

Biblical References in the Civil Rights Movement

Yesterday June 19th was a holiday called Juneteenth. It commemorates the day when the people in Galveston, TX got the message that the slaves were being freed after the Civil War. The Emancipation Proclamation by Abraham Lincoln on September 22nd, 1862 freed all of the slaves in the Confederacy, to be effective January 1st, 1863. The trouble was the states in the Confederacy did not recognize his authority.

But in April 1865, the Civil War ended. Then on June 19th, 1865, a Union general read the orders in accordance with the Emancipation Proclamation to free the slaves in Galveston, TX. It's been a day of celebration ever since then. And that was yesterday.

That leads into our sermon today.

The title of the sermon today is "Biblical References in the Civil Rights Movement."

The nonviolent Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s greatly reduced racial segregation and discrimination in the United States. There is an essay in the Holman Christian Standard Bible by Kevin L. Smith, PhD of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, entitled "The Bible and Civil Rights." It is placed at the beginning of the Epistle to Philemon. You may remember that the epistle to Philemon was a letter from the Apostle Paul to this man. It is talking about a slave, and here is the first paragraph of that essay.

"The Bible is central to the thought, rhetoric, and development of the Civil Rights Movement. This was influenced by the essential role of black churches and preachers in the organization of the movement. Not only was the movement characterized by meetings in churches and the singing of Negro spirituals, it was also marked by biblical themes and biblical rhetoric."

Let's study the biblical references in three of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches.

Occasionally he quotes verses. More often, he refers to biblical concepts that would be detected by people who are familiar with the Bible.

Loving Your Enemies

The first sermon or speech that we'll talk about is entitled "Loving Your Enemies." It was recorded in 1957, have been given by Doctor King more than once as early as 1952.

It was presented at a church in Montgomery, AL and also broadcast simultaneously to the public on a small radio station.

Doctor King quoted Matthew Chapter 5 starting in verse 43. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you."

Doctor King said this is difficult, but it is necessary for the survival of our civilization.

To love our enemies, we have to do three things.

He says #1 look at yourself. Surprisingly to love your enemies, first look at yourself, because maybe you're doing something wrong.

Then he quoted Matthew Chapter 7 starting in verse three. "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye, and look a plank is in your own eye?'"

Hypocrite, first remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

The 2nd way to love our enemies is to discover the good in our enemy. There's good and bad in everybody, he said, even in the race that hates you. He quoted Romans Chapter 7 starting in verse 14. "For we know that the law is spiritual. But I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do that I do not practice; but I hate that I do."

Yes, he says we want to do good, but we realize we can't always. There's bad in us as well as in our enemy.

He referred to Genesis one, verse 26 saying that all are made in the image of God. Genesis 1:26 "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'"

We and our enemies are made in the image of God.

The 3rd way to love our enemies is when the opportunity arises to defeat the enemy, don't do it. Don't try to defeat our enemies. At this point. Dr. King talked about the three Greek words for love in the Bible, *eros* having to do with romantic love, and *phileo* having to do with friendship.

He defines *agape* love as this. He says love is understanding; redemptive goodwill for all, so you love everybody because God loves them. We don't try to defeat them.

Then he asked the question why should we love our enemies? There are two reasons. One is that hate spirals into destruction.

The other reason to love our enemies is that hate makes the hater irrational. The person doesn't think clearly. This is the point where he may not be able to tell right from wrong, because his hatred is just so strong.

Matthew 5 he referred to this way, so we don't just love our friends. Matthew 5 verse 46 "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

The third reason to love our enemies is that love transforms our enemies.

I'll quote this from Doctor King. "Just keep loving them, and they can't stand it too long... By the power of your love they will break down under the load."

This sounds a lot like Romans 12:19 "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine. I will repay,'" says the Lord. Therefore, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing so you will heap coals of fire on his head."

Yes, he can cause a fire on the enemy's head, making it just impossible for them to keep hating. Eventually, as he says, they break down under the load.

