

“When Peace Becomes Obnoxious,”  
Sermon Delivered on 18 March 1956  
at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

29 Mar  
1956

29 March 1956  
Louisville, Ky.

*Preaching from Dexter's pulpit the morning before facing trial, King condemns the false, "obnoxious" peace that was restored to the University of Alabama campus after it barred Autherine Lucy from attending classes. Quoting Jesus—"I come not to bring peace but a sword"—King insists that peace "is not merely the absence of some negative force—war, tension, confusion, but it is the presence of some positive force—justice, goodwill, the power of the kingdom of God." Louisville Defender editor Frank L. Stanley transcribed the sermon while in Montgomery covering the trial and sent a copy to King for his review before publication on 29 March. On 3 April King thanked Stanley for his "fine" coverage of the Montgomery movement and expressed his "deepest appreciation for your interest in our cause and for the interest you have stimulated in Alpha men all over the country."*

A few weeks ago, a Federal Judge handed down an edict which stated in substance that the University of Alabama could no longer deny admission to persons because of their race. With the handing down of this decision, a brave young lady by the name of Autherine Lucy was accepted as the first Negro student to be admitted in the history of the University of Alabama. This was a great moment and a great decision. But with the announcement of this decision, "the vanguards of the old order began to surge." The forces of evil began to congeal. As soon as Autherine Lucy walked on the campus, a group of spoiled students led by Leonard Wilson and a vicious group of outsiders began threatening her on every hand.<sup>1</sup> Crosses were burned; eggs and bricks were thrown at her. The mob jumped on top of the car in which she was riding. Finally, the president and trustees of the University of Alabama asked Autherine to leave for her own safety and the safety of the University. The next day after Autherine was dismissed, the paper came out with this headline: "Things are quiet in Tuscaloosa today. There is peace on the campus of the University of Alabama."

Yes, things are quiet in Tuscaloosa. Yes, there was peace on the campus, but it was peace at a great price: it was peace that had been purchased at the exorbitant price of an inept trustee board succumbing to the whims and caprices of a vicious mob. It was peace that had been purchased at the price of allowing mobocracy to reign supreme over democracy. It was peace that had been purchased at the price of capitulating to the force of darkness. This is the type of peace that all men of goodwill hate. It is the type of peace that is obnoxious. It is the type of peace that stinks in the nostrils of the Almighty God.

---

1. Leonard Wilson, head of the Citizens Council of West Alabama and a sophomore at the University of Alabama, was expelled after his major role in fomenting the university's riots was revealed (see "Segregation: That Defiant Sophomore," *Newsweek*, 26 March 1956, p. 25).

29 Mar  
1956

Now let me hasten to say that this is not a concession to or a justification for physical war. I can see no moral justification for that type of war. I believe absolutely and positively that violence is self-defeating. War is devastating and we know now that if we continue to use these weapons of destruction, our civilization will be plunged across the abyss of destruction.

However, this is a type of war that every Christian is involved in. It is a spiritual war. It is a war of ideas. Every true Christian is a fighting pacifist.

In a very profound passage which has been often misunderstood, Jesus utters this: He says, "Think not that I am come to bring peace. I come not to bring peace but a sword."<sup>2</sup> Certainly, He is not saying that He comes not to bring peace in the higher sense. What He is saying is: "I come not to bring this peace of escapism, this peace that fails to confront the real issues of life, the peace that makes for stagnant complacency." Then He says, "I come to bring a sword" not a physical sword. Whenever I come, a conflict is precipitated between the old and the new, between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. I come to declare war over injustice. I come to declare war on evil. Peace is not merely the absence of some negative force—war, tension, confusion, but it is the presence of some positive force—justice, goodwill, the power of the kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup>

I had a long talk with a man the other day about this bus situation. He discussed the peace being destroyed in the community, the destroying of good race relations. I agree that it is more tension now. But peace is not merely the absence of this tension, but the presence of justice. And even if we didn't have this tension, we still wouldn't have positive peace. Yes, it is true that if the Negro accepts his place, accepts exploitation and injustice, there will be peace. But it would be a peace boiled down to stagnant complacency, deadening passivity, and if peace means this, I don't want peace.

- 1) If peace means accepting second-class citizenship, I don't want it.
- 2) If peace means keeping my mouth shut in the midst of injustice and evil, I don't want it.
- 3) If peace means being complacently adjusted to a deadening status quo, I don't want peace.
- 4) If peace means a willingness to be exploited economically, dominated politically, humiliated and segregated, I don't want peace. So in a passive, non-violent manner, we must revolt against this peace.

Jesus says in substance, I will not be content until justice, goodwill, brotherhood, love, yes, the Kingdom of God are established upon the earth. This is real peace—a peace embodied with the presence of positive good. The inner peace that comes as a result of doing God's will.

PD. *Louisville Defender*, 29 March 1956.

---

2. Matthew 10:34.

3. In subsequent speeches King often returned to this theme. See, for example, "The 'New Negro' of the South: Behind the Montgomery Story," June 1956, p. 282 in this volume.