

# **Non-aggression Procedures to Inter-racial Harmony**

**Address of Martin Luther King, Jr. at the American Baptist Assembly in Green Lake, Wisconsin  
July 23, 1956**

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Thank you very much for your kindness. Dr. Diman, executives of the Home Mission Societies, and Christian friends:

I need not pause to say how happy I am to be here this evening and to be a part of this very rich fellowship. I consider this a unique privilege as well as a unique honor, and I certainly want to express my personal appreciation to the executives of the Home Mission Societies for extending the invitation. I assure you that I am very happy to be here. I didn't know that I would run into so many old friends in coming to Green Lake so that all of this serves to increase my interest in my stay here and to make the fellowship even richer. I am more than happy to be a part of this very rich assembly and I am very proud to be a Baptist when I can see something like this.

Our subject for the evening as you will notice it on the programs is "Non-aggression Procedures to Inter-racial Harmony." Now what I will be talking about if I can break that down a little bit is a technique of non-violence in bringing about better race relations—non-violence as a technique in bringing about better race relations.

It is impossible to look out into the broad arena of American life without noticing a real crisis in race relations and this crisis has been precipitated on the one hand by the determined resistance on the part of reactionary elements in the South to the Supreme Court's momentous decision on segregation. It has been precipitated on the other hand by the radical change in the Negro's evaluation of himself. And it is impossible to understand the tension in race relations without understanding this revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of his nature and destiny.

A brief survey of the history of the Negro in America reveals this change in terms that are crystal clear. It was in the year of 1619 that the first Negro slaves landed on the shores of this nation. They were brought here from the soils of Africa. And unlike the Pilgrim Fathers who landed at Plymouth a year later, they were brought here against their wills. For more than 200 years, Africa was raped and plundered, her native kingdoms disorganized, her people and rulers demoralized and the whole continent inflicted with pains and burdens hardly paralleled by any race of people in the whole history of the civilized world. And throughout slavery the Negro was treated in a very inhuman fashion. He was not a person to be respected but a thing to be used. He was merely a depersonalized cog in the vast plantation machine. The famous Dred Scott decision of 1857 well illustrates the status of the Negro during slavery for it was in this decision that the Supreme Court of this nation said, in substance, that the Negro is not a citizen of the United States, he is merely property subject to the dictates of his owner. And this was the attitude that prevailed throughout slavery. And with the growth of slavery it became necessary to give some defense for it. It seems to be a fact of life that human beings cannot continue to do wrong without eventually reaching out for some rationalization to cover up an obvious wrong with the beautiful garments of righteousness. William James, a psychologist, used to talk a great deal about the stream of consciousness and he said one of the uniquenesses of human nature is that man has the capacity and the ability to temporarily block the stream of consciousness and inject anything in it that he wants to. And so man has the unique and tragic power of justifying the rightness of the wrong. And this is exactly what happened to the slave owners. They fell victim to the danger that forever confronts religion—that is a danger that religion and the Bible not properly interpreted can be used

as instruments to crystalize the status quo. And this was a thing that often happened and so from pulpits all over the nation certain ideas went out. It was argued that the Negro was inferior by nature because of Noah's curse upon the children of Ham. And Paul's command became a watchword—"Servant be obedient to your masters." And then one of the brethren had probably read some of the logic of Aristotle and he could put his argument almost in the form of an Aristotelian syllogism: he could say that man is made in the image of God; and then comes his minor premise—God, as everybody knows is not a Negro; then the conclusion—therefore, the Negro is not a man. This is the type of reasoning that prevailed at that time.

With all of this living under this, the Negro came to the point of losing faith in himself. He came to feel that perhaps he was less than human and the great tragedy of physical slavery was that it led to the paralysis of mental slavery and so long as the Negro accepted this place assigned to him, a sort of racial peace existed. But it was an uneasy peace in which the Negro was forced patiently to accept injustice and oppression and exploitation. It was a negative peace for real peace is not merely the absence of some negative force---tension, confusion or war—but real peace is the presence of some positive force: justice, goodwill, and brotherhood. So that this was merely a negative peace. But then one day something happened to the Negro. He traveled a great deal, he had been to war and he had seen a lot of things, literacy was vastly coming into being and illiteracy passing away, and all of these things came together to cause the Negro to take a new look at himself. Negro masses all over began to re-evaluate themselves and the Negro came to feel that he was somebody. His religion revealed to him that God loves all of His children and that, at bottom, the basic thing about a man was not his specificity but his fundamentum, and so he came to the point that he could agree with the eloquent poet:

Fleecy locks and black complexion  
Cannot forfeit Nature's claims.  
Skin may differ, but affection  
Dwells in black and white the same.

If I were so tall as to reach the pole,  
Or to grasp the ocean at a span,  
I must be measured by my soul;  
The mind is the standard of the man.

