few individuals learn this, and so they go through life merely existing and never living. Now you see signs all along in your everyday life with individuals who are the victims of self-centeredness. They are the people who live an eternal "I." They do not have the capacity to project the "I" into the "Thou."⁵ They do not have the mental equipment for an eternal, dangerous and sometimes costly altruism. They live a life of perpetual egotism. And they are the victims all around of the egocentric predicament. They start out, the minute you talk with them, talking about what they can do, what they have done. They're the people who will tell you, before you talk with them five minutes, where they have been and who they know. They're the people who can tell you in a few seconds, how many degrees they have and where they went to school and how much money they have. We meet these people every day. And so this is not a foreign subject. It is not something far off. It is a problem that meets us in everyday life. We meet it in ourselves, we meet in other selves: the problem of self-centeredness.

Now, we can say to a certain extent that persons in this situation are persons who have really never grown up. They are still children, at a point. For you see, a child is inevitably, necessarily egocentric. He is a bundle of his own sensations, clamoring to be cared for. And, to be sure, he has his own social context. He belongs to his mother, but he cares for her only because he wants to be fed and protected. He does not care for his mother for her sake but he cares for his mother for his own sake. And so a child is inevitably egocentric, inevitably self-centered. And that is why Dr. Burnham says that during the first six or seven years of development, the ego is dominant within the child. And both in behavior and in attitudes, a child is a victim of self-centeredness.⁶ This is a part of the early devel-

4. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are referred to as the "synoptic gospels" because they possess commonalities that the fourth gospel, John, does not. Cf. Matthew 10:39, Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24, and Luke 17:33.

5. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (1937).

6. King adopts this passage from *On Being a Real Person*: "From one point of view this may be regarded as failure to grow up. An infant is necessarily egocentric. He is a bundle of his own sensations, clamoring to be taken care of. To be sure, he has vital social relationships; he belongs to his mother, but all he wants her for is food and protection. He does not care for her nor try to understand her *for her sake*; he wants her, and later everyone else within his reach, solely for his own sake. Self-centered-

11 Aug
1957

opment of a little child. When people become mature, they are to rise above this. I look at my little daughter every day and she wants certain things and when she wants them, she wants them. And she almost cries out, "I want what I want when I want it." She is not concerned about what I think about it or what Mrs. King thinks about it. She wants it. She's a child and that's very natural and normal for a child. She is inevitably self-centered because she's a child.

But when one matures, when one rises above the early years of childhood, he begins to love people for their own sake. He turns himself to higher loyalties. He gives himself to something outside of himself. He gives himself to causes that he lives for and sometimes will even die for. He comes to the point that now he can rise above his individualistic concerns, and he understands then what Jesus meant when he says, "He who finds his life shall lose it; he who loses his life for my sake, shall find it."⁷ In other words, he who finds his ego shall lose his ego, but he who loseth his ego for my sake, shall find it. And so you see people who are apparently selfish; it isn't merely an ethical issue but it is a psychological issue.⁸ They are the victims of arrested development, and they are still children. They haven't grown up. And like a modern novelist says about one of his characters, "Edith is a little country, bounded on the east and the west, on the north and the south, by Edith."⁹ And so many people are little countries, bounded all around by themselves and they never quite get out of themselves. And these are the persons who are victimized with arrested development.

Now the consequences, the disruptive effects of such self-centeredness, such egocentric desires, are tragic. And we see these every day. At first, it leads to frustration and disillusionment and unhappiness at many points. For usually when people are self-centered, they are self-centered because they are seeking attention, they want to be admired and this is the way they set out to do it. But in the process, because of their self-centeredness, they are not admired; they are mawkish and people don't want to be bothered with them. And so the very thing they seek, they never get. And they end up frustrated and unhappy and disillusioned.¹⁰

ness is the inevitable attitude of early childhood. Says Dr. William Burnham: "The first period up to the age of seven or eight is one in which the ego is dominant. Both the child's behavior and the child's thinking are alike egocentric. It is the child's business to be selfish at this period" (Fosdick, p. 80; Fosdick's quotation is from William Henry Burnham's *The Wholesome Personality* [New York: D. Appleton, 1932], p. 49).

7. Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, pp. 80–81: "For a real person, maturely developed, is not egocentric. He has objective interests; he cares for other people for their sakes; he discovers causes and values for which he lives and might even die. . . . his enduring satisfactions are found in letting himself go for aims outside himself, and as Jesus said, he finds life by losing it."

8. On page 96 of Fosdick's *On Being a Real Person*, King underlined the following lines: "In them Jesus' basic principle is shown to be not alone great ethics but sound psychology—only he who loses life saves it, only he who expends life keeps it, only he who invests life enriches it."

9. Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, p. 81: "Moralists censure them as selfish, but beneath the ethical is a psychological problem—they are specimens of arrested development. Says a contemporary novelist about one of her characters: 'Edith was a little country bounded on the north, south, east, and west by Edith.'" Fosdick quotes novelist Martha Ostenso, "Gardenias in Her Hair," *Pictorial Review* 38 (September 1937): 84.

10. Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, pp. 81–82: "The disruptive effects of such egocentricity are serious. Like anybody else, the self-centered person wants to be appreciated; indeed like a spoiled child, he insists on it all the more ravenously, the more self-centered he is; but his egocentricity in any so-

11 Aug
1957

I'm sure you have seen people in life who are so desirous of gaining attention that if they cannot have and gain attention through normal channels, through normal social channels, they will gain it through anti-social means. There are those people who are so desirous of gaining attention that if everybody says, "Yes," they automatically say, "No," in order to be seen and to be heard. They are so self-centered that they must gain attention and they must be seen in order to survive. They want to be admired and in their quest for admiration, they don't gain it and in their failure to gain it, they become frustrated and bewildered and disillusioned.

Also, it leads to extreme sensitiveness. The individual who is self-centered, the individual who is egocentric ends up being very sensitive, a very touchy person. And that is one of the tragic effects of a self-centered attitude, that it leads to a very sensitive and touchy response toward the universe. These are the people you have to handle with kid gloves because they are touchy, they are sensitive. And they are sensitive because they are self-centered. They are too absorbed in self and anything gets them off, anything makes them angry. Anything makes them feel that people are looking over them because of a tragic self-centeredness. That even leads to the point that the individual is not capable of facing trouble and the hard moments of life. One can become so self-centered, so egocentric that when the hard and difficult moments of life come, he cannot face them because he's too centered in himself. These are the people who cannot face disappointments. These are the people who cannot face being defeated. These are the people who cannot face being criticized. These are the people who cannot face these many experiences of life which inevitably come because they are too centered in themselves. In time, somebody criticizes them, time somebody says something about them that they don't like too well, time they are disappointed, time they are defeated, even in a little game, they end up broken-hearted. They can't stand up under it because they are centered in self.

Then, finally, it can become so morbid that it rises to ominous proportions and leads to a tragic sense of persecution. There are persons who come to the point that they are so self-centered that they end up with a persecution complex and the end result is insanity. They end up thinking that the universe stands against them, that everybody is against them. They are turning around within themselves. They are little solar systems within themselves and they can't see beyond that. And as a result of their failure to get out of self, they end up with a persecution complex and sometimes madness and insanity. These are some of the effects of self-centeredness.

Now one will inevitably raise the question: How then do we conquer self-centeredness? How do we get away from this thing that we call self-centeredness? How can we live in this universe with a balance and with a type of perspective that keeps us going smoothly and we are not too absorbed in self? How do we do it? Let me make two or three suggestions and I can assure you that these suggestions will not at all solve the problem. For you will have to solve it, in many points, for yourself. But at least these things, I hope, will give you some guidance.

cial group makes admiration difficult. . . . The egocentrics, therefore, are habitually baffled, frustrated, and unhappy."

