

Paul's Letter to the Christians in America
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Preaching has a long standing tradition that goes back centuries, and some of the earliest preaching finds its origins in letters like the one that we just heard from Paul to the Christians in Corinth. Now with that in mind, as our scripture today comes from Paul and talks about how we use our God-given gifts, it seemed only appropriate to celebrate the Spiritual gifts of one of the greatest preachers and prophets of recent memory--Martin Luther King Jr. You see King wrote his own Pauline epistle, to the church in the United States of America in 1956, which he then read to the congregation of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. It really is a dead ringer for the writing of Paul.

Now, it would be one thing to just read this to you because it is the weekend of the Martin Luther King holiday, or because it seemed to fit nicely with the Corinthians passage this morning, but what I found to be absolutely astonishing is that this letter speaks beyond its time. You see the very things that King wrote about back in 1956 are things that are huge issues right now. King wrote not just about segregation and civil rights—which are always pertinent issues, but he also wrote about economics and the threat of capitalism going awry as it seems to have in the past years with the abuses on Wall Street. King talks about moral advances keeping up with scientific advances, and divisions within the church that threaten our work as the body of Christ. All of these topics could easily have been pulled out of your morning newspaper today. I was even tempted to read this to you and only at the end reveal that this was written 54 years ago, but I thought it would be more powerful for you to know where these words are coming from. So here it is, excerpts from, “Paul’s letter to the American Christians.” Listen for the voice of Paul the apostle; listen for the voice of Martin Luther King Jr. the prophet; and most of all, listen for the Word of God.

I, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to you who are in America, Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

For many years I have longed to be able to come to see you. I have heard so much of you and of what you are doing. I have heard of the fascinating and astounding advances that you have made in the scientific realm. I have heard of your dashing subways and flashing airplanes. Through your scientific genius you have been able to dwarf distance and place time in chains. You have been able to carve highways through the stratosphere. So in your world you have made it possible to eat breakfast in New York City and dinner in Paris, France... I have heard of your great medical advances, which have resulted in the curing of many dread plagues and diseases, and thereby prolonged your lives and made for greater security and physical wellbeing. All of that is marvelous. You can do so many things in your day that I could not do in the Greco-Roman world of my day... You have made tremendous strides in the area of scientific and technological development.

But America, as I look at you from afar, I wonder whether your moral and spiritual progress has been commensurate with your scientific progress. It seems to me that your moral progress lags behind your scientific progress... You have allowed the material means by which you live to outdistance the spiritual ends for which you live. You have allowed your mentality to outrun your morality. You have allowed your civilization to outdistance your culture.

Through your scientific genius you have made of the world a neighborhood, but through your moral and spiritual genius you have failed to make of it a brotherhood. So America, I would urge you to keep your moral advances abreast with your scientific advances.

I am impelled to write you concerning the responsibilities laid upon you to live as Christians in the midst of an unchristian world. That is what I had to do. That is what every Christian has to do. But I understand that there are many Christians in America who give their ultimate allegiance to man-made systems and customs. They are afraid to be different. Their great concern is to be accepted socially. They live by some such principle as this: "everybody is doing it, so it must be alright." For so many of you Morality is merely group consensus. ... You have unconsciously come to believe that right is discovered by taking a sort of Gallop poll of the majority opinion. How many are giving their ultimate allegiance to this way.

But American Christians, I must say to you ...as I said to the Philippian Christians, "You are a colony of heaven." This means that although you live in the colony of time, your ultimate allegiance is to the empire of eternity. You have a dual citizenry. You live both in time and eternity; both in heaven and earth. Therefore, your ultimate allegiance is not to the government, not to the state, not to nation, not to any man-made institution. The Christian owes his ultimate allegiance to God, and if any earthly institution conflicts with God's will it is your Christian duty to take a stand against it. You must never allow the transitory evanescent demands of man-made institutions to take precedence over the eternal demands of the Almighty God.

I understand that you have an economic system in America known as Capitalism. Through this economic system you have been able to do wonders. You have become the richest nation in the world, and you have built up the greatest system of production that history has ever known. All of this is marvelous. But Americans, there is the danger that you will misuse your Capitalism. I still contend that money can be the root of all evil. It can cause one to live a life of gross materialism. I am afraid that many among you are more concerned about making a living than making a life. You are prone to judge the success of your profession by the index of your salary and the size of the wheelbase on your automobile, rather than the quality of your service to humanity.