With this new self respect, and this new sense of dignity, the negative peace of the South was gradually undermined, and the tension which we notice today in the area of race relations can be explained by this revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of his nature and destiny and his determination to struggle and sacrifice until the sagging walls of segregation had been finally crushed by the battering rams of rugged justice. This is the meaning of the whole crisis.

Now this determination on the part of the Negro to struggle, and to struggle until segregation and discrimination had passed away springs from the same longing for human dignity that motivates oppressed peoples all over the world. This is not only a nation in transition, but this is a world in transition. There are approximately two billion, four hundred million people in this world and the vast majority of these people live in Asia and Africa. More than one billion, five hundred million of the peoples of the world live on these two continents. Six hundred million in China, four hundred million in India and Pakistan, two hundred million in Africa, and a hundred million in Indonesia and about eighty-six million in Japan, and all of these people constitute more than one billion, five hundred million of the peoples of the world. And over the years, most of these people have lived under the pressing yoke of some foreign power; they have been exploited economically, dominated politically, segregated and humiliated by some other power. But now they are gradually

gaining their freedom and there is a determination on the part of oppressed people all over the world to gain this freedom and this human dignity. So that the struggle of the Negro is a part of this great struggle all over the world—a struggle on the part of people—oppressed peoples—in general and the Negro in America in particular is not something that will suddenly disappear. Realism impels us to admit that the struggle will continue until justice becomes a reality. But, the great question, the basic question in the face of all of this is this question. How will the struggle be waged? How will the oppressed peoples of the world wage their struggle against the forces of injustice, the forces of oppression?

There are two basic answers to this question. One is to resort to the conventional methods of violence and hatred and we all know the danger of this method. Violence creates many more problems than it solves, and the oppressed peoples of the world cannot afford to flirt with retaliatory violence, and there is a voice crying through the vista of time saying, "He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword." And history is replete with the bleached bones of nations who refused to listen to the words of Jesus at this point. The method of violence would be both impractical and immoral. If this method becomes widespread it will lead to terrible bloodshed, and that aftermath will be a bitterness that will last for generations. So we must all pray and hope and work that the oppressed peoples of the world will not use the method of violence to stand out against oppression and injustice.

There is another method which can serve as an alternative to the method of violence, and it is a method of non-violent resistance. And, this is an important method, a significant method, and it is a method that I would like to recommend—a method that all of the oppressed peoples of the world must use if justice is to be achieved in a proper sense. There are several basic things that we can say about this method of non-violent resistance, this technique of non-violence. And these things are basic, these things are important in understanding this method, and this technique in confronting the problems of discrimination and of segregation and standing out against the forces of injustice.

The first thing that can be said about this method is that it is not a method of submission or surrender, and there are those who would argue that this method leads to stagnant complacency and deadening passivity, and so it is not a proper method to use. But that is not true of the non-violent method. The non-violent resister is just as opposed to the evil that he is protesting against as a violent resister. Now it is true that this method is non-aggressive and passive in the sense that the non-violent resister does not use physical aggression against his opponent. But at the same time, the mind and the emotions are active, actively trying to persuade the opponent to change his ways and to convince him that he is mistaken, and to lift him to a higher level of existence. This method is non-aggressive physically, but it is aggressive spiritually. It is passive physically, but it is active mentally and spiritually, so that the first thing about the method of passive resistance or the method of non-violent resistance is that it is not a method of surrender or a weapon of submission, but it is a method that is very active in seeking to change conditions and even though it is passive, it is still resisting.

There is another basic point about this technique of passive resistance, and it is this: that this method—in this method—the non-violent resister seeks to lift or rather to change the opponent, to redeem him. It does not seek to defeat him or to humiliate him. And I think this is very important, that the end is never merely to protest, but the end is reconciliation. And there is never the purpose behind this method is never to defeat or to humiliate the opponent. Now the method of violence seeks to humiliate and to defeat the opponents, and therefore it leads to bitterness. The aftermath of the method of violence is bitterness, but the method on non-violence seeks not to humiliate and not to defeat the oppressor, but it seeks to win his friendship and his understanding, and thereby

and therefore, the aftermath of this method is reconciliation. We must come to see, and all of those who struggle against injustice must come to see, that the tension at bottom is not between races-- as I like to say in Montgomery, the tension in Montgomery is not between 70,000 white people and 50,000 Negroes; the tension is at bottom a tension between justice and injustice. It is a tension between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, and if there is a victory, it will not be a victory merely for 50,000 Negroes. If there is a victory for integration in America, it will not be a victory merely for 16,000,000 Negroes, but it will be a victory for justice, a victory for good will, a victory for democracy. And so the aim must always be to defeat injustice and not to defeat the persons who are involved in it. This method of non-violence seeks to win the friendship and the understanding of the opponent rather to defeat him or to humiliate him.

