Loving Your Enemies,
Sermon Delivered at the Detroit Council
of Churches’ Noon Lenten Services

[7 March 1961]
Detroit, Mich.

King delivered this oft-given sermon at Central Methodist Church as his second message of the week for the Noon Lenten Services. He argues that Jesus’ command to love one’s enemies was not “the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer” but the words of a “practical realist.” Noting that love is a display of strength, King asserts: “Put us in jail, and we will go in with humble smiles on our faces, still loving you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we will still love you. . . . But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer.” The following text is taken from an audio recording of the service.2

1. King’s schedule for his Detroit visit included Noon Lenten sermons on 6 and 7 March (Lenox to King, 15 February 1961). Detroit’s radio station WWJ broadcast abridged versions of both sermons King preached during the Lenten series (Detroit Council of Churches, Announcement, “Noon Lenten services,” 15 February–30 March 1961).

2. King later published a version of this sermon (King, Strength to Love, pp. 34–41).
Again let me say how happy I am to be here and to be a part of this Lenten program once more. And I want to express my personal appreciation to my good friend Dr [G. M. Lenox] for extending the invitation. I would also like to express my personal appreciation to him for the great work that he is doing through the Detroit Council of Churches.

I travel over the country a great deal speaking for various Councils of Churches, and certainly all of them are doing good jobs, and I don't want to minimize any. But I think I can say without fear of successful contribution, contradiction, that I don't know any council that is doing a better job and that has a more dynamic program than the Detroit Council of Churches. And I'm sure that that is due a great deal to the dynamic leadership of Dr Lenox.

I regret so much that I cannot be with you tomorrow, but as has already been explained, I will have to go back, and I've had to change my schedule somewhat because of the heavy demands and because of the many responsibilities in the South. But I'm sure that you will want to come back tomorrow to hear my good friend, Dr Banks, who is certainly one of the distinguished and outstanding preachers of our nation. And it is good for Detroit to have a man of his caliber in this community, and I'm sure that you will want to hear him tomorrow.

Now this afternoon I would like to have you think with me on a passage of scripture that has been a great influence in my life and a passage that I have sought to bring to bear on the whole struggle for racial justice, which is taking place in our nation. The words are found in the fifth chapter of the gospel as recorded by Saint Matthew. And these words flow from the lips of our Lord and Master. "Ye have heard it said of old that thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, love your enemies. Bless them that curse you. Do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven."

These are great words, words lifted to cosmic proportions. And over the centuries men have argued that the actual practice of this command just isn't possible. Years ago the philosopher Nietzsche contended that this command illustrates that the Christian ethic is for weak men, not for strong men, and certainly not for the superman. And he went on to argue that it was just additional proof that Jesus was an impractical idealist who never quite came down to earth.

But we have come to see today that, far from being the practical, the impractical idealist, Jesus is the practical realist, and the words of this text stand before us with new urgency. And far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, love is the...

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3 Originally scheduled to be in Detroit for three days, King cited health concerns and the growing demands of the civil rights movement in shortening the stay to two days, 6–7 March (King to Lenox, 15 February 1961).
4 King refers to Allen A. Banks, pastor of Second Baptist Church.
5 Matthew 5:43–45.
6 King may refer to Friedrich Nietzsche, The Antichrist, trans. H. L. Mencken (New York: Knopf, 1918), p. 43. "The weak and the botched shall perish first principle of our charity. And one should help them to it. What is more harmful than any vice?—Practical sympathy for botched and the weak—Christianity."

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key to the solution of the problems of our world, love even for enemies. Since this is a basic Christian command and a basic Christian responsibility, it is both fitting and proper that we stop from time to time to analyze the meaning of these arresting words. And so we may well begin by raising the practical “how”—How do we go about loving our enemies?

There are many things that we must do in order to love our enemies, but I would like to suggest just three. Seems to me that the first thing that the individual must do in order to love his enemy is to develop the capacity to forgive with a naturalness and ease. If one does not have the capacity to forgive, he doesn’t have the capacity to love.

Now it is assumed that the individual or the group who is our enemy has done something to hurt us. That individual has mistreated us or has mistreated our group, so to speak, and this creates a conflict situation. Now, the only way to grapple with this conflict situation is that the mistreated person, the hurt person, the injured person, must develop the capacity to forgive, for it is only the individual who is injured or who is hurt that can forgive. The person who hurts must repent, but the person who is hurt is the one that must forgive. And it is through this method that we are able to restore the moral balance of society or individual relationships, for in the final analysis, forgiveness means a willingness to go any length to restore a broken relationship.

