

# Excerpts from MLK Jr's "Drum Major Instinct"

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## Scriptures:

Mark 10:35-45

35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." 36 And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" 37 And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." 38 But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" 39 They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; 40 but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." 41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 42 So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. 45 For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

## Sermon:

*"King's "Drum Major Instinct" sermon, given on 4 February 1968, was an adaptation of the 1952 homily "Drum-Major Instincts" by J. Wallace Hamilton, a well-known, liberal, white Methodist preacher. King encouraged his congregation to seek greatness, but to do so through service and love. King concluded the sermon by imagining his own funeral, downplaying his famous achievements and emphasizing his will to do right.*

## Full text and audio can be found at:

[http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc\\_the\\_drum\\_major\\_instinct/](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_the_drum_major_instinct/)

This morning I would like to use as a subject from which to preach: "The Drum Major Instinct." And our text for the morning is taken from a very familiar passage in the tenth chapter as recorded by Saint Mark...

The setting is clear. James and John are making a specific request of the master. They had dreamed, as most of the Hebrews dreamed, of a coming king of Israel who would set Jerusalem free and establish his kingdom on Mount Zion, and in righteousness rule the world. And they thought of Jesus as this kind of king. And they were thinking of that day when Jesus would reign supreme as this new king of Israel...

Now very quickly, we would automatically condemn James and John, and we would say they were selfish...

But before we condemn them too quickly, let us look calmly and honestly at ourselves, and we will discover that we too have those same basic desires for recognition, for importance. That same desire for attention, that same desire to be first ... we all have the drum major instinct.

We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade. And you know, we begin early to ask life to put us first. Our first cry as a baby was a bid for attention. And all through childhood the drum major impulse or instinct is a major obsession... in adult life, we still have it, and we really never get by it. We like to do something good. And you know, we like to be praised for it... Everybody likes it, as a matter of fact. And somehow this warm glow we feel when we are praised or when our name is in print is something of the vitamin A to our ego. Nobody is unhappy when they are praised, even if they know they don't deserve it and even if they don't believe it...

Now the presence of this instinct explains why we are so often taken by advertisers... In order to be a man of distinction, you must drink this whiskey. In order to make your neighbors envious, you must drive this type of car. In order to be lovely to love you must wear this kind of lipstick or this kind of perfume. And you know, before you know it, you're just buying that stuff... you see people over and over again with the drum major instinct taking them over. And they just live their lives trying to outdo the Joneses...

The drum major instinct can become destructive. And that's where I want to move now. I want to move to the point of saying that if this instinct is not harnessed, it becomes a very dangerous, pernicious instinct. For instance, if it isn't harnessed, it causes one's personality to become distorted... the distorted personality is the fact that when one fails to harness this instinct, he ends up trying to push others down in order to push himself up.

And whenever you do that, you engage in some of the most vicious activities. You will spread evil, vicious, lying gossip on people, because you are trying to pull them down in order to push yourself up...

And you know, that can happen with the church... I've been to churches, you know, and they say, "We have so many doctors, and so many school teachers, and so many lawyers, and so many businessmen in our church." And that's fine, because doctors need to go to church, and lawyers, and businessmen, teachers—they ought to be in church. But they say it... as if the other people don't count... And any church that violates the "whosoever will, let him come" doctrine is a dead, cold church, and nothing but a little social club with a thin veneer of religiosity.

When the church is true to its nature, it says, "Whosoever will, let him come." ...It's the one place where everybody should be the same, standing before a common master and savior. And

a recognition grows out of this—that all men are brothers because they are children of a common father...

Now the other thing is, that it leads to tragic—and we've seen it happen so often—tragic race prejudice... A need that some people have to feel superior. A need that some people have to feel that they are first, and to feel that their white skin ordained them to be first... In fact, not too long ago, a man down in Mississippi said that God was a charter member of the White Citizens Council. And so God being the charter member means that everybody who's in that has a kind of divinity, a kind of superiority. And think of what has happened in history as a result of this perverted use of the drum major instinct. It has led to the most tragic prejudice, the most tragic expressions of man's inhumanity to man.

...I always try to do a little converting when I'm in jail. And when we were in jail in Birmingham the other day, the white wardens and all enjoyed coming around the cell to talk about the race problem. And they were showing us where we were so wrong demonstrating... And then we got down one day to the point... to talk about where they lived, and how much they were earning.

And when those brothers told me what they were earning, I said, "Now, you know what? You ought to be marching with us. You're just as poor as Negroes." And I said, "You are put in the position of supporting your oppressor, because through prejudice and blindness, you fail to see that the same forces that oppress Negroes in American society oppress poor white people. And all you are living on is the satisfaction of your skin being white, and the drum major instinct of thinking that you are somebody big because you are white..."

And not only does this thing go into the racial struggle, it goes into the struggle between nations. And I would submit to you this morning that what is wrong in the world today is that the nations of the world are engaged in a bitter, colossal contest for supremacy... because nations are caught up with the drum major instinct. "I must be first." "I must be supreme." "Our nation must rule the world." And I am sad to say that the nation in which we live is the supreme culprit...

God didn't call America to do what she's doing in the world now. God didn't call America to engage in a senseless, unjust war as the war in Vietnam. And we are criminals in that war... And we won't stop it because of our pride and our arrogance as a nation...

But let me rush on to my conclusion, because I want you to see what Jesus was really saying... One would have thought that Jesus would have condemned them. One would have thought that Jesus would have said, "You are out of your place. You are selfish..."

But that isn't what Jesus did; he did something altogether different. He said in substance... It's a good instinct if you use it right. It's a good instinct if you don't distort it and pervert it. Don't give it up... But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. That is what I want you to do..." And he transformed the situation

by giving a new definition of greatness... that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's a new definition of greatness.

And... by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve... You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.

I know a man—and I just want to talk about him a minute, and maybe you will discover who I'm talking about as I go down the way... And he just went about serving. He was born in an obscure village, the child of a poor peasant woman. And then he grew up in still another obscure village, where he worked as a carpenter until he was thirty years old. Then for three years, he just got on his feet, and he was an itinerant preacher. And he went about doing some things. He didn't have much. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never owned a house. He never went to college. He never visited a big city. He never went two hundred miles from where he was born. He did none of the usual things that the world would associate with greatness...

They called him a rabble-rouser. They called him a troublemaker. They said he was an agitator... And so he was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial... And while he was dying, the people who killed him gambled for his clothing, the only possession that he had in the world. When he was dead he was buried in a borrowed tomb...

Nineteen centuries have come and gone and today he stands as the most influential figure that ever entered human history... His name may be a familiar one... This morning, you can be on his right hand and his left hand if you serve. It's the only way in.

Every now and then I guess we all think realistically about that day when we will be victimized with what is life's final common denominator—that something that we call death. We all think about it. And every now and then I think about my own death and I think about my own funeral...

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long... Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others.

I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody.

I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question.

I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry.

And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked.

I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison.

I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that

I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter ...I just want to leave a committed life behind. And that's all I want to say.

Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right or your left side, not for any selfish reason. I want to be on your right or your left side, not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition. But I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world.

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