April 4, 1954

(c) Take the minister choosing between truth and keeping in with
the member and being popular with the brethren.

The great progressive moves of history have been ruined by the perpetuity of "Pilate's"[2]

Conclusion—Who has been the most influential character in history Jesus or Pilate?
Who is it that has been the most influential character of human history—Jesus or Pilate?
Who is it that was able to change a Simon of sand into a Peter of Rock? Who
is it that was able to change a persecuting Peter into a Apostle Paul—Jesus or Pilate? Who
is it that has been able to split history into A.D. and B.C.—Jesus or Pilate?
Who is it that so captivated the soul of man that they shook the hinges from
the gates of the Roman empire—Jesus or Pilate? Who is it that gave impetus to a
movement that has grown from a group of eleven men to more than 600,000,000
followers today—Jesus or Pilate? Who is it whose influence has outlasted the Caesar
and whose majestic power has towered above empires—Jesus or Pilate?
Who is it that has given a message so universal and international that choirs the world ove can
sing "In Christ there is no East nor West"—Jesus or Pilate?
Who is it that so convinced men that his message is eternal and lasting that they have cry out with
Handel of all Haluluhia, Haluhia[16]

Preached at Dexter May, 1954[17]

ADF CSKC Sermon file, folder 13, "Mental Slavery", and Sermon file, folder 124

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12 King added this sentence in a second pen
13 Cf John 1:42
14 Cf Acts 9:1-28
15 King cites John Oxenham's hymn "In Christ There Is No East or West" (1908)
16 King cites the "Hallelujah Chorus" in George Frideric Handel's oratorio Messiah (1741)
17 King added this sentence in a second pen

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

"A Religion of Doing."
Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

April 4, 1954
Montgomery, Ala

During another weekend trip from Boston to Montgomery, King preached
the following sermon at Dexter. Drawing ideas from Harry Emerson Fosdick's
"Christianity Not a Form but a Force," King asserts "Christ is more concerned
about our attitude towards racial prejudice and war than he is about our long
processionals. He is more concerned with how we treat our neighbors than how
loud we sing his praises."

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1 Fosdick, A Great Time to Be Alive, pp 89-97
In the seventh chapter of Matthew’s Gospel we find these pressing words flowing from the lips of our Lord and Master “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my father which is in Heaven”* In these words Jesus is placing emphasis on a concrete practical religion rather than an abstract theoretical religion. In other words he is placing emphasis on an active religion of doing rather than a passive religion of talk. Religion to be real and genuine must not only be something that men talk about, but it must be something that men live about. Jesus recognized that there is always the danger of having a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds. He was quite certain that the tree of religion becomes dry and even dead when it fails to produce the fruit of action.

Let us turn for the moment to some of the truths implicit in our text which must forever challenge us as Christians. The first truth implied in our text is that the test of belief is action. This is just another way of saying that a man will do what he believes and in the final analysis he is what he does. There can be no true divorce between belief and action. There might be some divorce between intellectual assent and action. Intellectual assent is merely agreeing that a thing is true, real belief is acting like it is true. Belief always takes a flight into action. The ultimate test for what a man believes is not what he says, but what he does. Many people, for example, say that they believe in God, but their actions reveal the very denial of God’s existence. Indeed the great danger confronting religion is not so much theoretical atheism as practical atheism, not so much denying God’s existence with our lips as denying God’s existence with our lives. How many of us so-called Christians affirm the existence of God with our mouths and deny his existence with our lives? It causes many to wonder if we believe in God after all. And there is warrant for such a wonder. If a man believes that there is a God that guides the destiny of the universe, and if this God has planted in the fiber of the universe an inexorable moral law that is as abiding as the physical laws, he will act like it. And if he doesn’t act like it all of his impressive eloquence concerning his belief in God becomes as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. Belief is ultimately validated in action. The ultimate test of a man’s sincerity in crying Lord, Lord, is found in his active doing of God’s will.

A second truth implied in our text is that real religion is not a mere form but a dynamic force. Now there can be no doubt that this is one area in which we have failed miserably. Dr. Moffatt’s translation of that familiar passage in the second letter to Timothy is a true description of much of our conventional Christianity. It reads “Though they keep up a form of religion, they will have nothing to do with it as a force.”

