

02/04/2024 "Paul's Letter to American Christians"

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, 1956,

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/pauls-letter-american-christians-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

Preached to First Congregational Church by Rev. Thandiwe Dale-Ferguson

1 Corinthians 10:14-17 & 11:23-26

On this first Sunday of Black History Month, let me say, "There is no American History without Black History." Today, I share with you portions of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's 1956 sermon: "Paul's Letter to American Christians." This letter is as prophetic today as it was 68 years ago. I have cut it by about 2/3 to honor our time together. I encourage you to look it up and read it in its entirety. Let us pray. Holy God, open our hearts. And now, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

[Let me] share with you an imaginary letter from the pen of the Apostle Paul... At the top of the first page was this request: "Please read to your congregation as soon as possible, and then pass on to the other churches."

I, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to you who are in America, Grace be unto you, and peace from God our [Creator], through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. For many years I have longed to... come to see you... I have heard of the ...astounding advances that you have made in the scientific realm: ...your [electric cars and supersonic planes]...I have [also] heard of your great medical advances, which have resulted in the curing of many dread plagues and diseases.... All of that is marvelous...You have made tremendous strides in the area of scientific and technological development.

But America, as I look at you from afar, ... [it] seems ...that your moral progress lags behind your scientific progress... You have allowed the material means by which you live to outdistance the spiritual ends for which you live. You have allowed your mentality to outrun your morality. You have allowed your civilization to outdistance your culture. Through your scientific genius you have made of the world a neighborhood, but through your moral and spiritual genius you have failed to make of it a [community of kinship]. So America, I would urge you to keep your moral advances abreast with your scientific advances.

I am impelled to write you concerning the responsibilities laid upon you to live as Christians in the midst of an unChristian world... I understand that there are many Christians in America who give their ultimate allegiance to [human]-made systems and customs. They are afraid to be different... They live by some such principle as this: "everybody is doing it, so it must be alright." ...But American Christians, I must say to you as I said to the Roman Christians years ago, "Be not conformed to this world, but be... transformed by the renewing of your mind."²

...I understand that you have an economic system in America known as Capitalism. Through this economic system you have been able to do wonders. You have become the richest nation in the world... All of this is marvelous. But Americans, there is the danger that you will misuse your Capitalism. I still contend that money can be the root of all evil.⁴ ...I am afraid that many among you are more concerned about making a living than making a life. You are prone to judge the success of your profession by the index of your salary and the [horsepower of] your automobile, rather than the quality of your service to humanity.

The misuse of Capitalism can ...lead to tragic exploitation.... They tell me that [in 2024, 66% of the total wealth in the United States is owned by the top 10 percent of earners. In comparison, the lowest

50 percent of earners owned less than 3 percent of the total wealth]¹. Oh America, how often have you taken necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. If you are to be a truly Christian nation you must solve this problem... You can use your powerful economic resources to wipe poverty from the face of the earth. God never intended for one group of people to live in superfluous inordinate wealth, while others live in abject deadening poverty. God intends for all of [God's children] to have the basic necessities of life, and [God] has left in this universe "enough and to spare" for that purpose. So I call upon you to bridge the gulf between abject poverty and superfluous wealth.

I would that I could be with you in person, so that I could say to you face to face what I am forced to say to you in writing... Americans, I must remind you, as I have said to so many others, that the church is the Body of Christ. So when the church is true to its nature it knows neither division nor disunity. But I am disturbed about what you are doing to the Body of Christ. They tell me that in America ...you have allowed segregation to creep into the doors of the church. How can such a division exist in the true Body of Christ? You must face the tragic fact that [in 2024 as in 1956] when you stand at [10:00] on Sunday morning to sing ["How Great Thou Art,"] you stand in the most segregated hour [in] America. They tell me that there is more integration in [Hollywood] than there is in the Christian church. How appalling that is.

...So Americans I must urge you to get rid of every aspect of segregation [and racial inequity]. The broad universalism standing at the center of the gospel makes both the theory and practice of [racial inequity] morally unjustifiable...The underlying philosophy of Christianity is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosoph[ies] of segregation[, white supremacy and Christian nationalism]....Yes America, there is still the need for an Amos to cry out to the nation: "Let judgment roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."⁸

...I must bring my writing to a close now... But just before leaving, I must say to you, as I said to the church at Corinth, that I still believe that love is the most durable power in the world....This principle stands at the center of the cosmos. As John says, "God is love." [The one] who loves is a participant in the being of God. [The one] who hates does not know God.¹¹ ... Love is ...the heartbeat of the moral cosmos...

...I hope this letter will find you strong in the faith. ...And now unto [God] who is able to keep us from falling, and lift us from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy, to [God] be power and authority, forever and ever. Amen.¹⁴

¹ For details of the reception it found there, see C. W. Kelly to King, 8 September 1956, pp. 365-366 in this volume. King later published the sermon in revised form in *Strength to Love* (1963).

² Romans 12:2.

³ Philippians 3:20: "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."

⁴ 1 Timothy 6:10.

⁵ Galatians 3:28.

⁶ Acts 17:24, 26.

⁷ See Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1937).

⁸ Amos 5:24.

⁹ In a speech to the National Committee for Rural Schools, King attributed this statement to Kenneth Clark, replacing "Christian" with "honorable" (see King, "Desegregation and the Future," 15 December 1956, p. 478 in this volume).

¹⁰ Romans 8:38-39.

¹¹ 1 John 4:16.

¹² 1 Corinthians 13:1-2.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 13:3.

¹⁴ Cf. Jude 24-25.

Source: MLKJP-GAMK, Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers (Series I-IV), Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., Atlanta, Ga., Box 119A, folder 16.

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/203961/wealth-distribution-for-the-us/>