I hope that at this moment you will not utter a word unless that word is uttered to God. For the moment you will rise above the miasma and the hurly-burly of everyday life and center your vision on those eternal verities, those eternal values that should shape our destiny. Life is difficult. It is the road we travel, but in traveling this road we encounter rough places. At points it's a meandering road, it has its numerous curves, it has its hilly places; and we struggle to get over the hills. Sometimes it's painful, sometimes it's trying. But [somehow?] we have a faith, and we have a belief that even though the road of life is meandering and curvy and rough and difficult, we can make it if God guides us and leads us. We go on with that faith, and we can keep on keeping on. We can smile when others all around us are giving up in despair. Lead me. Guide me. Be with me as I journey the road of life.

May we open our hearts and spirits now as we listen to the words from the choir [choir sings]

This morning I would like to continue the series of sermons that I'm preaching.
on love. I'll preach a sermon this morning that I preached in this pulpit some two years ago, but one that I've had a chance to give some more thought to. And one that I hope will clear up some of the things that we have been discussing in the two previous sermons. You remember we started the series preaching from the subject "Loving Your Enemies." The second sermon in the series was "Love in Action," based on the prayer of Jesus Christ on the cross: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

And I'd like to use as the subject this morning "Levels of Love," trying to bring out the meaning of the various types of love. Certainly, there is no word in the English language more familiar than the word "love." And yet in spite of our familiarity with the word, it is one of the most misunderstood words. In a sense it is an ambiguous term. And we often confuse when we begin to grapple with the meaning of love and when we attempt to define it. And I think a great deal of the confusion results from the fact that many people feel that love can be defined in one category, in one pattern, in one type. But in order to understand love and its meaning and its many sides, its qualities, we must understand that there are levels of love. And this is what I would like to set forth this morning as my thesis and try to give these various levels of love.

First, there is what I would refer to as utilitarian love. This is love at the lowest level. Here one loves another for his usefulness to him. The individual loves that person that he can use. A great deal of friendship is based on this, and this why it is meaningless pseudo-friendship, because it is based on this idea of using the object of love. [Congregational remarks] (That's right.) There are some people who never get beyond the level of utilitarian love. They see other people as mere steps by which they can climb to their personal ends and ambitions, and the minute they discover that they can't use those persons they disassociate themselves, they lose (All right) this affection that they once had for them. (That's right.)

Now we can easily see what is wrong with this love. Number one—it is based on true selfishness, for in reality the person who engages in utilitarian love is merely loving himself (That's right) through somebody else. The second thing wrong with it is that it ends up depersonalizing persons. The great philosopher Immanuel Kant said, in what he called his categorical imperative, that "every man should so live that he treats every other man as an end and never as a means." Kant had something there because the minute you use a person as a means you depersonalize that person, and that person becomes merely an object. This is what we do for things. We use things, and whenever you use somebody you, in your own mind, thingify that person. A great Jewish philosopher by the name of Martin Buber wrote a book entitled I and Thou, and he says in that book that life at its best is always on the level of...
"I and Thou," and whenever it degenerates to the level of "I and It," it becomes dan-
gerous and terrible. Whenever we treat people not as thous, whenever we treat a
man not as a him, a woman not as a her but as an it, we make them a thing, and this
is the tragedy of this level of love. This is the tragedy of racial segregation. In the
final analysis, segregation is wrong not merely because it makes for physical incon-
veniences, not merely because it leaves the individuals who are segregated with
inferior facilities, but segregation is wrong, in the final analysis, because it substi-
tutes an I-It relationship for the I-Thou relationship and relegates persons to the sta-
tus of things. This is utilitarian love. And the other thing wrong with it is that it is
always a conditional love, and love at its best is always unconditional.

I talked with a white man in Albany, Georgia, the other day, and when we got
down in the conversation he said, "The thing that worries me so much about this
movement here is that it's creating so much tension, and we'd had such peaceful
and harmonious race relations." And then he went on to say, "I used to love the
Negro, but I don't have the kind of love for them that I used to have. You know, I
used to give money to Negro churches. And even the man who worked for me, I
would give him something every year extra, I'd give him a suit. But I just don't feel
that way now. I don't love Negroes like I used to." And I said to myself, "You never
did love Negroes (That's right) because your love was a conditional love. It
was conditioned upon the Negro staying in his place, and the minute he stood up as a man
and as somebody, you didn't love him anymore because your love was a utilitarian
love that grew up from the dark days of slavery and then almost a hundred years of
segregation." This is what the system has done, you see (Yes) It makes for the crud-
est level of love. Utilitarian love is the lowest level of love.