Certainly that describes many people. There are about 700,000,000 Christians in the world today, and were Christ’s faith and way of life a vital force in anything like that number, the condition of this world would be far better than it is. How much truth there is in the lines of a modern poet who speaks about our worshipping congregation.

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2 Matthew 7:21
3 1 Corinthians 13:1
4 2 Timothy 3:5 (Moffatt)
How much of our contemporary christianity can be described as a mere Sunday habit. To put it fugitively, christianity is not a garment that we wear in everyday life, but it is a Sunday suit which we put on on Sunday morning and hang up neatly in the closet on Sunday night never to be touched again until the next Sunday. We have a form of religion but have nothing to do with it as a force. As E. Stanley Jones put it, "innoculated with a mild form of christianity, we have become immune to the genuine article." Yet if religion is to be real and genuine in our lives it must be experienced as a dynamic force. Religion must be effective in the political world, the economic world, and indeed the whole social situation. Religion should flow through the stream of the whole [of] life. The easygoing dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, the god of religion and the god of life, the god of Sunday and the god of Monday has wrought havoc in the portals of religion. We must come to see that the god of religion is the god of life and that the god of Sunday is the god of Monday.

One of the things that prevents the church from being the dynamic force that it could be is the deep division within. We argue endlessly over creeds and ritual and denominationalism while the forces of evil are marching on. My friends the forces of evil in the world today are too strong to be met by isolated denominations. We must come to see that we have a unity of purpose that transcends all of our differences and that the God whom we serve is not a denominational God. When we come to see this we will meet the forces of evil, not with a mere form, but with strong organized forces of good. Let it not be said that we have a form of religion but have nothing to do with it as a force. (Quote Shakespeare Othello)

A final truth implied in our text is that we must never substitute esthetics for ethics. As Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick has said, "There are two sets of faculties in (all of) us, the esthetic and the ethical—the sense of beauty and the sense of duty—and Christ appeals to both." And there is the ever present danger that we will become so involved in singing our beautiful hymns about Christ and noticing our beautiful architecture and ritual, that our religion will end up in emotional adorations only, saying, "Lord, Lord!"

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5 Fosdick, A Great Time To Be Alive, p. 89. "In the United States today there are between fifty and sixty million members of Christian churches, and were Christ's faith and way of life a vital force in anything like that number, the condition of this country would be far better than it is. Gratefully appreciating the genuine faith and character in our churches, yet when one surveys the scene as a whole, one understands the lines of a modern poet about our worshiping congregations. 'They do it every Sunday, / They'll be all right on Monday, / It's just a little habit they've acquired.'"

6 E. Stanley Jones, The Christ of the Indian Road (New York: Abingdon, 1925), p. 119. "We are inoculating the world with a mild form of Christianity, so that it is now practically immune against the real thing." Cf. Fosdick, A Great Time To Be Alive, p. 90. E. Stanley Jones (1884-1973) was a Christian missionary and evangelist.

7 Fosdick considers these themes in his sermon "Christianity More Than Duty—Not Weight but Wings" in The Hope of the World, pp. 167-175.
What we are seeing in our world today is countless millions of people worshipping Christ emotionally but not morally. The white men who lynch Negroes worship Christ. The strongest advocates of segregation in America also worship Christ. Many of the greatest economic exploiters worship Christ. Much of the low, evil and degrading conditions existing in our society is perpetuated by people who worship Christ. The most disastrous events in the history of Christ's movement have not come from his opposers, but from his worshippers who said, "Lord, Lord!"

My friends may I say that a Christianity that worships Christ emotionally and does not follow him ethically is a conventional sham. Let us be well assured amid our beautiful churches, and our lovely architecture, that Christ is more concerned about our attitude towards racial prejudice and war than he is about our long processionals. He is more concerned with how we treat our neighbors than how loud we sing his praises. Christ is more concerned about our living a high ethical life than our most detailed knowledge of the creeds of Christendom. Not every one, not any one, who merely says, "Lord, Lord!" but he that doeth the Father's will!

