Draft of Chapter IV, "Love in Action"

[*July 1962–March 1963*]
[*Atlanta, Ga.*]

King uses Jesus' words from the cross to preach forgiveness in the face of humanity's ignorance, citing war, slavery, and segregation as manifestations of a "tragic blindness." In particular, he decries those who "go on blindly believing in the eternal validity of an evil called segregation and the timeless truth of a myth called white supremacy. What a tragedy! Millions of Negroes have been crucified by conscientious blindness." King developed this sermon from an outline from which he preached in the spring of 1960.[1]

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do
Luke 23 34

---

1 King, "Love in Action" I, 3 April 1960, pp. 405–407 in this volume

There are probably no words in all the New Testament that express more clearly and solemnly the magnanimity of Jesus' spirit than that sublime utterance from the cross—"Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Here we see love at its best

It is impossible to understand the great meaning of Jesus' prayer without noticing the word with which the text opens. It is the word "then." The verse which immediately precedes it reads thus: "And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvery, there they crucified Him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand and the other on the left."[2] Then, said Jesus, Father, forgive them. "Then"—when he was dying, a most ignominious death. "Then"—when he was being plunged into the abyss of nagging agony. "Then" when man had stopped to his worst. "Then"—when the wicked hands of the creature had dared to crucify the only begotten son of the creator. Then, said ~~Jesu~~ Jesus, Father forgive them. Behind that "then" could have been another reaction. Then he could have said, "Father, get even with them." Then he could have said, "Father let loose the mighty thunderbolts of righteous wrath and destroy them in their tracks." Then he could have said, "Father open the flood gates of justice and let the staggering avalanche of retribution pour upon them them."[3] But this was not his response. Though subjected to inexpressible agony, though suffering excruciating pain, though despised and rejected, nevertheless, He cries, "Father forgive them."

Let us notice two basic lessons from this text.

First, it is a marvelous expression of Jesus' ability to match words with actions. One of the great tragedies of life is that men seldom bridge the gulf between practice and profession, between doing and saying. There is that persistent schizophrenia which leaves so many of us tragically divided against ourselves. On the one hand we proudly profess certain sublime and noble principles, but on the other hand, we sadly practice the very antithesis of those principles. How often are our lives characterized by a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds? We talk eloquently about our commitment to the principles of Christianity and yet we live our lives saturated with the practices of paganism. We proudly profess our devotion to democracy, and yet we sadly practice the very opposite of the democratic creed. We talk passionately about peace, and yet at the same time we assiduously prepare for war. We make our fervent pleas for the high road of justice, and yet we tread unflinchingly the low road of injustice. This strange dicotomy, this agonizing gulf between the ought and the is, stands out as the long and tragic story of mah's earthly pilgrimage.

But when we turn to the life of Jesus we find the gulf bridged. Never in all history have we found a more sublime example of the consistency of word and deed. During his ministry around the sunny villages of Galilee, Jesus had talked passion-

---

2 Cf. Luke 23:33.

3 The preceding four sentences were altered in the published version: "That 'then' might well have been otherwise. He could have said, 'Father, get even with them,' or 'Father, let loose the mighty thunderbolts of righteous wrath and destroy them,' or 'Father, open the flood gates of justice and permit the staggering avalanche of retribution to pour upon them'" (*Strength to Love*, p. 25).

July 1962–
March 1963

ately about forgiveness This strange doctrine awakened the questioning mind of Peter "How oft," he asked, "shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Seven times " Peter wanted to keep it legal and statistical But Jesus responded by affirming that there is no limit to forgiveness "I say not unto thee until seven times but until seventy times seven "[4] In other words, forgiveness is not a matter of quantity, but a matter of quality One cannot forgive four hundred and ninety times without it becoming a part of the habit structure of one's being. Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a permanent attitude **This was what Jesus taught his disciples.**

Jesus had also admonished his followers to love their enemies and pray for them that despitefully used them [5] This doctrine had fallen upon the ears of many of his hearers like strange music from a foreign land Their ears were not attuned to the tonal qualities of such amazing love They had been taught to love their friends and hate their enemies Their lives had been conditioning to seek redress in the time-honored technique of retaliation. And Yet Jesus continued to teach them that only through a creative love for their enemies could they be children of their father in Heaven