11 Aug
1957

I think one of the best ways to face this problem of self-centeredness is to discover some cause and some purpose, some loyalty outside of yourself and give yourself to that something. The best way to handle it is not to suppress the ego but to extend the ego into objectively meaningful channels.¹¹ And so many people are unhappy because they aren't doing anything. They're self-centered because they aren't doing anything. They haven't given themselves to anything and they just move around in their little circles. One of the ways to rise above this self-centeredness is to move away from self and objectify yourself in something outside of yourself. Find some great cause and some great purpose, some loyalty to which you can give yourself and become so absorbed in that something that you give your life to it. Men and women have done this throughout all of the generations. And they have found that necessary ego satisfaction that life presents and that one desires through projecting self in something outside of self. As I said, you don't solve the problem by trying to trample over the ego altogether. That doesn't solve the problem. For you will always have the ego and the ego has certain desires, certain desires for significance. The three great psychoanalysts of this age, of this century, pointed out that there are certain basic desires that human beings have and that they long for and that they seek at any cost. And so for Freud the basic desire was to be loved. Jung would say that the basic desire is to be secure. But then Adler comes along and says the basic desire of human nature is to feel important and a sense of significance.¹² And I think of all of those, probably—certainly all are significant but the one that Adler mentions is probably even more significant than any: that all human beings have a desire to belong and to feel significant and important.¹³

And the way to solve this problem is not to drown out the ego but to find your sense of importance in something outside of the self. And you are then able to live because you have given your life to something outside and something that is meaningful, objectified. You rise above this self-absorption to something outside. We look through history. We see that biography is a running commentary of this. We see a Wilberforce.¹⁴ We see him somehow satisfying his desire by absorbing his life in the slave trade, those who are victims of the slave trade. We see a Florence Nightingale.¹⁵ We see her finding meaning and finding a sense of belonging by giving herself to a great cause, to the unnursed wounded. We see an Albert Schweitzer who looks at men in dark Africa who have been the victims of colonial-

11. On page 91 of Fosdick's *On Being a Real Person*, King underlined the following: "They can, and do, and if they are to be mature they must, get out of themselves, not by suppressing their egos but by extending them." In the right-hand margin King wrote: "We get out of ourselves, not by suppressing our egos, but by extending them. One must expand his ego into an extended self."

12. Alfred Adler (1870–1937) was an Austrian psychiatrist.

13. Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, p. 97: "Of the three major figures in modern psychiatry, Freud may roughly be represented as saying that man wants most of all to be loved; Jung that he wants most of all to feel secure; Adler that he wants most of all to feel significant. Leaving the question of priority open, that last desire is insistent in all of us. Every man wants to feel that he counts."

14. William Wilberforce (1759–1833) was a British politician who worked for the abolition of slavery.

15. Florence Nightingale (1820–1910) directed British nursing services in Turkey during the Crimean War. In London she founded the world's first training school for nurses in 1860.

11 Aug
1957 ism and imperialism and there he gives his life to that. He objectifies himself in this great cause. And then we can even find Jesus totally objectifying himself when he cries out, "Ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."¹⁶

This is the way to go through life with a balance, with the proper perspective because you've given yourself to something greater than self. Sometimes it's friends, sometimes it's family, sometimes it's a great cause, it's a great loyalty, but give yourself to that something and life becomes meaningful. I've seen people who discovered a great meaning in their jobs and they became so absorbed in that that they didn't have time to become self-centered. They loved their job. And the great prayer that anyone could pray at that point is: "O God, help me to love my job as this individual loves his or hers. O God, help me to give my self to my work and to my job and to my allegiance as this individual does." And this is the way out. And I think this is what [*Ralph Waldo*] Emerson meant when he said: "O, see how the masses of men worry themselves into nameless graves, while here and there, some great unselfish soul forgets himself into immortality." And this becomes a point of balance when you can forget yourself into immortality. You're not so absorbed in self, but you are absorbed in something beyond self.