A very interesting story comes to us from the pen of Dr. Hugh Price Hughes. I will tell it as used by Dr. Howard Thurman. The story takes place in the city of everywhere. It is the tale of a man who might have been I, for I dreamed one time of journeying to that city. I arrived early one morning. It was cold, there were flakes of snow on the ground and as I stepped from the train to the platform I noticed that the baggageman and the red cap were warmly attired in heavy coats and gloves, but oddly enough, they wore no shoes. As I looked further I found that no one in the station wore any shoes. Boarding the streetcar, I saw that my fellow travellers were likewise barefoot, and upon arriving at the hotel I found the bellhop and the clerk both devoid of shoes.

Unable to restrain myself longer, I asked the ingratiating manager what the practice meant.

"What practice?" said he.

"Why," said I, pointing to his bare feet, "why don't you wear any shoes in this town?"

"Ah," said he, "that is just it. Why don't we?"

"But what is the matter? Don't you believe in shoes?"

"Believe in shoes, my friend! I should say we do. That is the first article of our creed, shoes. They are indispensable to the wellbeing of humanity."

"Well, then, why don't you wear them?" said I, bewildered.

"Ah," said he, that is just it. Why don't we?"

After I checked in the hotel I met a gentleman who wanted to show me around the city. The first thing we noticed upon emerging from the hotel was a huge brick structure of impressive proportions. To this he pointed with pride.

"You see that?" said he. "That is one of our outstanding shoe manufacturing establishments!"

"A what?" I asked in amazement. "You mean you make shoes there?"

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8 In the folder containing this sermon, King kept a typescript of the story by Hughes (1847-1902), a Methodist minister who founded the periodical *Methodist Times* in 1885. Thurman retold the story in his book *The Gowing Edge* (New York Harper & Brothers, 1956), pp. 143-146. 4 July 1954
“Well, not exactly,” said he, “we talk about making shoes there, and believe me, we have got one of the most brilliant young fellows you have ever heard. He talks most thrillingly and convincingly every week on this subject of shoes. He has a most persuasive and appealing way. Just yesterday he moved the people profoundly with his exposition of the necessity of shoe wearing. Many broke down and wept. It was really wonderful!”

“But why don’t they wear them?” said I, insistently.

“Ah,” said he, “that is just it. Why don’t we?”

And coming out of “The City of Everywhere” into the “Here,” over and over that query rang in my ears: “Why don’t we? Why don’t we? Why don’t we?”

My friends we say that we believe in wearing the way of Christ. We build beautiful churches in which we preach and sing with moving eloquence about the necessity of wearing his way. But why don’t we?

“Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things I command you?”

“Why don’t we? Why don’t we? Why don’t we? Why don’t we?”

[Preached at Dexter on July 4th, 1954]

TAD  CSKC  Sermon file, folder 91, “Religion of Doing”

9  Cf Luke 6:46

“What Is Man?” Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

[11 July 1954]

Montgomery, Ala

In this handwritten and dated version of a sermon King had been developing since his seminary years, he stresses that all people are created in God’s image and bear a responsibility to live accordingly. King draws upon Harry Emerson Fosdick in calling

1 King indicates on the folder containing this sermon that he preached this sermon at Dexter on 9 July 1954, a Friday. He may have erred on the precise date he delivered the sermon, which according to the Montgomery Examiners 15 July report of the Men’s Day service, occurred on 11 July 1954. For early uses of this sermon title, see King, Sermon Introductions, 30 November 1948–16 February 1949, and “Radio Sermons,” 26 July 1953–6 September 1953, pp. 84 and 136 in this volume, respectively. King’s personal library contained a copy of Crozer professor Edwin Ewart Aubrey’s Living the Christian Faith (New York: Macmillan, 1939), which King annotated. He underlined the following portion of the preface: “What is man?” becomes an acute problem once again, and its answer lies outside the descriptions of the average psychological textbook, greatly as these contribute to our understanding of the ways in which men express themselves” (Aubrey, Living the Christian Faith, p. viii). King later published a version of this sermon in his 1959 book The Measure of a Man (Philadelphia: Christian Education Press, 1959), pp. 1–18 and in his 1963 sermon collection (King, “What Is Man?” in Strength to Love, pp. 87–92).