Now you’ll hear people saying from time to time, “I will forgive you, but I won’t forget.” [Congregation] [laughter] Well if you won’t forget, you haven’t forgiven because forgiveness means forgetting. Now it doesn’t mean forgetting in the sense that you completely erase the misdeed out of your mind. This may be impossible. But it means that you erase it from your mind in the sense that it no longer serves as a determining factor in the future relationship, so that one can only forgive when he forgets.

Again we hear people saying, “I will forgive you but I won’t have anything to do with you.” There again, one hasn’t forgiven if he will not have anything to do with the person or the group that he is supposedly forgiving because forgiveness means reconciliation. Forgiveness means the development of a new relationship. And I submit to you that the first way that one can go about loving his enemy neighbor is to develop the capacity to forgive.

The second thing is this. In order to love the enemy neighbor we must recognize that the negative deed of the enemy does not represent all that the individual is. His evil deed does not represent his whole being. If we look at ourselves hard enough, and if we look at all men hard enough, we see a strange dichotomy, a disturbing schizophrenia. We are divided against ourselves, split up so to speak. There is something within 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.” There is something within all of us that causes us to agree with Plato that “the human personality is like a charoteer with two headstrong horses each wanting to go in different directions.”

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7 Ovid Metamorphoses 7 20
8 Plato Phaedrus 246a–247c
Augustine in his *Confessions* from time to time, “Lord, make me pure, but not yet.”

[laughter] Or we find ourselves crying out with the Apostle Paul, “The good that I would I do not, and the evil that I would not that I do.” Or we cry out with Carlyle that “there are depths in man which go down to the lowest hell and heights which reach the highest heaven, for are not both heaven and hell made out of Him, everlasting miracle and mystery that He is.”

And there is within all of us something of this division And psychologists have tried to analyze it Sigmund Freud calls it a conflict between the id and the super-ego. Theologians call it a conflict between God and man. But whatever we call it, we realize soon or later that the “isness” of our present natures is out of harmony with the eternal “oughtness” that forever confronts us. And this means that there is some good in the worst of us [Congregation] (Amen) and some evil in the best of us (Amen) And when we come to see thus we begin to love all men And we see an element of good even in the person who is seeking to defeat us and even in the person of the group that hates us most.

And finally we come to see that there is within every man the image of God, and no matter how much it is scarred, it is still there. And so when we come to recognize that the evil act of our enemy neighbor is not the whole being of our enemy neighbor, we develop the capacity to love him in spite of his evil deed.

The other thing that we must do in order to love the enemy neighbor is this: we must seek at all times to win his friendship and understanding rather than to defeat him or humiliate him. There may come a time when it will be possible for you to humiliate your worst enemy or even to defeat him, but in order to love the enemy you must not do it. For in the final analysis, love means understanding goodwill for all men and a refusal to defeat any individual. And somehow love makes it possible for you to place your vision and to center your activity on the evil system and not the individual enemy who may be caught up in that system. And so you set out to defeat segregation and not the segregationist. You set out to defeat the evil system of communism and not the communist. And there is a great deal of difference there. And there must be an active love for the individuals who may be caught up in an evil unjust system while we continue to work passionately and unrelentingly to do away with the system itself.

The Greek language comes to our aid when we seek to analyze the meaning of love with special reference to our enemies. There are three words in the Greek language for love. There is the word *eros*, for instance. And the word *eros* refers to a sort of aesthetic love. Plato uses it a great deal in his dialogues—a yearning of the soul for the realm of the divine. And it has come to us to mean a sort of romantic love.

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9 Augustine *Confessions* 8.7
10 Romans 7:19
11 Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (1800)
12 Cf Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, pp 137–138 “The problem of maturity is not only to achieve unity amidst complexity of impulses but to overcome the particular conflict between the is and the ought of life, between the ideal possibilities to which freedom encourages man and the drive of egotism, which reason sharpens rather than assuages.”
13 Genesis 1:27
and so in that sense we all know about *eros* We’ve experienced it, and we’ve read about it in all of the beauties of literature In a sense Edgar Allan Poe was talking about *eros* when he talked about his beautiful Annabel Lee with a love surrounded by the halo of eternity. In a sense, Shakespeare was talking about *eros* when he said, “Love is not love which alters when its alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove It is an ever-fix’d mark that looks on tempest and is never shaken It is a star to every wandering bark.” This is beautiful This is *eros*, a vital type of love.