Now there is another type of love which is real love, and we're moving on up now
into genuine, meaningful, profound love. It is explained through the Greek word
eros. Plato used to use that word a great deal in his dialogues as a sort of yearning of
the soul for the realm of the divine. But now we see it as romantic love, and there is
something beautiful about romantic love. When it reaches its height there is noth-
ing more beautiful in all the world. A romantic love rises above utilitarian love in the
sense that it does have a degree of altruism, for a person who really loves with
romantic love will die for the object of his love. A person who is really engaged in
true romantic love will do anything to satisfy the object of that love, the great love.
We've read it about in all of the beauties of literature, whether in ancient or
medieval days. We could read about it in a Romeo and Juliet, Anthony and
Cleopatra, Tristan and Isolde, beauty of romantic love. Edgar Allan Poe talks about
it in his beautiful "Annabel Lee" with the love surrounded by the halo of eternity. I've quoted
for you before those great words of Shakespeare which explain the
beauty of romantic love:

Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove
It is an ever-fix'ed mark

5 Buber, I and Thou (1937)
6 Poe, "Annabel Lee" (1849)
That looks on tempests and is never shaken,  
It is the star to every wandering bark.  

Oh, it’s a beautiful love. There is something about romantic love that lifts it above the crude level of utilitarian love.

But I must warn you that romantic love is not the highest love. And we must never forget this. With all of its beauty, this can’t be the highest form of love because it is basically selfish. This is often difficult to think about, but it is true. You love your lover because there is something about that person that attracts you. If you are a man, it may be the way she looks. It may be the way she talks. It may be her glowing femininity. It may be her intellectual qualities. It may be other physical qualities—something about her that attracts you. If you are a woman, it may be something about that man that attracts you, and even if you can’t put it in words, you end up saying, “I don’t quite know what it is, but I just know that he moves me.” [laughter] This is the, this is romantic love. It’s a selfish love, and so with all of its beauty, it can never be considered the highest quality of love.

Well, there is another type of love, certainly on the same level of romantic love, and that is mother’s love. (That’s right) Oh, when life presents it in its beauty, it gives us something that we never forget, for there is nothing more beautiful than the loving care, the tender concern, and the patience (That’s right) of a real mother. (That’s right) This is a great love, and life would be ugly without it. Mother’s love brings sunshine into dark places. (Yes) And there is something about it that never quite gives up. (Amen, That’s right) The child may wander to some strange and dark far country, but there’s always that mother who’s there waiting (Yes, Lord) and even her mind journeys to the far country (Yes, Lord) No matter what the mistake is, no matter how low the child sinks, if it’s a real mother, she still loves him. (Praise Him, Lord) How beautiful it is. (Oh, yes) It has been written about, too, in beautiful glowing language. We’ve read about it. We’ve seen it in beautiful stories. It is a great love.

There is another level of love that I would like to mention this morning. But before mentioning that let me say that even mother’s love can’t be the highest. (That’s right) We hate to hear that, I guess, but you see, a mother loves her child because it is her child (That’s right) And if she’s not careful, she can’t quite love that other person’s child like she loves her child. (That’s right) Even mother’s love has a degree of selfishness in it. (Yes)

Well, we move on up to another level of love that is explained in another Greek word, the word philo, which is the sort of intimate affection between personal friends. This is friendship. In a sense it moves a little higher, not because the love itself is deeper, not because the person who is participating in the love is any more genuine of concern, but because its scope is broader, because it is more inclusive. You see, romantic love, at its best, is always between two individuals of opposite sex, but when we rise to friendship, a man can love a man, a woman can love a woman. Friendship becomes one of the most beautiful things in all the world. One can have five friends, ten friends, twenty friends, and jealousy does not creep in as the hori-
zon broadens and as the group enlarges (That's right) In romantic love, always, jealousy emerges when the one individual moves towards a love act with another individual and rightly so. Then in friendship, which is not based on sex, which is not based on physical attraction, one has risen to another level of love where they stand side by side and become united because of a common interest in something beyond themselves. In romantic love, the individuals in love sit face to face absorbed in each other. In friendship the individuals sit side by side absorbed in some great concern and some great cause and some great issue beyond themselves, something they like to do together. It may be hunting. It may be going and swimming together. It may be discussing great ideas together. It may be in a great movement of freedom together. Friendship is beautiful (Yes Lord) There is a beauty about it that will always stand. There is nothing more beautiful in all the world than to see real friendship, and there isn't much of it either (That's right) You labor a long time to find a real genuine friend (Yes Lord, Preach it), somebody who's so close to you that they know your heartbeat. I must hasten to say that as we discuss these levels of love we must remember that one can be involved in several levels simultaneously. A young lady who loves her husband is engaged in romantic love, but at the same time she will have some children later—she engages in mother's love, and if she's really a wonderful person she's a good friend of her husband. So that one can engage in romantic love and mother's love and friendship simultaneously. This is a beautiful level.

