Due to an extremely crowded and strenuous schedule for the last two or three years, I have not had an opportunity to write most of the sermons that I preach. In most cases I have had to content myself with a rather detailed outline. This happens to be the case with all of the sermons that I have preached on the general theme of brotherhood and race relations. I have several such sermons pretty well outlined, but I do not have a single one in a final written form. If I had time I would be more than happy to write one of these sermons in full, but several pressing responsibilities make that impossible at this time. But for these difficulties I would be more than happy to comply with your request. Please know that I regret this very deeply. I might mention that I have the complete manuscript for several of my other sermons. If you are ever desirous of having one I will be glad to submit it.

Very sincerely yours,

Martin L. King, Jr.
MLKmlb

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

Man’s Sin and God’s Grace

King describes human sin as “the tragedy of collectivity and social life” that requires God’s grace. This sermon was probably inspired by Gerald Hamilton Kennedy’s homily “Sin and Grace”1 Invoking the story of the prodigal son, King challenges America: “You’ve trampled over sixty million of your precious citizens. You have called them ‘dogs,’ and you have called them ‘niggers.’ You have pushed them aside and kicked them around and pushed them in an inferior economic and political position. And now you have made them almost de-personalized and inhuman. And then you are in that far country of oppression, trampling over your children. But western civilization, America, you can come home and if you will come home, I will take you in.”2

The following text is taken from an audio recording of the service.

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1 King kept an annotated copy of Kennedy’s The Lion and the Lamb: Paradoxes of the Christian Faith in his personal library and wrote “Man’s Sin and God’s Grace” on the top margin of page 41 of Kennedy’s book. At the top of a typed draft of this sermon, King wrote, “See Kennedy’s Book.” (King, “Man’s Sin and God’s Grace,” 1954–1960)

2 The dating of this recording is based on King’s recollection of his seminary years and of an encounter in Atlanta, suggesting that he delivered this sermon during his tenure at Dexter.
human nature is set forth on almost every page of the Bible. The Bible pictures it in the pride and disobedience of Adam and Eve, which ends up injecting a discord in the beautiful symphony of life in a garden. It pictures it in a ruthless and merciless pharaoh, caught in the clutches of a hardened heart. It pictures it in the jealousy of a Saul, who ends up hating David with a bitter and dangerous hate. It pictures it in the glorious career of a David, who constantly spoils that career with recording interrupted and making sex the be all and end all of life. It pictures it in a Judas, who was willing to succumb to the temptation of selling his lord for a few pieces of silver. It pictures it in Pilate, who sacrifices truth on the altar of his self-interest and who falls victim to the whims and caprices of a group of people who are crying out, “Crucify him.” Yes, it pictures it in a vicious but sincere mob hanging the world’s most precious character on a cross between two thieves. The Bible is clear in setting forth the tragic dimensions of the gone-wrongness of human nature.

Wherever we discover life, somehow we discover this gone-wrongness. Wherever there is a struggle for goodness, we discover, on the other hand, a powerful antagonism, something demonic, something that seems to bring our loveliest qualities to evil and our greatest endeavors to failure. Theologians have referred to this over the years as “sin.” That is something that stands at the core of life, this element of sin. And whenever we think about man we must think of this tragic fact—that man is a sinner. Sin is this revolt against God, sin is at bottom separation. It is alienation. It is a creature trying to project himself to the status of the creator. It is the creature’s failure to accept his limitations and, thereby, reach out for something higher to integrate his life, and it ends up in tragic separation.

Man is a sinner before the Almighty God. That is one of the basic facts of the universe and one of the basic facts of life. Now, we’ve tried to get away from this in the modern world, we hate to hear this word “sin.” We try to run from it, and we try to talk about it in other terms. This is one of the weaknesses of religious liberalism, that in throwing out certain traditional concepts, which it should have thrown out—traditional concepts like the damnation of infants and a hell with a fiery furnace—it was good that liberal Christianity threw that out. I have no objection to that, for I find it very difficult and almost impossible to believe in a hell of a fiery furnace and all of that. But in throwing out these old traditional conceptions, liberalism fell victim to the danger that forever confronts any new view, and that is that it became sentimental and soft, feeling that man was evolving from a lower state to a higher state and eventually he would move on up the evolutionary ladder and throw off all of the evils and sin of his nature. Then, we came back to see that even after all of that man is still a sinner.

