

“The Most Durable Power,”
Excerpt from Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist
Church on 6 November 1956

5 June 1957
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Always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods and Christian weapons. Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. Always avoid violence. If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in your struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos.

In your struggle for justice, let your oppressor know that you are not attempting to defeat or humiliate him, or even to pay him back for injustices that he has heaped upon you. Let him know that you are merely seeking justice for him as well as yourself. Let him know that the festering sore of segregation debilitates the white man as well as the Negro. With this attitude you will be able to keep your struggle on high Christian standards.

Many persons will realize the urgency of seeking to eradicate the evil of segregation. There will be many Negroes who will devote their lives to the cause of freedom. There will be many white persons of good will and strong moral sensitivity who will dare to take a stand for justice. Honesty impels me to admit that such a stand will require willingness to suffer and sacrifice. So don't despair if you are condemned and persecuted for righteousness' sake. Whenever you take a stand for truth and justice, you are liable to scorn. Often you will be called an impractical idealist or a dangerous radical. Sometimes it might mean going to jail. If such is the case you must honorably grace the jail with your presence. It might even mean physical death. But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their

¹ King derived the title of this sermon from Harry Emerson Fosdick's "The Most Durable Power in the World" (*Successful Christian Living*, pp. 86-96). King annotated a copy of Fosdick's book and kept it in his personal library. A few months earlier King had published an article entitled "Nonviolence and Racial Justice" in the February 1957 *Christian Century* (in *Papers 4*, 118-122).

children from a permanent life of psychological death, then nothing could be more Christian

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I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may.

I still believe that love is the most durable power in the world. Over the centuries men have sought to discover the highest good. This has been the chief quest of ethical philosophy. This was one of the big questions of Greek philosophy. The Epicureans and the Stoics sought to answer it; Plato and Aristotle sought to answer it. What is the *summum bonum* of life?² I think I have discovered the highest good. It is love. This principle stands at the center of the cosmos. As John says, "God is love."³ He who loves is a participant in the being of God. He who hates does not know God. From a sermon preached in Montgomery, Alabama, November 6, 1956

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2 *Summum bonum* is Latin for "highest good."

3 1 John 4:8, 16