But even friendship can't be the highest level of love because there is something about friendship that is selfish. You love people that you like. And it's hard to be friendly with Mr. [James O.] Eastland. It's hard to be friendly with Mr. Marvin Griffin if you believe in democracy. Friendship is always based on an affection for somebody that you like, and it's difficult to like Mr. Griffin. It's difficult to like Mr. Eastland because we don't like what they are doing. But this would be a terrible world if God hadn't provided us with something where we could love Mr. Griffin even though it's impossible for us to really like him. And friendship limits the circle even though it enlarges the circle over romantic and mother's love. It limits it because it says that the friend is the person who has mutual concerns and the person that you like to be with, that you like to talk with (That's right), that you like to deal with.

Well, there is a love that goes a little higher than that. We refer to that as humanitarian love. It gets a little higher because it gets a little broad and more inclusive. The individual rises to the point that he loves humanity. And he rises to the point of saying that within every man there is a divine spark. He rises to the point of saying that within every man there is something sacred and so all humanity must be loved. And so when one rises to love at this point he does get a little higher because he is seriously attempting to love everybody. But it still can't be the highest point because it has a danger point. It is impersonal, it says I love this abstract something called humanity, which is never quite concretized in an individual. Dostoyevsky, the great Russian novelist, said once in one of his novels, "I love humanity in general so

8 Eastland served in Congress from Mississippi in 1941 and from 1943 until 1978, using his power as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee to block civil rights legislation.

9 Griffin served as governor of Georgia from 1955 to 1959.
much that I don’t love anybody in particular”¹⁰ [laughter] So many people get to this point. It’s so easy to love an abstraction called humanity and not love individual human beings. And how many people have been caught in that (That’s right) Think of the millions of dollars raised by many of the white churches in the South and all over America sent to Africa for the missionary effort because of a humanitarian love. And yet if the Africans who got that money came into their churches to worship on Sunday morning they would kick them out. (Yes they would) They love humanity in general, but they don’t love Africans in particular [laughter] (That’s right) There is always this danger in humanitarian love—that it will not quite get there The greatness of God’s love is that His love is big enough to love everybody and is small enough to love even me (That’s right) And so humanitarian love can’t be the highest

Let me rush on to that point which is explained by the Greek word agape Agape is higher than all of the things I have talked about. Why is it higher? Because it is unmotivated, it is spontaneous, it is overflowing; it seeks nothing in return. It is not motivated by some quality in the object. Ultimate love is motivated by a quality in the object, namely the object’s usefulness to him. Romantic love is motivated by some quality in the object, maybe the beauty of the object or the quality that moves the individual. A mother’s love is motivated by the fact that this is her child, something in the object before her. Move on up to friendship, it is motivated by that quality of friendliness and that quality of concern that is mutual. Go on up to humanity, humanitarian love, it is motivated by something within the object, namely a divine spark, namely something sacred about human personality. But when we rise to agape, to Christian love, it is higher than all of this. It becomes the love of God operating in the human heart (Amen, Yes Lord) The greatness of it is that you love every man, not for your sake but for his sake. And you love every man because God loves him (Amen, That’s right) And so it becomes all inclusive. The person may be ugly, or the person may be beautiful. The person may be tall, or the person may be short. The person may be light, or the person may be dark. The person may be rich, or the person may be poor. The person may be up and in, the person may be down and out. The person may be white, the person may be black. The person may be Jew, the person may be Gentile. The person may be Catholic, the person may be Protestant. In other words, you come to the point of loving every man and becomes an all-inclusive love. It is the love of God operating in the human heart. And it comes to the point that you even love the enemy¹¹ (Amen) Christian love does something that no other love can do. It says that you love every man. You hate the deed that he does. If he’s your enemy and he’s evil, but you love the person who does the evil deed.