So Jesus consistently taught his disciples that love and forgiveness were absolute necessities for spiritual maturity Now the moment of testing emerges Christ, the innocent Son of God, lies in painful agony on ~~a~~ {an} uplifted Cross. What place is there for love and forgiveness now? How will Jesus act? What will he say? The answer to these questions burst forth in majestic splendor Jesus lifts his head up amid the wreath of thorns that encircles his brow and cries out in words lifted to cosmic proportions "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do " Indeed, this was Jesus finest hour, this was his heavenly response to his earthly rendezvous with destiny

One can only see the greatness of this prayer by contrast. Nature does not forgive It is caught in the finality of its own impersonal structure In spite of the agonizing plea of the men trapped in the path of the rushing hurricane or the anguishing cry of the builder falling from the scaffold, nature must stand with a cold, serene, andpassionless indifference She must do everlasting honor to her fixed, immutable laws When these laws are violated, she has no alternative but to follow inexorably her path of uniformity Nature does not and cannot forgive

Man is slow to forgive [6] We live by the philosophy that life is a matter of getting even and saving face We genuflect before the altar of revenge Samson, eyeless at ~~Goya~~ {Gaza}, prays fervently for his enemies, but only for their utter destruction [7] The potential beauty of human life is constantly made ugly by man's ever recurring tendency to sing the song of retaliation.

Society is even less prone to forgive [8] It has to have its standards, norms and mores. It has to have its legal checks and judicial restraints. Those who fall below the

4 Cf Matthew 18 21–22
5 Matthew 5 44
6 In the published version "Or contrast Jesus' prayer with the slowness of man to forgive" (p 27)
7 Cf Judges 16 28
8 In the published version "Or contrast the prayer with a society that is even less prone to forgive" (p 27)

standards and those who disobey the laws are often left in a dark abyss of condemnation with no hope for another chance Ask the innocent young lady, who, as a result of a moment of overriding passion, becomes the mother of an illigitimate child, and she will tell you that society is slow to forgive Ask the public figure, who through a moment's carlessness betrays the public trust, and he will tell you that society is slow to forgive Go to any prison and ask its numerous inhabitants, who, through small misdemeanors and large felonies have written shameful ~~lives~~ {lines} across the pages of their lives, and they will cry from behind the bars that society is slow to forgive Go to that same prison and make your way to death row and ask those tragic victims of criminality as they prepare to make their pathetic walk to the electric chair, and they will cry from a dark and hopeless cell that society does not forgive What is capital punishment but ~~society's~~ society's final assertion that it is determined not to forgive

This is the persistent story of life Look down through the centuries and see how the oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of revenge "Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot " Man has never risen above this idea of the lex talionis [9] In spite of the fact that the law of revenge solves no social problems, men continue to go its disastrous way History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that followed this self-defeating path

Jesus eloquently affirmed from the cross a higher law He knew that the old eye for an eye philosophy would end up leaving everybody blind [10] He did not seek to overcome evil with evil He overcame evil with good Although crucified by hate, he responded with a radical love [11]

What a magnificent lesson! Generations will continue to rise and fall, men will continue to worship the god of revenge and bow before the alter of retaliation, but ever and again this noble lesson from Calvary will come as a nagging reminder that only goodness can drive out evil, and only love can conquer hate

There is a second lesson that comes to us from Jesus' prayer on the Cross It is an expression of Jesus' awareness of man's intellectual and spiritual blindness "They know not what they do," said Jesus. Blindness was their trouble Enlightenment was their need We must recognize that Jesus was nailed to the cross not simply by sin but by blindness The man who cried "crucify him" were not bad men but blind men [12] The ~~piercing~~ {jeering} mob that lined the roadside which led to the cross was not composed of evil people but blind people They knew not what they did What a tragedy![13]

History abounds with illustrations of this shameful tragedy Centuries ago a sage

---

9 *Lex talionis* is Latin for "law as retaliation " This principle that criminals should receive precisely the injuries they inflict upon their victims was most famously established in the legal code of Hammurabi, the sixth king of Babylon (1792–1750 BCE)