Then the Greek language talks about *philia*, which is another level of love that is a sort of intimate affection between personal friends It is friendship And so on this level you love because you are loved It’s a reciprocal love You love the people that you like.

Then the Greek language has another word It calls it *agape* *Agape* is more than romantic love *Agape* is more than friendship *Agape* is understanding, redemptive goodwill for all men *Agape* is an overflowing love, a spontaneous love, which seeks nothing in return. And theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart. When you rise to love on this level you love all men, not because you like them, not because their ways appeal to you, not because they are useful to you, but you love all men because God loves them. And you rise to the noble heights of loving the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed that the person does.

And I think this is what Jesus means when he says, “Love your enemies.” And I’m so happy he didn’t say, “Like your enemies,” because it’s kind of difficult to like some people [laughter] Like is sentimental, like is an affectionate sort of thing And you can’t like anybody who’s bombing your home and threatening your children It’s hard to like a senator who’s spending all of his time in Washington standing against all of the legislation that will make for better relationships and that will make for brotherhood It’s difficult to like them But Jesus says, “Love them,” and love is greater than like Love is understanding, redemptive, creative goodwill for all men And so Jesus was expressing something very creative when he said, “Love your enemies Bless them that curse you Pray for them that despitefully use you.”

Now for the moments left, let us turn from the practical “how” to the theoretical “why,” and ask the valid, the vital and valid question, Why should we love our enemies? Because this is an important question.

I would say the first reason, and I’m sure Jesus had this in mind, we should love our enemies is this to return evil for evil only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. And somewhere along the way of life, somebody must have

14 Edgar Allan Poe, “Annabel Lee” (1849)
15 Shakespeare, “Sonnet 116” (1609)
16 Harry Emerson Fosdick, *On Being Fit to Live With*, pp 6–7 “Love in the New Testament is not a sentimental and affectionate emotion as we so commonly interpret it. There are three words in Greek for love, three words that we have to translate by our one word, love. *Eros*—*erotic* comes from it—that is one *Philia*—that is another Greek word. It meant intimate personal affectionateness and friendship. But the great Christian word for love is something else *agape* *Agape* means nothing sentimental or primarily emotional at all, it means understanding, redemptive, creative good will.”
17 King probably refers to Senator James O’Eastland (D-Miss) as he does in “Levels of Love,” 16 September 1962, p. 441 in this volume
sense enough, somebody must have morality enough, somebody must have religion enough, to cut off the chain of hate and evil. And this can only be done by meeting hate with love. For you see in a real sense, if we return hate for hate, violence for violence, and all of that, it just ends up destroying everybody. And nobody wins in the long run. And it is the strong man who stands up in the midst of violence and refuses to return it. It is the strong man, not the weak man, who stands up in the midst of hate and returns love.

Some time ago, my brother and I were driving from Atlanta, Georgia, to Chattanooga, Tennessee. He was driving the car, and it was late at night, and for some reason most of the drivers were discourteous that night. They just didn’t dim their lights as they approached our car. Everybody was forgetting to dim lights that night. And my brother got angry, and he said, “I know what I’m going to do. The next car that comes along this highway and fails to dim its lights, I’m going to refuse to dim mine, and I’m going to keep these lights on in all of their glaring outpour.” And I looked up and I said, “Wait a minute. Don’t you do that. For if you refuse to dim your lights, there will be a little too much light on this highway [laughter], and may end up in destruction for all of us. Somebody will have to have sense enough on this highway to dim their lights.” [laughter] And maybe here we find an analogy to the whole struggle of life. Somebody must have sense enough to dim their lights. (Right) Hate begets hate. Force begets force. Violence begets violence. Toughness begets toughness. And it is all a descending spiral ending in destruction for everybody.

And so Jesus is right. (Yes) Love is the answer. The other point is this that we should love our enemies because hate damages the personality and injures the soul. So often we talk about what hate does to the hated person or to the hated group, and we think of the damages that we find in the hate process as it moves toward the object of hate. So when we look in our nation and we look in the South in particular, we began to talk about how much it damages the Negro for the white man to hate him, and what this hate on the part of the white group is doing to destroy the Negro, and what it is doing to destroy the physical comfort, and the individual’s freedom, and the collective freedom of the Negro. And that is true, it does destroy this. But so often we overlook the fact that hate is as damaging to the subject of hate as it is to the object of hate. Hate damages a white man, in many instances, more than it damages the Negro, for it does something to the personality, it does something to the soul. And this is why I say that our struggle in the United States today is not merely a struggle to free the Negro, but it is a struggle to free our white brothers from their fears, from their prejudices, from their hate, and all of those attitudes that destroy and damage the soul.