And so this is the distinction that I want you to see this morning. And on all other levels we have a need love, but when we come to agape we have a gift love. And so it is the love that includes everybody. And the only testing point for you to know whether you have real genuine love is that you love your enemy (Yeah), for if you fail

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¹⁰ Cf Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov (New York Modern Library, 1937), p 56 “But it has always happened that the more I detest men individually the more ardent becomes my love for humanity”

¹¹ Cf Matthew 5:44
King preaches at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 1960. Courtesy of Donald Uhrbrock/Timepix.
to love your enemy there is no way for you to fit into the category of Christian love. You test it by your ability to love your enemy. And so this is what we have before us as Christians. This is what God has left for us. He's left us a love. As He loved us, so let us love the brother. And therefore, I'm convinced this morning that love is the greatest power in all the world. Over the centuries men have asked about the highest good, they've wanted to know. All of the great philosophers have raised the question, "What is the summum bonum of life? What is the highest good?" Epicureans and the Stoics sought to answer it. Plato and Aristotle sought to answer it. What is that good that is productive and that produces every other good? And I am convinced this morning that it is love. God is light. God is love. And he who hates does not know God. But he who loves, at that moment, rises to a knowledge of God.

And so you may be able to speak well, you may rise to the eloquence of articulate speech, but if you have not love you are become as sounding brass or the tinkling cymbal (Yes Lord). You may have the gift of prophecy so that you can understand all mysteries. You may break into the storehouse of nature and bring out many insights that men never knew were there. You may have all knowledge so that you build great universes. You may have endless degrees. But if you have not love it means nothing. Yes, you may give your gifts and your goods to feed the poor. You may rise high in philanthropy, but if you have not love, your gifts have been given in vain. Yes, you may give your body to be burned (All right), and you may die the death of a martyr. You may have your blood spilt, and it will become a symbol of honor for generations yet unborn. But if you have not love, you're blood was spilt in vain. (All right) We must come to see that it is possible to be self-centered in our self-sacrifice and self-righteous in our self-denial. We may be generous in order to feed our ego. We may be pious in order to feed our pride. And so without love, spiritual pride becomes a reality in our life, and even martyrdom becomes egotism.

Love is the greatest force in all the world. And this is why Jesus was great. He realized it in his life, and he took this force and split history into A D and B C so that all history has to sing about him and talk about him because he made love the center of his life. And what does the cross mean? It means that God's love shines before us through that cross in all of its dimensions. And so "when I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died, I count my highest gains but loss and pour contempt on all my pride. Were the whole realm of nature mine that were a present far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my all, and my all." This is our legacy. This is what we have. And may we go on with a love in our hearts that will change us and change the lives of those who surround us. And we will make this old world a new world. And God's kingdom will be a reality.

We open the doors of the church now. Someone here this morning needs to accept the Christ. Someone needs to make a decision for Him. If you have the faith, He has the power. Who this morning will come? Just as you are, will you come? Just
as you are, will you come? And make this church not only a place to come as a regular attending person but a spiritual home Who this morning will make that decision as we sing this great hymn, "Just As I Am" Wherever you are, will you accept Christ? By Christian experience baptism [words inaudible] Wherever you are, you come this morning God's love stands before us God's love is always ready He's calling you now Make the church the center of your life, for here, we come to the mercy seat Here, you learn the great realities of life [Congregation sings]

Now let us stand for the next stanza, and if you are there we still bid you come wherever you are. Who will come this morning? Just as I am, wherever you are, will you come? Is there one who will accept Christ this morning?

Now let us sing that last stanza, and as we prepare to sing, I make this last plea There is someone here this morning without a church home There is someone here this morning standing between two opinions There is someone here this morning who lives in Atlanta, who was a Christian back home, but who is not united with a church in this city We give you this opportunity, in the name of Christ, to come as we sing this last stanza This is the hour for you to decide [Congregation sings]

God bless you [recording interrupted]

At MLKJC ET-72

16 King refers to Charlotte Elliot's hymn "Just As I Am" (1836)

"Can a Christian Be a Communist?"
Sermon Delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church

30 September 1962
Atlanta, Ga

While insisting that "no Christian can be a communist," King calls on his congregation to consider communism "a necessary corrective for a Christianity that has been all too passive and a democracy that has been all too inert." Frustrated by the church's unwillingness to take a stand against racial discrimination, he complains, "This morning if we stand at eleven o'clock to sing 'In Christ There Is No East or West,' we stand in the most segregated hour of America." King also admonishes individuals unwilling to commit to social justice "If you haven't discovered something that you will die for, you aren't fit to live." The following text is taken from an audio recording of the service.

1 A voice at the beginning of the tape states that the recording's date is 30 September 1962. See also "'Can a Christian Be a Communist?' King's Topic at Ebenezer Sunday," Atlanta Daily World, 29 September 1962. King included a version of this sermon titled "How Should a Christian View Communism?" in Strength to Love (pp. 93-100)