10 Matthew 5 38

11 The word "radical" was replaced by "aggressive" in the published version (p 28)

12 Cf Mark 15 12–14

13 Fosdick, *The Hope of the World*, p 222 "Jesus was put to death not simply by sin but by stupidity Those angry men before Pilate, crying 'Crucify him!' did not know what they did What a tragedy! Those people by the roadside jeering at the staggering figure under his heavy cross did not know what they did "

July 1962–
March 1963

named Socrates was forced to drink the hemlock The men who called for his death were not bad men with demonic blood running through their veins On the contrary, they were sincere and [*respectable?*] citizens of Greece They sincerely thought Socrates an atheist because his idea of God had a philosophical depth that went beyond traditional concepts [14] It was not badness but blindness that killed Socrates The Apostle Paul was not a bad man when he was ~~presenting~~ persecuting Christians [15] He was a sincere conscientious devotee of Israel's faith He thought he was right He persecuted Christians not because he was devoid of sincerity but because he was devoid of enlightenment. The Christians who engaged in infamous persecutions and shameful Inquisitions were not evil men but misguided men [16] The churchmen who felt that they had an edict from God to stand in the way of scientific progress, whether in the form of a Copernican revolution or a ~~Davins~~ Darwinian theory of evolution, were not mischievous men, but misinformed men [17] And so Christ's words from the Cross may be written in sharply etched terms across some of the most inexpressible tragedies of history "They know not what they do."

This tragic blindness expresses itself in so many ominous ways in the modern world There are those who still feel that war is the answer to the problems of the world They are not evil people On the contrary, they are good respectable citizens whose ideas are dressed in the garments of patriotism They talk in terms of brinkmanship and a balance of terror They sincerely feel that a continuation of the arms race will do more good than harm [18] So they passionately call for bigger ~~boms~~ {bombs}, larger nuclear stockpiles, and faster ballistic missiles

Wisdom should tell them that war is obsolete There may have been a time that war could serve as a negative good in the sense of preventing the spread and growth of an evil force But the present destructive power of modern weapons of warfare eliminates the possibility of war serving even as a negative good. If we assume that life is worth living and that man has a right to survive, then we must find an alternative to war In a day when Sputniks are dashing through outer space and guided ballistic missiles are carving highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can win a war [19] A so-called limited war can leave nothing but a calamitous legacy of human suffering, political turmoil, and spiritual disillusionment. A world war (God forbid) will leave nothing but the smouldering ashes of a human race whose folly

---

14 Fosdick, *The Hope of the World,* p 223 "The Athenians who made Socrates drink the hemlock, far from being bad, were among the most earnest, conscientious, religious people of their day But they stupidly thought Socrates an atheist because his idea of God was so much greater than the popular opinion "

15 Acts 9 1–28

16 The Catholic Church began forcibly suppressing heresy throughout Europe in the thirteenth century, and the Inquisition continued for hundreds of years Most notably in Spain under the rule of King Ferdinand V and Queen Isabella I, judges of the Inquisitions interrogated Catholic heretics, Jews, and Muslims and forced them to convert often under threat of torture, exile, and execution

17 In the published version the phrase "natural selection" replaced "evolution" (p 29)

18 The phrase "do more good than harm" was replaced by "be conducive to more beneficent than maleficent consequences" (p 29)

19 Sputniks were a series of unmanned satellites initially launched by the Soviet Union in the late 1950s The word "sputniks" was replaced by "vehicles" in the published version (p 29)

led inexorably to an untimely death **So the alternative to disarmament and the suspension of nuclear tests may well be a civilization plunged into the abyss of ~~civilization~~ annhilation** Andyet there are those who sincerely feel that disarmament is an evil and international negotiation is an abominable waste of time Today our world is threatened with the grim prospect of atomic annihilation because ~~those~~ there are still too many men who know not what they do