3. Genesis 3
4. In Exodus 7–14, Pharaoh’s callousness prevents him from releasing the Hebrew people
5. 1 Samuel 18:5–11
6. 2 Samuel 11:1–21 In a handwritten outline of this sermon, King wrote that David’s career was spoiled by tragic lust (King, “Man’s Sin and God’s Grace,” Sermon outline, 1954–1960)
9. Matthew 27:38
We face the new psychology, and it furnished us with a lot of words and a lot of phrases to explain certain weaknesses of human nature, and so we very easily dismiss the word "sin." And we start talking about phobias and inhibitions, and we reached over to Freudian psychology and said that it's a conflict between the id and the superego. But when man got through talking in terms of all of his bombastic psychological phrases, he discovered that, at bottom, he was still a sinner before the Almighty God and that, at bottom, the conflict is not between the id and the superego but the conflict is between God and man. And the universe stands with that glaring picture of the reality of life—that man is a sinner, man is a sinner in need of God's redemptive power. We can never escape this fact.

We just need to look around a little, that's all, and we discover it everywhere. Notice this element of the gone-wrongness of human nature in our own personal lives. I don't mean for you to look out here at somebody else this morning, just look at yourself long enough, and you will discover this dimension, this tragic dimension of sin. All men, great minds, philosophers, and literary geniuses throughout the ages have pointed out, and we find ourselves having to agree with them, that there is something wrong in human nature. There is something in all of us that makes us more than one self. We are all two selves, and if you look at yourself hard enough you will discover that other self. We find ourselves split against ourselves. We have something of what the psychologists or the psychiatrists would refer to as the schizophrenic personality. We are split personalities. There is something high in us and there is something low in us.

Plato talked about it in one of his dialogues, and he pictured the human personality as a charioteer with two headstrong horses, each wanting to go in different directions. Reason was the driver, and spirit and appetite were the two horses. And here is spirit with its good desires on this side, and here is appetite with its evil dimensions over here. And each of them wanting to go in different directions. There is something true in Plato's analysis of the human situation.

There is something in all of us which causes us to cry out with Ovid, the Latin poet, "I see and approve the better things of life, but the evil things I do." One day Goethe looked at himself, and he said, "It's strange that I'm one self but yet in all of this bundle of me there's enough stuff to make both a gentleman and a rogue." That seems to be the characteristic of life. There is within all men this bundle of stuff that keeps us in a dichotomy, a dualism, so that we have enough in us to be both good and evil. There is enough in us to make both a gentleman and a rogue.

This is a dimension of life. H.G. Wells said one day, "I'm not so much of a human being as a civil war, and every man confronts this civil war within himself." There is the complying North of his soul always in conflict with the recalcitrant South. And there is that continual battle, that civil war, the South of the soul breaking out against the North of the soul. This is man's plight. Man discovers that he has

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10 King refers to Plato's *Phaedrus* 246a–247c.
11 Ovid *Metamorphoses* 7:20.
13 Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, p. 52. "A modern novelist describing one of his characters says, 'He was not so much a human being as a civil war.'"
this division, this very tension at the center of his nature. Just look hard enough, and you’ll discover that something. That’s why Paul could say, “The good that I would I do not, and the evil that I would not, that I do.” And then man discovers it, and he goes out and tries to resolve the tension, and he finds himself something like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Oh, in the day he’s this respectable person, he’s good and decent, a servant of humanity, but then at night he goes and puts on that other self. And there is that Mr Hyde, that indecent self, that degrading self, that self that sinks to animalism. And there is something in all of us, although we read it in literature, that comes to the center of our lives, and we find that we are Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.