Doctor King said that modern psychology and Gandhi learned about love and nonviolence recently. Christ taught it centuries ago.

There are three ways for the oppressed people to deal with it.

One way is violence. But then it will never end. Violence would never end.

The 2nd way is to give in, like Israel wanting to return to Egypt when things got difficult.

I'm reminded of Exodus chapter 16 starting in verse 2. "Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the children of Israel said to them, 'Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'"

They wanted to go back when things got tough. Admonishing the people of the time, Doctor King was not to give in.

The 3rd way to handle oppression is by nonviolent protest, based on the principles of love, and that is what Doctor King did for his entire life.

Then toward the end of this sermon, doctor King quoted Matthew 5 verse 44, "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you."

Pray for those who spitefully use us. Yes, people had definitely mistreated Doctor King and the others in the Civil Rights movement, and he said pray for them.

This is another sermon that's much more well known.

I Have a Dream

It's the "I Have a Dream" speech. August 28th, 1963.

Doctor King gave this speech during the March on Washington.

He said that 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, there was still segregation and discrimination against black people.

That was not acceptable, and that they would not be satisfied until what he quoted in Amos 5:24, “Let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” That’s what they want to see: justice and righteousness.

He talked about the suffering they went through. He said that unearned suffering is redemptive.

He could have gotten that from first Peter 2:20, “For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God.”

Yes, people were beaten during that time. They took it patiently and suffered, and it would be commendable toward God.

Doctor King said he had a dream that his children would live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

And he had another dream also, he said, and there he quoted Isaiah Chapter 40, starting in verse 4, “Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

He is looking forward to that time, looking forward to the time when his children live in a fair nation, a free nation.

And he also had a dream of the Kingdom of God.

I’ve Been to the Mountaintop

A third sermon that Doctor Martin Luther King gave is entitled, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.”

He gave this sermon on April 3rd, 1968. He was murdered the next day. This is in Memphis, TN. He went there to give support to a sanitation workers’ strike.

Wages were very, very low. Working conditions were very dangerous, even to the point where two workers have been killed sometime before that strike. They had died in the equipment that they were using.

Dr. Martin Luther King said he preferred to be in the 20th century more than any other time in history. I think it’s because of the movement that they had, this civil rights movement. They were making success. There had been a lot of success by 1968, the Voting Rights Act and Civil Rights Act, and others.

He said people had to stick together. He wanted people in the movement to stick together.

You said that the pharaoh prolonged slavery by keeping the Israelite slaves fighting among themselves. Oh, that’s interesting. I never noticed that before, but you can see it in Exodus Chapter 5 starting in verse 7, “You shall no longer give the people straw to make brick, as before. Let them go and gather straw for themselves. And you shall lay on them the quota of bricks which they made before. You shall not reduce it. For they are idle; therefore they cry out,

saying, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.' Let more work be laid on the men, that they may labor in it, and let them not regard false words."

Moses had told the pharaoh that people need to be released to go and worship God. Pharaoh's response was to have them make bricks without straw. They had to gather straw in addition to making bricks.

Verse 19, "And the officers of the children of Israel saw that they were in trouble after it was said, 'You shall not reduce any bricks from your daily quota.' Then as they came out from Pharaoh, they met Moses and Aaron who stood there to meet them. And they said to them, 'Let the LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us abhorrent in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to kill us.'"

They were not sticking together. They were falling for Pharaoh's trap, if I think of it that way, where they actually accused Moses and Aaron instead of sticking with them. Doctor King did not want that to happen in the civil rights movement; he wanted people to stick together.

Another observation by Doctor King had to do with the imprisonment that many of the movement had suffered, including him. He said that the jailers were moved by their prayers, words and songs. That is an interesting parallel to what we see in Acts Chapter 16, where Paul and Silas were put in prison. Acts 16:25, "But at midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them." A similar type of thing was going on. Others were listening to Paul and Silas praying and singing. "Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were open and everyone's chains were loosed."