July 1962–March 1963

Notice how the truth of this text is revealed in race relations Slavery was perpetuated in America not merely by human badness but also by human blindness True, the causal basis for the system of slavery must be traced back, to a large extent, to the economic factor But men soon convinced themselves that a system which was so economically profitable must have been morally justifiable They began to formulate elaborate theories of racial superiority Their rationalizations were contrived to clothe obvious wrongs in the beautiful garments of righteousness It was this tragic attempt to give moral sanction to an economically profitable system that gave birth to the doctrine of white supremacy Religion and the Bible were used as instruments to crystalize the status quo Science was used as a tool to prove the biological inferiority of the Negro Even philosophical logic was used to give intellectual credence to the system of slavery Someone who had read the logic of the philosopher Aristotle place ~~this~~ {the} argument of the inferiority of the Negro in the framework of an Aristotelian syllagism The argument went thusly All men are made in the image of God, God, as everybody knows, is not a Negro, Therefore, the Negro is not a man So men took the insights of religion, science, and philosophy and conveniently twisted them to give sanction to the doctrine of white supremacy This idea was soon imbedded in every etextbook and preached in practically every pulpit It became a structured part of the culture Soon men embraced this philosophy not as the rationalization of a lie but as the expression of a final truth They sincerely came to believe that the Negro was inferior by nature and that slavery was ordained by God In 1857 the system of slavery was given its greatest legal boost when the Supreme Court of the United States rendered the Dred Scott decision The Court affirmed that the Negro had no rights that the white man was bound to respect The Judges that rendered this decision were not wicked men On the contrary, they were decent and dedicated men But they were victims of spiritual and intellectual blindness They knew an not what they did The whole system of slavery was largely perpetuated by sincere ignorance [20]

This tragic blindness is found in racial segregation—the not too distant cousin of slavery Some of the most vigorous defenders of segregation are sincere in their beliefs and earnest in their motives It is true that some men are segregationist merely for reasons of of political expediency and economic gain But all of the resistance to integration is not the rear guard action of professional bigots There are some who sincerely feel that what they do in attempting to preserve segregation is best for themselves, their children, and their nation In most instances they are good church people, anchored in the religious faith of their mothers and fathers

---

20 The word "ignorance" was replaced with "though spiritually ignorant persons" in the published version (p 30)

July 1962–
March 1963

Pressed for a religious indication for their conviction, they will argue that God was the first segregationist. "Red birds and blue birds don't fly together," they contend They sincerely feel that their views about segregation can be rationally explained and morally justified Pressed for a justification for their belief in the inferiority of the Negro, they will turn to some pseudo work of science and sincerely argue that the Negroes' brain is smaller than the white man's brain They do not know, for they refuse to know, that the idea of an inferior or superior race has been refuted by the best evidence of the science of anthropology Great anthropologists like Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead and Melvin Herskonicts have all agreed that there ~~are no inferior or superior races, but inferior and superior individuals in all races.~~ [21] {while there may be inferior and superior individuals in all races, there is no superior or inferior race } Again, the segregationists refuse to know that science has revealed that there are four types of blood and that these four types are found within every racial group They go on blindly believing in the eternal validity of an evil called segregation and the timeless truth of a myth called white supremacy What a tragedy! Millions of Negroes have been crucified by conscientious blindness Like Jesus on the Cross, we must look lovingly at our oppressors and say· "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do "

From all that I have attempted to say it should be clear now that sincerity and conscientiousness are not enough History has proven that these noble virtues can be relegated to tragic vices There is nothing more dangerous in all the world than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidy As Shakespeare said

> "For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds,
> Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds "[22]

As the chief moral guardian of the community, the church must implore men to be good and well-intentioned It must extoll the virtues of kind-heartedness and conscientiousness But somewhere along the way it must remind men that goodness and conscientiousness without intelligence may be the brutal forces that will lead to shameful crucificions The church must never ure of reminding men that they have a moral responsibility to be intelligent

We must admit that the Church has often overlooked this moral demand for enlightenment. At times it has talked as if ignorance is a virtue and intelligence a crime Through its obscurantism, closed mindedness, and obstinancy to new truth, the church has often unconsciously encouraged its worshippers to look askance upon intelligence

But if we are to call ourselves Christians, we had better avoid intellectual and moral blindness. Throughout the New Testament we are reminded of the need for enlightenment We are commanded to love God not only with our hearts and souls, but also with our minds [23] **Jesus bids his disciples not only to be as harmless as**

---

21 Melville J Herskovits (1895–1963) was an American anthropologist who studied African and African American culture His book *The Myth of the Negro Past* explored racial myths of the time (New York Harper & Brothers, 1941)

22 Shakespeare, "Sonnet 94" (1609)

23 Cf Matthew 22 37

doves but also as wise as serpents.[24] When the Apostle Paul ~~noticed~~ {notices} the blindness of many of his opponents, he says "I ~~beat~~ {bear} them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge."[25] Over and over again the Bible reminds us of the danger of zeal without knowledge and sincerity without intelligence