And there is another way to rise above self-centeredness and that is by having the proper inner attitude toward your position or toward your status in life or whatever it is. You conquer self-centeredness by coming to the point of seeing that you are where you are today because somebody helped you to get there. And so many people, you see, live a self-centered, egocentric life because they have the attitude that they are responsible for everything and for their position in life. For everything they do in life, they feel, somehow, that they are responsible and solely responsible for it.

An individual gets away from this type of self-centeredness when he pauses enough to see that no matter what he does in life, he does that because somebody helped him to do it. And he then gains the type of perspective and the type of balance which keeps him from becoming self-centered. He comes to see that somebody stands in the background, often doing a little job in a big way, making it possible for him to do what he's doing. Can you believe that? That no matter where you stand, no matter how much popularity you have, no matter how much education you have, no matter how much money you have, you have it because somebody in this universe helped you to get it. And when you see that, you can't be arrogant, you can't be supercilious. You discover that you have your position because of the events of history and because of individuals in the background making it possible for you to stand there.

Would you allow me to share a personal experience with you this morning? And I say it only because I think it has bearing on this message. One of the problems that I have to face and even fight every day is this problem of self-centeredness,

16. Cf. Matthew 25:40. Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, p. 91: "Wilberforce can identify himself with the victims of the slave trade, Florence Nightingale with the unnursed wounded in a war, and Jesus can carry this objectification of himself so far that he says, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.'"

11 Aug
1957

this tendency that can so easily come to my life now that I'm something special, that I'm something important. Living over the past year, I can hardly go into any city or any town in this nation where I'm not lavished with hospitality by peoples of all races and of all creeds. I can hardly go anywhere to speak in this nation where hundreds and thousands of people are not turned away because of lack of space. And then after speaking, I often have to be rushed out to get away from the crowd rushing for autographs. I can hardly walk the street in any city of this nation where I'm not confronted with people running up the street, "Isn't this Reverend King of Alabama?" Living under this it's easy, it's a dangerous tendency that I will come to feel that I'm something special, that I stand somewhere in this universe because of my ingenuity and that I'm important, that I can walk around life with a type of arrogance because of an importance that I have. And one of the prayers that I pray to God everyday is: "O God, help me to see myself in my true perspective. Help me, O God, to see that I'm just a symbol of a movement. Help me to see that I'm the victim of what the Germans call a *Zeitgeist* and that something was getting ready to happen in history; history was ready for it. And that a boycott would have taken place in Montgomery, Alabama, if I had never come to Alabama. Help me to realize that I'm where I am because of the forces of history and because of the fifty thousand Negroes of Alabama who will never get their names in the papers and in the headline. O God, help me to see that where I stand today, I stand because others helped me to stand there and because the forces of history projected me there. And this moment would have come in history even if M. L. King had never been born." And when we come to see that, we stand with a humility. This is the prayer I pray to God every day, "Lord help me to see M. L. King as M. L. King in his true perspective." Because if I don't see that, I will become the biggest fool in America.

And I think that's why Jesus looked at a man one day and called him a fool.¹⁷ He was standing around talking about his barns. And he said, "I'm going to tear down my barns and build greater barns and I'm just going to say to my soul, 'Eat, drink and be merry.'" Jesus looked at that man and called him a fool. And Jesus called him a fool because he didn't have sense enough to realize that he stood where he was in terms of his barns and in terms of his wealth because somebody in the background helped him to get there. We never get anywhere in this world without the forces of history and individual persons in the background helping us to get there.