And then the Bible talks about how the jailer came out and thought somebody is going to get loose. He wanted to kill himself. Then in verse 30, "And he brought them out and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'" That's what the jailer said. "So they said, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.'" Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house"

That was a very similar situation to what Doctor King and others in the movement went through where they'd be in prison. Other people would hear them praying and singing. Doctor King said the jailers were even moved by that.

Doctor King said when God speaks who can but prophesy?

He said this in the context of a minister speaking on injustice. He thought that any minister should speak on injustices in the country.

We can see this in Amos 3:7-8. "Surely the LORD God does nothing, unless he reveals his secret to his servants the prophets. A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The LORD has spoken! Who can but prophesy?"

Doctor King had read the Bible. He knew about love toward other people and fairness. And he knew he needed to speak.

He said that he needed to speak as Jesus did, saying the spirit of the Lord is on me. I need to deal with problems of the poor, is the way Doctor King put it.

Verses in the Bible are somewhat similar. Luke 4:16-19 “So He [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of the sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

Besides preaching the gospel to the poor, Dr. King wanted to deal with the problems of the poor.

Doctor King knew that ministers often talk about our reward. And he said it's OK to talk about having white robes later, but people need clothes now.

Think of Revelation 7, verse 9. “After these things, I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.” That is the innumerable multitude, clothed in white robes. He said it is good to talk about that, but people need clothing now.

Then he said it's OK to talk about a new Jerusalem, but people need a new Memphis now, a new New York now, and other cities. Revelation 21 verse two talks about the New Jerusalem. “Then I, John saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

You talk about a reward, a New Jerusalem. We have to help people now.

He advised people to march to boycott businesses that were not being fair to black people, and to do business with the black owned businesses.

The black people at that time had a lot of economic power. (One might not realize it.) And they could use it.

Then he talked about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. A man who come to Jesus asking what he needed to do to gain eternal life. Jesus didn't debate him. Instead, He gave the parable of the Good Samaritan to say who is our neighbor. That was the question the man asked, what do you do for eternal life? Keep the commandments, including loving your neighbor. He says who is your neighbor?

Christ gave a parable where a man of another nationality was concerned about his brother. Other people came by. Doctor King realized other people thought in the past that people are just too busy. He said no, they're really afraid in the parable. They were thinking, if I do help the man, what will happen to **me**?

The Good Samaritan said in his mind, If I don't help him, what will happen to **him**?

And Doctor King thought well, if I don't help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them? Let's read just a few verses from Luke 10 Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:33 "But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.'"

Toward the end of this speech entitled "I've Been to the Mountaintop" Doctor King said that he had been to the mountaintop and saw the promised land, as Moses had.

Let's read this in Deuteronomy 32. There's a little bit more to it than one might think in Deuteronomy 32, verse 48. "Then the LORD spoke to Moses that very same day, saying: "Go up this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, across from Jericho; view the land of Canaan, which I will give to the children of Israel as a possession; and die on the mountain which you ascend, and be gathered your people, just as Aaron your brother died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people." Dr. King was comparing himself in a way to how Moses was able to see the promised land, that he was able to see the promised land, a land of racial equality and fairness.

Doctor King also said he saw the glory of the coming of the Lord. Consider this Matthew 24 verse 30. "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Dr Martin Luther King was murdered the next day.

He had the vision of a land where there was racial equality. But like Moses having the vision of the promised land, he did not live to be in it.

In the Holman Christian Standard Bible, the last paragraph of the essay by Doctor Smith is this:

"The Bible was central to the energy of the Civil Rights Movement. In planning meetings, preachers and laypersons read from its pages. In public disputes, everyday people quoted its promises and its truth regarding the dignity of all humanity, regardless of skin color. It would not be a stretch to suggest that the Civil Rights Movement would have lacked moral fiber (and one might further say divine blessing) without the underlying truth claims drawn from the Bible."