

The Life and Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Dr. King (1929-1968) was a visionary, a man of peace, and a social justice warrior. But first and foremost, he was a Christian Pastor. While I neither agree with nor endorse many of his theological beliefs, this man was truly used by God in his time. Dr. King's thinking was informed by several Christian Bible principles, chief among them being the inherent dignity of all men and women as beings made in the image of God (**Genesis 1:26-27, NKJV**), love of neighbor as oneself (**Leviticus 19:18**), and Sermon on the Mount principles of nonviolent resistance and love of enemies (**Matthew 5:38-48**). We begin with some big picture background of the circumstances that led up to the days of Dr. King and the civil rights movement that he led.

Historically, racism in America has largely been along the lines of skin color. It had its origins in the African slave trade. Both Europeans and Africans were complicit in taking human beings captive and selling them across the Atlantic. Under the Law of Moses, such a thing to the extent that kidnapping was involved, was punishable by death (**Exodus 21:16**).

Theologically, American slavery was defended on the basis of two things. First, slavery is found in the Bible, and there is no law outlawing the practice entirely. This is true, but I would argue that God was simply responding to the evil propensities of men, and that it was His permissive will but not His perfect will. Men enslaving other men is an affront to the dignity inherent in the creation of all men and women (**Genesis 1:26-27**). Likewise, divorce and polygamy are acknowledged in the Bible, but they are a violation of God's perfect will of one man-one woman marriage (**Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-8**). Second, it was argued that Africans were descendants of Ham and Canaan, and were therefore cursed by God to be servants (**Genesis 9:18-27**). While some of Ham's descendants did migrate to Africa, the specific son upon whom the curse fell was Canaan. And Canaan settled in the land which God later gave to Israel. They were not even Africans! This shows how important it is for Bible students to learn the Word of God, study it, and cut it straight. The fact of the matter is that the descendants of Canaan were Canaanites, and were later subjugated by Israel in Joshua and King David's days. So the prophecy has been fulfilled already in history, and has no legitimate application to American history.

Before proceeding, let us acknowledge two basic Bible truths. First, all people have equal access to salvation spiritually through Christ Jesus (**Galatians 3:28-29**). This teaches us the high intrinsic value of every soul, for Christ's blood was shed for all peoples (**1 John 2:2**). The second Bible truth is found in Acts 17:26. "**And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings.**" There is one human race. We are all descendants of Adam and Noah. There are

therefore no distinctions based on color or ethnicity, with regard to the value of each person.

The following principles may be derived from the "I Have A Dream" speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on 8/28/1963. The commentary is my own.

1. Dr. King saw his movement as the greatest demonstration in US History. But we recall that the greatest demonstration in all of history was that of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to save sinners such as we (**Romans 5:8**).
2. Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. This remedied the lack of human dignity ascribed under the law. But things were much different in practice. Dr. King drew applications from spiritual captivity and applied them to the circumstances in the nation. Just as spiritual captivity was remedied by the coming of the Lord (**Luke 4:18**), physical captivity is remedied by application of true justice according to Christian principles. See **Matthew 6:10**.
3. The occasion of this speech is within the context of lawful redress of grievances. This is always the first and best option. But after a century, Dr. King and supporters of the movement for equality of civil rights regarding skin color were not going away. They would neither be intimidated nor give up.
4. Dr. King spoke well of our founding documents. Their basis in Judeo-Christianity was amenable to Dr. King. Human rights were seen by him to be "unalienable", having been gifted to men by the Creator God, and not by the whims of a godless government. His concept of liberty is a similar concept to annotations noted in point 2 in connection with **Luke 4:18**.
5. "Riches of freedom and the security of justice" are concepts essential to the nature of God, and freely offered by Him. Dr. King's use of "God's children" is, in this context, meant to be applied in the universal sense, not the special sense of believers only.
6. "**For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently?**" (1 Peter 2:20a). Dr. King endorsed peaceful means only. Sadly, others who claim to be in the mission of Dr. King have co-opted the movement and committed excesses and crimes. This happened in the 1960's and it continues to this day.
7. "**But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God**" (1 Peter 2:20b). Dr. King's call for "meeting physical force with soul force" reminds us of the conduct of Jesus Christ when He was arrested at the Garden of Gethsemane, put on trial, and crucified on the cross. It was Dr. King's earnest desire that the movement "not lead us to a distrust of all white people." Yet this is exactly what today's Critical Race Theory does, and it is being promoted in our universities and workplaces today. Dr. King says that "we cannot walk alone." This is what is taught in the Bible in **Ecclesiastes 4:8-12**.

8. God is no respecter of persons. **“For there is no partiality with God”** (Romans 2:11). The preacher quotes Amos 5:24, which reads, **“But let justice run down like water, And righteousness like a mighty stream”** (Amos 5:24).
9. Dr. King shared the Christian belief that “unearned suffering is redemptive.” Christ’s suffering was redemptive.
10. Perhaps the best known line of Dr. King’s speech is this: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” This criteria for judgment is color-blindness. Character is important, especially Christian character, above all other traits. Affirmative Action was signed into law by JFK in 1961 as a means to prevent discrimination. Today, it is often used to establish quotas according to race, gender, or other class, and results in unfairly treating those who are not of that class. This is contrary to the spirit of Dr. King’s statement. Furthermore, such interpretation and practice foments more division of various groups, races, and classes.
11. The orator interjected into his speech a marvelous and hope filled quote from Isaiah 40:4-5: “I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”
12. We find five words stressed by Dr. King. Hope. Faith. Brotherhood. Prayer. Freedom. All enjoined in the Bible.
13. “Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!” Let us pray as we have been taught by the Lord, **“Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven”** (Matthew 6:10). May divine principles relating to the essential thing, Christian salvation, be operative in our great nation. **“And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed”** (John 8:32,36)

We have come a long way to asserting the human dignity of all men and women of all races. What now should the church do? Preach the gospel and seek to live out the Great Commission. Respect others, assert human dignity, and promote justice according to Christian principles, but do not encourage people to think of themselves as victims of injustice without cause, nor excuse those who choose sinful lifestyles. May we all humbly think of ourselves as recipients of divine love, grace, and mercy! And know this: Christ came to save sinners (**1 Timothy 1:15**), not to achieve social justice. When we preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and not social justice, we shall have greater effect in the world for Christ. Social justice has its place as an outworking of the gospel, but it cannot be achieved without the conversion of the human heart through the hearing and believing in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.