We think of Marian Anderson.¹⁸ We think of this great person who stands on the stage of history, with all of the prestige and all of the fame that can come to an individual. Let us never forget that Marian Anderson, that great contralto, is there today because somebody in the background helped her to get there. Because there was that mother who was willing to work days and nights until her eyebrows were all but parched and her hands all but scorched in order that her daughter could get her training and an education. There were the people in

17. Luke 12:16-40.

18. Marian Anderson (1897-1993) was an internationally acclaimed African-American opera singer.

11 Aug 1957 Union Baptist Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the choir that she was singing in, who said, "You have it and go ahead and we are going to stand with you." And that is why Marian Anderson is great today because she recognizes that. One day, somebody said to Miss Anderson, "Miss Anderson, what has been the happiest moment in your life?" She said: "It was not the moment that I stood before the critics of the world and that I sang with the Philharmonic Orchestra of New York and the critics were lavish with their praise. Not the moment that I sang before the kings and queens of Europe. Not the moment that I sang before Sibelius of Finland and he said, 'My roof is too low for such a voice.' Not even the moment when the great Toscanini said that I possess a voice that only comes once in a century.¹⁹ The greatest moment in my life was the moment that I could say, 'Mother, you may stop working now.'"

Marian Anderson discovered that she stands today in a position of fame and of prestige because somebody in the background helped her to get there. And only by seeing this can we rise out. If you have the privilege of a fine education, well, you have it because somebody made it possible. If you have the privilege to gain wealth and a bit of the world's goods, well, you have it because somebody made it possible. So don't boast, don't be arrogant. You, at that moment, rise out of your self-centeredness to the type of living that makes you an integrated personality.

Finally, the proper religious faith gives you this type of balance and this type of perspective that I'm talking about. This, you see, is something of the genius of great religion, that on the one hand, it gives man a sense of belonging and on the other hand, it gives him a sense of dependence on something higher. So he realizes that there is something beyond in which he lives and moves and even moves and gains his being.²⁰ This is what great religion does for him.

You know, Greek mythology used to talk about the goddess of Nemesis and this was one of the functions of the goddess of Nemesis. The goddess of Nemesis kept everything on a common level. If you got too low, beat down and you didn't feel that you were quite up to par, you felt a sense of inadequacy and a sense of inferiority, this goddess would pull you up. And then, if you got too high for yourself, you felt too highly of yourself, you felt too exalted, this goddess would do what the older people used to say, "Pull you a buttonhole lower." And everything was kept on a common level. And there needs to be something in your life of a goddess of Nemesis which pulls you down when you get too high and pulls you up when you feel the sense of inadequacy and that is what religion at its best does. It keeps you to the point that you don't feel like you are too low and you don't feel like you are too high but you'll maintain that type of balance. And you come to see that you're an adjective, not a noun. It is only God that is a noun, you are a dependent clause not an independent clause. You come to see through great religion, somehow, there is only one being in this universe that can say "I am" unconditionally. We turn over to Genesis and we read of God saying, "I am that I

19. Jean Sibelius (1865–1957) was a Finnish composer. Arturo Toscanini (1886–1954) was an Italian conductor who led the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra from 1928 to 1936.

20. Cf. Acts 17:28.

11 Aug
1957

am,” and that’s the only being that can say that.²¹ But man is a child of God and he must always say, “I am, because of.” And when you come to see that, you see that your existence is adjectival; it is dependent on something else. Your existence is dependent on the existence of a higher power and you can’t walk around the universe with arrogance. You can’t walk about the universe with a haughty spirit because you know that there is a God in this universe that you are dependent on.

And I’m so glad that the new science did something to dampen our arrogant spirits. For a long time, man felt that he was the center of the universe and all of his science had given him that. All of the days in the past he came up under what was known as the geocentric theory: the earth was the center of the universe and everything revolved around the earth. Then came Copernicus and Galileo and others, said that the sun is the center, the heliocentric theory came into being. And that reminded us somehow that we are dependent on something. We are not just at the center of this universe. We are only at the center to the extent that we give ourselves and our allegiance to God Almighty.

And I’m so glad that the new science came into being to dampen our arrogance. It says to us that our earthly planet is a dependent planet; it is a small planet in the orbits of this universe. The sun is the center of this universe, that man must look beyond himself to discover his significance. And that does something to each of us so that we can see when we have faith in God that we have nothing to boast about, we have nothing to be arrogant about but we live with a humility that keeps us going.