... If you are to be a truly Christian nation you must solve this problem. ... You can work within the framework of democracy to bring about a better distribution of wealth. You can use your powerful economic resources to wipe poverty from the face of the earth. God never intended for one group of people to live in superfluous inordinate wealth, while others live in abject

deadening poverty. God intends for all of his children to have the basic necessities of life, and he has left in this universe “enough and to spare” for that purpose. So I call upon you to bridge the gulf between abject poverty and superfluous wealth.

I would that I could be with you in person, so that I could say to you face to face what I am forced to say to you in writing.

Let me rush on to say something about the church. Americans, I must remind you, as I have said to so many others, that the church is the Body of Christ. So when the church is true to its nature it knows neither division nor disunity. But I am disturbed about what you are doing to the Body of Christ. They tell me that in America you have within Protestantism more than two hundred and fifty six denominations. The tragedy is not so much that you have such a multiplicity of denominations, but that most of them are warring against each other with a claim to absolute truth. This narrow sectarianism is destroying the unity of the Body of Christ. You must come to see that God is neither a Baptist nor a Methodist; He is neither a Presbyterian nor a Episcopalian. God is bigger than all of our denominations. If you are to be true witnesses for Christ, you must come to see that America.

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There is another thing that disturbs me to no end about the American church. You have a white church and you have a Negro church. You have allowed segregation to creep into the doors of the church. How can such a division exist in the true Body of Christ? You must face the tragic fact that when you stand at 11 : 00 am on Sunday morning to sing “All Hail the Power of Jesus Name” and “Dear Lord and Father of all Mankind,” you stand in the most segregated hour of Christian America. They tell me that there is more integration in the entertaining world and other secular agencies than there is in the Christian church. How appalling that is.

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So Americans I must urge you to get rid of every aspect of segregation. The broad universalism standing at the center of the gospel makes both the theory and practice of segregation morally unjustifiable. Segregation is a blatant denial of the unity which we all have in Christ.

May I say just a word to those of you who are struggling against this evil. Always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods and Christian weapons. ...As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him.

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So don't despair if you are condemned and persecuted for righteousness' sake. Whenever you take a stand for truth and justice, you are liable to scorn. Often you will be called an

impractical idealist or a dangerous radical.

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I can say this with some authority, because my life was a continual round of persecutions. After my conversion I was rejected by the disciples at Jerusalem. Later I was tried for heresy at Jerusalem. I was jailed at Philippi, beaten at Thessalonica, mobbed at Ephesus, and depressed at Athens. And yet I am still going. I came away from each of these experiences more persuaded than ever before that “neither death nor life, nor

angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come . . . shall separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” So I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. ..

I must bring my writing to a close now. Timothy is waiting to deliver this letter, and I must take leave for another church. But just before leaving, I must say to you, as I said to the church at Corinth, that I still believe that love is the most durable power in the world. ... This principle stands at the center of the cosmos. ...

So American Christians, you may master the intricacies of the English language. ..But even if you “speak with the tongues of man and angels, and have not love, you have become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.” You may have the gift of prophecy and understanding all mysteries. You may be able to break into the storehouse of nature and bring out many insights that men never dreamed were there. ... But all of this amounts to absolutely nothing devoid of love.

But even more Americans, you may give your goods to feed the poor. You may give great gifts to charity. You may tower high in philanthropy. But if you have not love it means nothing.... Man has the tragic capacity to relegate a heightening virtue to a tragic vice. Without love benevolence becomes egotism, and martyrdom becomes spiritual pride.

So the greatest of all virtues is love. It is here that we find the true meaning of the Christian faith. This is at bottom the meaning of the cross. The great event on Calvary signifies more than a meaningless drama that took place on the stage of history. It is a telescope through which we look out into the long vista of eternity and see the love of God breaking forth into time. It is an eternal reminder to a power drunk generation that love is the most durable power in the world, and that it is at bottom the heartbeat of the moral cosmos...

I must say goodbye now. I hope this letter will find you strong in the faith. It is probable that I will not get to see you in America, but I will meet you in God’s eternity. And now unto him who is able to keep us from falling, and lift us from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy, to him be power and authority, forever and ever. Amen.