We discover that there is a private aspect of our lives forever in conflict with the personal aspects of our lives. We all have a private self that we don’t want the public self to discover. There is a privacy about all of us that we are ashamed of, that we forever seek to hide, and that we would never want to become public. This is the sin of man. There is a Mr Hyde in all of us that seeks at the night of life to go into being while pushing aside the day of life that is Dr Jekyll, and then, the next morning it tries to become Dr Jekyll again. Then, that night it becomes Mr Hyde again. There is this conflict between the is-ness of our present natures and the eternal ought-ness that forever confronts us. That comes in all lives.

And so it boils down that we are sinners in need of God’s redemptive power. We know truth, and yet we lie. We know how to be just, and yet we are unjust. We know how to live our lives on the plane of love, and yet we hate, or we are unfaithful to those we should be faithful to. We stand amid the high road, and yet we deliberately choose the low road. We know the ways of peace, and yet we go to war. We have resources for great economic systems where there could be equitable distributions of wealth, and yet we monopolize and take it all for ourselves and forget about our brothers. And when we come to see ourselves, we discover that all of us are sinners. “All we like sheep have gone astray.”

There’s no point in pushing it out here, saying, “Well, I don’t fit into that category,” for sin takes so many areas. It not only, you see, we often see these things that are so glaring and we think they are the only sins—you know, getting drunk, or indulging in tragic lust, or going downtown robbing a bank and stealing a lot of money. That’s not the only sin. I’ve seen people who would never rob a bank, but how many people have they robbed of their good names? I’ve seen people who were so good that they would never do anything in terms of stealing from their neighbors of material goods, but they’ll get on the telephone and gossip about them and spread evil rumors about them. All of that’s sin. I’ve seen people who would say they, “I don’t do anything I don’t drink. I don’t do this. I don’t do that,” and then they end up their lives bogged down in a negative because the Christian ethic is never a bundle of do-nots but it’s a bushel of dos. Whenever I hear people talking about what they don’t do, I wonder what do they do. It’s always an...

14 Romans 7:19
15 Robert Louis Stevenson, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886)
16 Isaiah 53:6 In his copy of The Lion and the Lamb, King underlined Kennedy’s use of this biblical text and wrote underneath, “The Universality of Sin” (p. 37)
"I Have Sinned"

Introduction - Modern man's attempt to get away from the fact of sin through doctrines of automatic progress and inherent goodness of man. But finally we must come back to the fact that man is a sinner.

What sin is. Sin is separation:
1. Separation from self
2. Separation from others
3. Separation from God

At the end of the chapter “Forgive Us Our Trespasses” in his copy of Hamilton’s 1954 book Horns and Halos in Human Nature, King writes a brief outline titled “I Have Sinned.” He notes, “Modern man’s attempt to get away from the fact of sin through doctrines of automatic progress and inherent goodness of man. But finally we must come back to the fact that man is a sinner” (p. 103).
affirmative And there is never a time when the individual, even in his moment of highest ethical achievement, doesn't experience this disintegration, this tragic alienation from God. Every man experiences it. And that is why the saint always recognizes that he's a sinner, and the worst sinner in the world is the man who feels that he isn't a sinner. That is the point at which he's the greatest sinner. So that in our own personal lives, as we look at ourselves, as we look at the personal dimensions of our everyday living, we discover this dimension of sin. And there is something about it that causes us to know that as we look down into the deepest resources of our souls that we are in eternal revolt against God.

I don't know about you, but when I look at myself hard enough and deep enough and go on back from my public self to my private self, I don't feel like crying out with the Pharisee, "I thank Thee, God, that I'm not like other men." But I find myself saying, "Lord, be merciful unto me a sinner." There is that dimension which runs the gamut of human life so that man in his personal experiences discovers this tragic dimension and this awful tendency of sin.

But you know this thing of sin grows even worse when we go out to the social dimensions of it, when we pass from the personal to the social. And that is when sin really becomes tragic. When man comes together collected in society, when persons come together and come into, bring into being this big something called society, then sin rises to even more ominous proportions. You know, individuals devoid of society are much more moral, much more rational, much more good than society itself. But it's because man is caught in society that he becomes even a greater sinner. It's very seldom that a man by himself will lynching anybody, but a mob will lynch somebody. Individual men won't do the things that a nation will do. So that when we get caught up in societal living, when we get caught up in social life, sin even grows greater.