Another basic factor in the method of non-violent resistance is that this method does not seek merely to avoid external physical violence, but it seeks to avoid internal violence of spirit. And at the center of the method of non-violence stands the principle of love. Love is always the regulating ideal in the technique and the method of non-violence. And this is the point at which the non-violent resister follows the love and Saviour Jesus Christ. For it is this love ethic that stands at the center of the Christian faith, and this stands as the regulating ideal for any move, for any struggle to change conditions of society.

Now I realize that to talk about love can be something very sentimental, I realize that it can end up as empty words. It is very easy to say, "Love your oppressor"; it is very easy to say, "Love your enemy"; it is very easy to say, "Pray for those that spitefully use you"; but it can be empty talk unless we understand the real meaning of this love. Now we all know, we must be frank enough to admit, that you cannot love your enemy or your oppressor like you love your personal friends or like you love your wife or your husband, and I don't think it means that. That is not the meaning of love at this point. The Greek helps us out here a great deal; it talks about love in several senses. It talks about "eros," and eros is a significant type of love. Eros is a sort of aesthetic love. Plato talks about this love a great deal in his dialogue with Phaedrus. It is, it boils down to a romantic love, it is craving for something and it has with it a bit of affection, an affectionate feeling. And then there is another type of love that we talk about a great deal, it is a love we have for personal friends. The Greek talk about it in "philia." And it is a type of love—it stands on the basis of reciprocity. It has with it that mutual taint; it loves because it is loved. And then the Greek comes out with something higher and something that is stronger, something that is more powerful than eros or any other type of love. It talks about "agape," and agape is understanding good will for all men. Agape seeks nothing in return, it is a redemptive love, it is a love of God working within men. And so when men move to the point of agape, they love not because the individuals are so worthwhile to them, not because it's anything they like so much about the individual, but they love them because God loves them. They love them because they are worthwhile to God. And this is the meaning of agape, it is a love that loves the person that does the evil deed while the hating the deed that the person does. And this is the type of love that can redeem, it is a transforming love and this is a type of love that we talk about and that we are supposed to live about in this method of non-violent resistance. It is a love that can change individuals; it can change nations; it can change conditions.

Then I cannot close without mentioning another aspect of the method of non-violence—another thing that goes along with this method—a basic belief that goes along with it, and it is the belief that the universe is on the side of justice. The non-violent resister has great faith in the future. And there is a belief that at bottom justice will triumph in the universe over all of the forces of injustice. People are frequently asking me and people in Montgomery how is it that we continue to move on and continue to work after seven or eight months; how is it that we continue to burn out our automobile tires and keep going amid all of the tension.

Well, my wife answered the question a few days ago in a manner quite satisfactory to me. One reporter was asking her how it was that she remained so calm in the midst of all of the pressure of the situation, how she was able to keep moving in the midst of all of the tension and constant threats, and I never will forget her words. "We believe we are right and in believing that we are right, we believe that God is with us," and that is the answer. And that is the answer that eventually comes to the aid of the passive resister. We have the strange feeling down in Montgomery that in our struggle for justice we have cosmic companionship, and so we can walk and never get weary because we believe and know that there is a great camp meeting in the promised land of freedom and justice, and this belief—and this feeling—that God is on the side of truth and justice and love, and that they will eventually reign supreme in this universe. And this comes down to us from the long tradition of our Christian faith.

That is something that stands at the center of our faith. That is a great epic, that is a great event that stands at the center of our faith, which reveals to us that God is on the side of truth and love and justice, and says to us that Good Friday may occupy the forum for the day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumph and beat of the drums of Easter. It says that evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy the palace and Christ a cross, but one day that same Christ will rise up and split history into AD and BC, so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by His name.

There is something in this universe that justifies Carlyle in saying, "No man can live forever." And there is something in this universe that justifies William Conant Bryant in saying, "Truth crushed to earth will rise again." And there is something in this universe that justifies James Russell Lowell in saying:

Truth forever on the scaffold,  
Wrong forever on the throne,  
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and,  
behind the dim unknown,  
Stands God within the shadow,  
keeping watch over his own.

And this is what the method of non-violent resistance says to the individual engaged in the struggle. And this is why the non-violent resister can suffer and not retaliate because he has this strong faith in the future.

This is a method, this is a technique, and this is a procedure. It is not at all without precedent. A brown man tried it in India. He looked over at the powerful British empire, and he noticed all of their vast and intricate military machinery. And in the midst of looking at all of this, something said to him and he said to himself: "We cannot use this method." And so he decided to confront physical force with an even greater force—namely soul force. And this brown man, Mahatma Ghandi, was able to free his people from the political domination and the economic exploitation inflicted upon them by Britain. And so those 400 million people stand out today with their freedom through the method of non-violent resistance, and God grant that we will continue to move on all men of good will; and all those who are confronted with oppression in this world, will move on with this method—not with the method of violence, not with the method of retaliatory violence, not with any method that seeks to retaliate, but the method that seeks to redeem. And whenever we decide to do this, we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man to the bright and glittering daybreak of justice and freedom and brotherhood for all people.

God bless you.