Some time ago, I was reading a book, or rather an essay by Dr. E. Franklin Frazier, the outstanding sociologist of Howard University, and it’s called “The Pathology of Racial Prejudice.” And he has a very interesting illustration in there. He shows that you find many persons who are filled with hate very normal in many of their relationships. But when they become, when they come to the point of interacting with Negroes, they interact in a very pathological manner. And he gave the illustration of a very aristocratic, wealthy white woman in Virginia who had this beautiful, palatial home, and a Negro went by one day to see her, to talk with her on some matters. And she happened to have been a mulatta, very fair, and the white lady didn’t know that she was a Negro. She invited her in and had her to sit on this beautiful, expen-
sive sofa. And they were seated in the living room and they talked and talked and had a genuine fellowship. And then the Negro woman left. A few days later, the white woman discovered that this was a Negro woman that had been in her house, that she had maybe an ounce of Negro blood, and that made her Negro. So she discovered this and after she discovered that she had entertained a Negro on that fine sofa, she went and burned it up. Now this is what hate will do. It leads to pathological ends.18

All the psychologists have been telling us this, haven’t they? They tell us today that we must love or perish. And they tell us that there is something about hate that disrupts the personality, that makes for inner conflicts and guilt feelings and, thereby, develops neurotic personalities. But long ago Jesus realized this. Jesus realized that hate does something to the personality of the hater, and so the individual who hates can’t see right. The individual who hates can’t walk right. The individual who hates loses his sense of objectivity and his sense of values. And so for the individual who hates, the beautiful becomes ugly, and the ugly becomes beautiful. The true becomes false, and the false becomes true. The evil becomes good, and the good becomes evil. The person who hates loses the power of rationality and objectivity. And so again Jesus was right—love your enemies. (Yeah) Bless them that curse you. Pray for them that despitefully use you because hate can destroy the personality.

And finally, we must love our enemies because hate, or rather because love has within its very power transforming qualities. And we notice hate and think about it. Hate serves to destroy. Love serves to build up. Hate seeks destructive ends. Love seeks constructive ends. Hate seeks to annihilate. Love seeks to convert. Hate seeks to live in monologue. Love seeks to live in dialogue. And it is only through love that we are able to redeem and transform the enemy neighbor.

And so when Jesus says, “love the enemy,” he’s saying love the enemy because there is something about love that can transform, that can change, that can arouse the conscience of the enemy. And only by doing this are you able to transform the jangling discords of society into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood and understanding. We’ve seen examples of this—many cases in history and in biography. We look back at our own history, and we think of Abraham Lincoln, the great president of the United States, one of the great men of history. When H.G. Wells stopped one day to discover the six great men of history, after he had looked around the world, he had to choose Abraham Lincoln as one of the six great men of history.19

Abraham Lincoln was a great man. You remember when he was running for president of the United States, there was a man who hated Lincoln. He went around the country saying very nasty and evil things about Lincoln. And sometimes he got very low in his words; he would go so far as to say, “You don’t want this tall, lanky, ignorant man as your president.” Abraham Lincoln was aware of all of this. He was aware of all of the words that were being uttered by this man. The man’s name was [Edwin M.] Stanton. Finally, Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United


19 Mays, "Non-Violence," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 28 February 1948
States. And then came that day when he had to select his cabinet. And do you know what Abraham Lincoln did when he started selecting his cabinet? He looked around the country and decided to choose a man by the name of Stanton as his secretary of war. Abraham Lincoln’s advisors looked over to him and said, “Are you crazy? Are you foolish? Do you know what this man has been saying about you?” Abraham Lincoln said, “Yes, I’ve read his words, and I’ve heard about them. But after looking over the country, I find that he’s the best man for the job.” Few months later, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. Many great words were uttered concerning Abraham Lincoln, but one of the finest tributes ever paid Abraham Lincoln, some of the greatest words ever uttered concerning the life of Abraham Lincoln, were uttered by this man by the name of Stanton. And he scratched across the pages of history that “now belongs to the ages.” Suppose Abraham Lincoln had hated Stanton, suppose he had returned evil for evil [recording interrupted].