So we see that we have a mandate not only to conquor sin but to conquer ignorance Modern man is presently having a rendezvous with chaos not merely because of human badness but also because of human stupidity If Western civilization continues to degenerate until it, like twenty four of its ~~prede~~ predecessors, falls hopelessly into the bottomless void of liquidation, it will be due not only to its undeniable sinfulness, but also to its appalling blindness[26] If American democracy should gradually disentegrate, it would be due as much to a lack of insight as to a lack of commitment to right. If modern man continues to flirt unhesitatingly with war and eventually transforms his earthly habitat into an inferno that even Dante ~~can~~ could not imagine, it will result not only from downright badness, but also from downright stupidity[27]

"They know not what they do," said Jesus Blindness was their besetting trouble And the crux of the matter lies here we do need to be blind Unlike physical blindness that is usually inflicted upon individuals as a result of natural forces outside their control, intellectual and moral blindness is an ill which man inflicts upon himself by his tragic misuse of freedom and his failure to use his mind to its fullest capacity[28] **There is plenty information available if we consider it as serious a moral obligation to be intelligent as to be sincere.** One day we will learn that the heart can never be totally right if the head is totally wrong **This is not to say that the head can be right if the heart is wrong.** Only through the bringing together of head and heart—intelligence and goodness—can man rise to a filfillment of his true essence Neither is this to say that one must be a philosopher or a possesor of extensive academic training before he can achieve the good life I know many people of limited formal training who have amazing intelligence and foresight The call for intelligence is a call for open-mindness, sound judgment, and love for truth It is a call for men to rise above the stagnation of close-mindness and the paralysis of gullibility No one need be a profound scholar to be open-minded No one need be a keen academician to engage in an addiduous search for truth

Light has come into the world There is a voice crying through the vista of time calling men to walk in the light Man's earthly life will be reduced to a tragic cosmic elegy if he fails to heed this call "This is the condemnation," says John, "that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light"[29]

---

24 Cf Matthew 10 16 Fosdick, *The Hope of the World,* p 227 "If we are to call ourselves Christians, we had better not be stupid Who was it said that his disciples were to be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves? Jesus"

25 Cf Romans 10 2

26 King may be elaborating on an idea expressed by Arnold Toynbee in a twelve-volume work of comparative analysis on world civilizations throughout history, *A Study of History* (1934–1961), as he did in his sermon "First Things First" (2 August 1953, p 145 in this volume)

27 King refers to Dante Alighieri and the first volume of his epic poem *Divine Comedy, Inferno* (1314)

28 In the published version, the word "ill" was replaced by "dilemma" (p 32)

29 John 3 19

July 1962–
March 1963

So Jesus was right about those men who crucified him They knew not what they did. They were inflicted with a terrible blindness

Let us leave with a true picture of the Cross. Many quiet afternoons I have walked into this Sanctuary and looked meditatively at the illumined Cross above the altar. Every time I look at that Cross I am reminded of the greatness of God and the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. I am reminded of the beauty of sacrificial love and the majesty of ~~unnerving~~ unswerving devotion to truth It causes me to cry out with John Browning [30]

> "In the Cross of Christ I glory, Towering o'er
> the wrecks of time, all the light of sacred
> story Gathers round its head sublime "[31]

It would be wonderful if I could look at the Cross and emerge with only this sublime reaction But somehow I can never turn my eyes from that Cross without realizing that it symbolizes a strange mixture of greatness and smallness, of good and evil As I behold that uplifted Cross I am not only reminded of the unlimited power of God, but also of the sordid weakness of man I not only think of the glory of the divine, but of the tang of the human I am reminded not only of Christ at his best, but also of man at his worst

We must continue to see the Cross as a magnificant symbol of love conquering hate, and light overcoming darkness But in the midst of this glowing affirmation, let us never forget that our Lord and Master was nailed to that Cross because of human blindness. Those who crucified him knew not what they did

TADd MLKP-MBU Box 120

---

30 In the published version, the phrase "cry out" was replaced with "say" (p 33)
31 King cites John Bowring's hymn "In the Cross of Christ I Glory" (1825)