That is why one theologian can write a book entitled Moral Man and Immoral Society. He discovers that man as an individual is pretty good, he's not totally immoral. But when man begins to interact in society, he gets caught up in all of the evils of society. And so that is why people caught in society will do things that they probably never would do as an individual. They want to be approved socially. They get courage to do things that they could never do by themselves. The crowd is doing it, and so in order to be in social line with the crowd they do it. And so man rises to the tragic level of social sin. And then the real tragedy of man's social and collective existence is the fact that sin is almost inescapable in this level. Because you are involved in society and you are necessarily a part of the sins of society, you can't quite break off.

I was talking with a man the other night who was saying to me that he refused to pay income taxes because the nation uses such taxes for war, and I was sympathetic with his view. But I said to him, "You haven't solved the problem because by refusing to pay income tax because the nation spends its money for the evils of war you are just putting greater tax burdens on your brother. And somehow you cannot

17 Luke 18:9–14
18 King refers to Reinhold Niebuhr's 1932 book
refuse to pay taxes because you drove your car down here from Ohio, and you had to buy gas, and every time you bought gas you were paying some taxes on that gas, and you were helping to support war even while you bought gas. Man can never escape evil in his life. He is a part of the structure of society and so he must be a part of all the greed of society, he’s a part of all the wars of society, and even if he’s a pacifist, he’s still contributing to the very thing that he’s revolting against. This is the tragedy of collective and social life—that man never gets out of sin because he’s caught up in society, and he can’t get out of society because if he got out of that he wouldn’t be man.

Social psychologists tell us that the thing that makes an individual a person is that he interacts with other persons, and man never becomes man until he interacts. That baby comes into being, but that baby comes to be a personality as it interacts with others around it. And so man can never get away from man and society. And yet as he stands in society, he’s caught up in all of the evils of society, all of the sins of society. This is the tragedy of man’s predicament—that even on every level of his movement he’s caught in sin and he supports evil. And I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. That is the interaction, the togetherness of humanity and that makes the level of social sin even more tragic.

Now, that looks kind of bad, and I’m about to conclude now. I know you say, “Now you stand there on a somber note. You’ve said to us that we are sinners, we are caught in the clutches of sin in our personal lives and in our social lives.” And yes, if we stop there, I assure you that we would be in a pretty tragic predicament, that man’s life would be a life of nothingness, a life of endless pessimism. So that we can’t stop there. And that’s something of the beauty of the Christian faith, that it says that in the midst of man’s tragic predicament, in the midst of his awful inclination towards sin, God has come into the picture and has done something about it. That’s the beauty of our faith. It says that standing over against the tragic dimensions of man’s sin is the glorious dimensions of God’s grace. Where sin abounded, grace abounded even more exceedingly. That’s the Christian faith. On the one hand it is the most pessimistic religion in the world, for it recognizes the tragic and awful dimensions of man’s sin. But on the other hand it is the most optimistic religion in the world, for it recognizes the heightening dimensions of God’s grace and how God’s grace can come in and pick up. So that over against man’s sin stands God’s grace. Christianity, therefore, becomes the greatest pessimistic optimistic religion in the world. It’s a combination of a pessimistic optimism, it sees over against man’s sinfulness, man’s tragic state, the graciousness of God’s mercy, and His love and His forgiving power.

God’s grace stands over man’s sin. Now, the grace of God is not just some passing phrase, not just some old concept that we should be ashamed to use now. It’s not just some mechanical concept that has no deep meaning. Grace has a very vital place in any life. It has a very vital place in understanding the whole predicament.

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19 Cf. Romans 5:20 Kennedy used this biblical citation as the basis for his sermon “Sin and Grace” *(The Lion and the Lamb, p. 35)*
of man and the whole predicament of the universe, for you can never understand
life until you understand the meaning of the grace of God. The whole of life
hinges on the ever flowing power and ever flowing stream of God's grace. Grace is
just that something that God gives us. It's a gift that we don't merit, that we don't
deserve, but which we so desperately need. That's grace, and none of us could live
without it.