[Recording resumes] must learn to say to all those reactionaries who have brought, blocked the road to progress. We will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we will still love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. And so put us in jail, and we will go in with humble smiles on our faces, still loving you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we will still love you. Send your propaganda agents around the country and make it appear that we are not fit morally, culturally, and otherwise for integration. And we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hours, and drag us out on some wayside road and beat us and leave us half dead, and we will still love you (That’s right). But be assured that we will wear you down (Yes indeed) by our capacity to suffer (Yes). And one day we will win our freedom, but not only will we win freedom for ourselves, we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process (Yes, Lord) And our victory will be a double victory. This seems to me the only answer and the only way to make our nation a new nation and our world a new world. Love is the absolute power.

Years ago, Napoleon said something like this: “Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have built great empires. But upon what did they depend? They depended upon force. But years ago Jesus built an empire that depended upon love. And even to this day, millions will die for him.” And that is the meaning of love. As we watch Jesus the Christ and see him as he starts out standing amid the intricate and fascinating military machinery of the Roman Empire, it seems that we can hear him say-

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20 In his 17 November 1957 version of this sermon, King continued “Abraham Lincoln would have not transformed and redeemed Stanton. Stanton would have gone to his grave hating Lincoln, and Lincoln would have gone to his grave hating Stanton. But through the power of love, Abraham Lincoln was able to redeem Stanton. [¶] That’s it. There is a power in love that our world has not discovered yet. Jesus discovered it centuries ago. Mahatma Gandhi of India discovered it a few years ago, but most men and most women never discover it. For they believe in hitting for hitting, they believe in an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, they believe in hating for hating. But Jesus comes to us and says, “This isn’t the way.” (“Loving Your Enemies,” Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, in Papers 4:322.)

ing, "I will not use these methods. I will just take the ammunition of love and put on the breastplate of righteousness and the whole armor of God. And just start marching." And this was what he did. And through this approach he was able to shake the hinges from the gates of the Roman Empire. And through his life, he was able to transform history and split history into AD and BC so that today we can hear the glad echo of heaven sing:

Jesus shall reign where'er sun
Does its successive journeys run,
His Kingdom spread from shore to shore,
Till moon shall wane and wax no more.

And this is the meaning of the cross as we move toward Easter. It is not just a meaningless drama taking place on the stage of history, but 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, a generation growing in nuclear and atomic weapons, saying love is the only way. (Yeah) Love is the only answer. And so this morning, as I look into your eyes, as I lift my eyes beyond you and look into the eyes of the peoples of the world, I love you. I would rather die than hate you. (Amen) And I believe that my spirit can meet your spirit, and your spirit, through this process, will meet my spirit, and through this collision of spirits, the kingdom of God will finally emerge. (Amen) There is still a voice crying even this day, saying, "Love your enemies. (Yeah) Bless them that curse you. (Yes) Do good to them that hate you. Pray for them that despitefully use you." (Yes) And only through this method can you matriculate into the university of eternal life.

Oh God, our gracious heavenly Father, we thank Thee for the inspiration of Jesus the Christ. And grant that we will love Thee with all of our hearts, souls, and minds, and love our neighbors as we love ourselves, even our enemy neighbors. (Amen) And we ask Thee, Oh God, in these days of emotional tension, when the problems of the world are gigantic in extent and chaotic in detail, to be with us in our going out and our coming in, in our rising up and in our lying down, in our moments of joy and in our moments of sorrow, until the day when there shall be no sunset and no dawning. (Amen)

At MAWC.

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22 Cf. Ephesians 6:11-17
23 King quotes Isaac Watts's hymn "Jesus Shall Reign" (1719)
24 Cf. Mark 12:30-31
25 Cf. Psalm 121:8 and Psalm 139:2-3

Sermons on Secrets

King delivered a sermon series on secrets at Ebenezer in the winter of 1961 that may have included the following three handwritten documents. The first two outlines may have formed the basis for a sermon on married happiness. Here, King bemoans the fact that "marriage has lost something of its spiritual creative meaning, and in many cases has become little more than a monotonous endurance contest between two people." In the third manuscript, King calls for contentment in the midst of life's tensions by pointing to the example of the apostle Paul who "[learned] to live from within instead of from without" and trusted in God to provide a "[changeless] structure of goodness in the universe, which transcends every circumstance."