The other day, I went out to Kilby prison to pray with some of the men on death row. And it’s always a very tragic experience, not so much a tragic experience as a sort of sad experience to look at men who have committed great crimes and now they are standing in a little cell with nothing there much, just in a little cell between four walls. And they can’t see much and they’re just waiting for the day of their death and the day of their ultimate doom. And I went to pray with some of these men. And I never can forget as I walked away from there after praying and walked out of all of these bars, I couldn’t walk out with arrogance. I couldn’t walk out with the feeling that I’m not like these men. I couldn’t walk out with the attitude of the Pharisee, “I thank Thee God that I’m not like other men.”²² But as I walked out of that door, something was ringing in my heart saying, “But for the grace of God, you would be here.”²³ As I look at drunkard men walking the streets of Montgomery and of other cities every day, I find myself saying, “But by the grace of God, you too would be a drunkard.” As I look at those who have lost balance of themselves and those who are giving their lives to a tragic life of pleasure and throwing away everything they have in riotous living, I find myself saying, “But by the grace of God, I too would be here.” And when you see that point, you cannot be arrogant. But you walk through life with a humility that takes away the self-centeredness that makes you a disintegrated personality. And you begin to sing:

21. This verse is actually Exodus 3:14.

22. Cf. Luke 18:11.

23. Cf. I Corinthians 15:10.

11 Aug
1957

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saves a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now I'm found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'Twas grace that brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.²⁴

And when you take this attitude, you go into the room of your life and take down the mirrors because you cannot any longer see yourself. But the mirrors somehow are transformed into windows and you look out into the objective world and see that you are what you are because of somebody else. You are what you are because of the grace of the Almighty God. He who seeks to find his ego will lose it. But he who loses his ego in some great cause, some great purpose, some great ideal, some great loyalty, he who discovers, somehow, that he stands where he stands because of the forces of history and because of other individuals; he who discovers that he stands where he stands because of the grace of God, finds himself. He loses himself in that something but later finds himself. And this is the way, it seems to me, to the integrated personality.

O God, our gracious Heavenly Father, help us to rise out of our attitude of self-centeredness, out of our egotism. Help us to rise to the point of having faith in Thee and realizing that we are dependent on Thee. And when we realize this, O God, we will live life with a new meaning and with a new understanding and with a new integration. We ask Thee to grant all of these blessings in the name and spirit of Jesus. Amen.

Is there one this morning who will accept the Christ? I'm sure there is someone in this congregation who has not united with a church in Montgomery, someone in this congregation who has not united with a church in any city. And this morning I want to make a special call. I want to extend a special invitation to you. Who this morning will make the decision? Who this morning will accept the Christ? Who will come into this church and become a part of this Christian fellowship just as you are? This is the time now to make the decision. Let us turn to hymn number one sixty-two.

[*Speaking over congregational singing:*] Is there one this morning who will make the decision? Is there another? And another?

The recessional hymn is three seventy-one. Once more, let me say how very happy we are to have all of our visitors here this morning. And I will look forward to greeting you as you emerge from the sanctuary. Be sure, thank you very much [*King, who probably has been handed or told something by an unidentified person, thanks the person in mid-sentence of this address to the congregation*], be sure to be back this evening for the Lord's Supper, that's at seven o'clock, just one hour. And I'm urging every member of this church to be here on time, the choir to be here and the deacons and all of the members. And we will be here just one hour. Will all of the members please do that? And those of you who have not had the right hand of fellowship, we are all urging you to be here for that purpose. Let us now turn to

24. These are the first and third verses of the Christian hymn "Amazing Grace."

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

the recessional hymn three seventy-one. [*congregation sings the first and second verses of "I Love to Tell the Story"*] 20 Aug
1957

At. MLKEC.