To give a practical example of grace, I remember when I was in theological sem-
inary. We were having final exam in a course in philosophical theology, which
turned out to be a very difficult course. It turned out that after the exam was over,
we, everybody in the class—I think about twenty-five or thirty-five students were in
the class—and all of us flunked the exam, all of us did a very poor job. You see, in
graduate school, when you make a C you flunk. So all of us made under eighty,
everybody, so we had all flunked the course. But then I never will forget Dr Davis
came back to that class. He told us about it, and there we were sitting there, sor-
rrowful, feeling that we were going to have to take philosophical theology over again.
And he said, "Well, you've been a loyal class, and I think, at bottom, maybe I should
do something about this. And you will notice on your books that I have added ten
points, to every examination I've added ten points." I got my little blue book and I
noticed up there at the top, "75." Then under there I noticed the word "grace" and
then it had "10" under there, right across from "grace." And then there was a line
there, and it said "85" under there. And that happened for every examination,
there was this additional ten points, so that all of us were able to get by and pass the
examination and get through the course. That was grace.

Now, he didn't have to do that. We didn't deserve it, we didn't merit it. But we
so desperately needed it to pass that course and to finish that seminary. And this was
the grace that carried us through. This is the meaning of God's grace. As we stand
amid the great examination of life, confronting all of the experiences of life, we
stand writing our answers to all of the issues of life, but in all of our very being we
flunk the exam, we make mistakes; we are not prepared. Our ingenuity is too weak,
we are too finite to pass it. And yet God reaches out and says to us, "If you will have faith in me, if you will be loyal enough to come
to class, I will add a little to your examination so that you can pass and stand up amid
life with all of the beauty and all of the glory of life, and you can get through." And
that's the thing that brings us through life. That's something that we don't merit,
that's something that we don't deserve, but that's something that we so desperately
need in order to survive and pass the ultimate examination of life, which lifts us
from the seminary of life to the broad university of experience and eternal life. This
is what God gives us, and it only comes through His grace, His free gift.

Have you ever done anything, and you felt that you had become a shame to your-
self? You feel a sense of shame before your family and before society, and you felt
that your integrity never would come back? That your life now was an endless
process of meaninglessness and that everything that turned against you, and as you

20 During King's final year at Crozer Theological Seminary, he took two courses in philosophical
theology with George W. Davis. Philosophy of Religion and Advanced Philosophy of Religion. King
received an A in both courses.
walked the streets you were ashamed to look at anybody, and you felt that everybody was looking at you with scorn. And you went to bed at night, and you tried to pray that you wouldn’t think about it or you wouldn’t dream about it, but even in the midnight hours you would wake up and discover that it was still plaguing you. And then, at that moment, you decided to try another method, you decided to turn this thing over to God and lay yourself bare before the Almighty God, and something happened to you, and you could walk out before life and before your family and before yourself and your friends with new meaning. Looked like the life had taken on something new, and you wondered what happened. That was the grace of God. Something that you didn’t deserve, something that you didn’t merit, but something that you so desperately needed in order to live through the experiences of life.

I talked with a young lady some two or three years ago who had had a tragic, or made a tragic mistake in life; she felt, and she felt that her life was now bare and meaningless. Life had no meaning, her family was disappointed with her, friends were disappointed, and relatives were disappointed, everybody was disappointed. And she was ashamed to face life, ashamed to stand up before anybody because of this great mistake. Then I looked at her, having known her for a number of years, and I said to her first, “Here’s one thing you’ve got to do—you’ve got to forget about this mistake that you made back here. Don’t get bogged down in the past. You’ve got to look forward to the future now. You’ve got to outlive it. And let this sense of guilt you have serve as only an impetus for you to keep going and outlive and renew your experiences.” And then I said to her, “Try this. I know it sounds kind of vague and old-timey for a young person to say this to another young person, but you know, one day just try this, just, just get off to yourself, and close all of the doors, and get off in some privacy, and just sit there, meditate on this thing, and, and then decide to lay your life bare before the Almighty God. Just decide to turn it over to Him, and decide that you have come to the limit, that you can’t solve this thing, and just leave it to God.”

I saw that young lady two days ago in Atlanta. I was talking to her about this very same thing, and here was a new person, young lady now, who lives all of the glory of life, very happy, a very happy family relationship, having forgotten about this experience. And she said, “Somehow it just passed away. And I don’t even think about it too much now. It doesn’t cross my mind hardly.” Oh, I could look at her and say to myself that was the grace of God. That’s what the grace of God does. It gives us that something that we so desperately need to live this difficult and this often trying experience of human life.

And there is another thing about it. There’s a boy who leaves home and runs off to a far country, and he throws away everything that he has. He wastes everything that he has—all of his virtue, all of his time, all of his money, and everything else. And there he is in a hog’s pen, getting ready to eat of the food that the hogs eat. But then something comes to him, he comes to himself and says, “I’m no hog. I’m the son of a father back home.” And he decides to run back home and go back to his father. But you know the beauty of that thing is, that parable talks about a father standing back home and almost looking out, seeing that boy as he trudges back up the dusty road that he had once gone down. When that boy gets home, the father looks about and says, “Servants, go ahead and bring the fatted calf. For my son is back home and we are going to celebrate tonight.” He didn’t deserve that. That
father had every right in the world to look at that son and say, “I’m through with it, through with you. You deceived me, you disappointed me, you did everything against my will.” But instead of doing that the father said, “Come back home. Come in and be elevated into this home, for you are my son and I still love you.” And that’s what Jesus is saying, that’s what the Gospel is saying, that’s the meaning of grace—that no matter how low we sink, no matter how far we go, God still stands there saying, “If you come back home, I’ll take you in.”

Western civilization, you’ve gone into the far country of imperialism and colonialism. You have trampled over more than one billion six hundred million of the people of the world. You have exploited them economically, you have dominated them politically, trampled over them, humiliated them, and segregated them. And there you are in this far country of exploitation. But oh, western civilization, if you will rise up now and come home, I’ll take you in. And I will make of you a great civilization so that you can inject new meaning into the veins of this world and of this civilization.

America, you’ve done that. You’ve trampled over sixty million of your precious citizens. You have called them “dogs,” and you have called them “niggers.” You have, you have pushed them aside and kicked them around and pushed them in an inferior economic and political position. And now you have made them almost depersonalized and inhuman. And there you are in that far country of oppression, trampling over your children. But western civilization, America, you can come home and if you will come home, I will take you in. And I will bring the fatted calf and I will cry out to all of the eternities, “Hallelujah,” for my nation has come home.

Drunkard man, you’ve gone to the far country of drunkenness, you’ve gone to the far country of gambling, you’ve gone to the far country of everything that is low and evil and degrading your own personal life. But if you will rise up and come home, I’ll take you in. You don’t deserve it, you don’t merit it, but you so desperately need it in order to live. And so when we do that, and we discover the meaning of this thing, this powerful grace that comes to offset this tragic sin, we can cry out with John Newton:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That sav es a wretch like me
I once was lost but now I’m found,
Was blind but now I see
’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
but not only that, ’twas grace my fears relieved

Isn’t that the beauty of it? It teaches us how to fear, and yet, it relieves those very same fears. And then we can talk about

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

21 Cf Luke 15:11–32
22 King quotes stanzas of John Newton’s 1779 hymn “Amazing Grace.”
Where sin abounded, grace abounded even more exceedingly

Oh God, our gracious heavenly Father, help us to see the meaning of this grace, and help us to realize that in our sinful lives there is some hope, there is a way out through Thy powerful and ever flowing grace. In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray Amen.

We open the doors of the church now. Probably there is someone here this morning who feels the need of this grace, feels the need of this Christ, who forever gives this grace. Who this morning will accept it? He might be leading you this morning. Will you be able to say, “Where He leads me, I will follow. Wherever He leads me, I will follow.”23 As we sing this beautiful hymn, hymn number 164, I want somebody to make a decision this morning. I look over this congregation, and I see those who need to make the decision. Where He leads me, I will follow. Who will make that decision? Come in and accept the Christ as your personal savior. For all of His powerful grace, let us stand.

23 King refers to Ernest W Blandy’s 1890 hymn “Where He Leads Me.”