

The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life, By Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. *Delivered at New Covenant Baptist Church in Chicago on April 9, 1967*

I want to use as the subject from which to preach: "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life." (*All right*) You know, they used to tell us in Hollywood that in order for a movie to be complete, it had to be three-dimensional. Well, this morning I want to seek to get over to each of us that if life itself is to be complete, (*Yes*) it must be three-dimensional.

Many, many centuries ago, there was a man by the name of John who found himself in prison out on a lonely, obscure island called Patmos. (*Right, right*) And I've been in prison just enough to know that it's a lonely experience. (*That's right*) And when you are incarcerated in such a situation, you are deprived of almost every freedom, but the freedom to think, the freedom to pray, the freedom to reflect and to meditate. And while John was out on this lonely island in prison, (*That's right*) he lifted his vision to high heaven (*All right, He did*) and he saw, descending out of heaven, a new heaven (*All right*) and a new earth. (*That's right*) Over in the twenty-first chapter of the book of Revelation, it opens by saying, "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth. (*All right*) And I John saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, (*All right*) coming down from God out of heaven." (*Oh yeah*)

And one of the greatest glories of this new city of God that John saw was its completeness. (*That's right*) It was not up on one side and down on the other, (*All right*) but it was complete in all three of its dimensions. (*Yes*) And so in this same chapter as we looked down to the sixteenth verse, John says, "The length and the breadth (*He did, he did*) and the height of it are equal." (*Yes, sir*) In other words, this new city of God, this new city of ideal humanity is not an unbalanced entity, (*No*) but is complete on all sides. (*Yes*) Now I think John is saying something here in all of the symbolism of this text and the symbolism of this chapter. He's saying at bottom that life as it should be and life at its best (*Yeah*) is a life that is complete on all sides. (*That's right*)

And there are three dimensions of any complete life to which we can fitly give the words of this text: length, breadth, and height. (*Yes*) Now the length of life as we shall use it here is the inward concern for one's own welfare. (*Yes*) In other words, it is that inward concern that causes one to push forward, to achieve his own goals and ambitions. (*All right*) The breadth of life as we shall use it here is the outward concern for the welfare of others. (*All right*) And the height of life is the upward reach for God. (*All right*) Now you got to have all three of these to have a complete life.

Now let's turn for the moment to the length of life. I said that this is the dimension of life where we are concerned with developing our inner powers. (*Yeah*) In a sense this is the selfish dimension of life. There is such a thing as rational and healthy self-interest. (*Yeah*) A great Jewish rabbi, the late Joshua Leibman, wrote a book some years ago entitled *Peace of Mind*. And he has a chapter in that book entitled "Love Thyself Properly." And what he says in that chapter, in substance, is that before you can love other selves adequately, you've got to love your own self properly. (*All right*) You know, a lot of people don't love themselves. (*That's right*) And they go through life with deep and haunting emotional conflicts. So the length of life means that you must love yourself.

And you know what loving yourself also means? It means that you've got to accept yourself. (*All right*) So many people are busy trying to be somebody else. (*That's right*) God gave all of us something significant. And we must pray every day, asking God to help us to accept ourselves. (*Yeah*) That means everything. (*Yeah*) Too many Negroes are ashamed of themselves, ashamed of being black. (*Yes, sir*) A Negro got to rise up and say from the bottom of his soul, "I am somebody. (*Yes*) I have a rich, noble, and proud heritage. However exploited and however painful my history has been, I'm black, but I'm black and beautiful." (*Yeah*) This is what we've got to say. We've got to accept ourselves. (*Yeah*) And we must pray, "Lord, Help me to accept myself every day; help me to accept my tools." (*Yeah*)

I remember when I was in college, I majored in sociology, and all sociology majors had to take a course that was required called statistics. And statistics can be very complicated. You've got to have a mathematical mind, a real knowledge of geometry, and you've got to know how to find the mean, the mode, and the median. I never will forget. I took this course and I had a fellow classmate who could just work that stuff out, you know. And he could do his homework in about an hour. We would often go to the lab or the workshop, and he would just work it out in about an hour, and it was over for him. And I was trying to do what he was doing; I was trying to do mine in an hour. And the more I tried to do it in an hour, the more I was flunking out in the course. And I had to come to a very hard conclusion. I had to sit down and say, "Now, Martin Luther King, Leif Cane has a better mind than you." (*That's right*) Sometimes you have to acknowledge that. (*That's right*) And I had to say to myself, "Now, he may

be able to do it in an hour, but it takes me two or three hours to do it." I was not willing to accept myself. I was not willing to accept my tools and my limitations. (*Yeah*)

But you know in life we're called upon to do this. A Ford car trying to be a Cadillac is absurd, but if a Ford will accept itself as a Ford, (*All right*) it can do many things that a Cadillac could never do: it can get in parking spaces that a Cadillac can never get in. [*laughter*] And in life some of us are Fords and some of us are Cadillacs. (*Yes*) Moses says in "Green Pastures," "Lord, I ain't much, but I is all I got." [*laughter*] The principle of self-acceptance is a basic principle in life.

Now the other thing about the length of life: after accepting ourselves and our tools, we must discover what we are called to do. (*Oh yeah*) And once we discover it we should set out to do it with all of the strength and all of the power that we have in our systems. (*Yeah*) And after we've discovered what God called us to do, after we've discovered our life's work, we should set out to do that work so well that the living, the dead, or the unborn couldn't do it any better. (*Oh yeah*) Now this does not mean that everybody will do the so-called big, recognized things of life. Very few people will rise to the heights of genius in the arts and the sciences; very few collectively will rise to certain professions. Most of us will have to be content to work in the fields and in the factories and on the streets. But we must see the dignity of all labor. (*That's right*)

When I was in Montgomery, Alabama, I went to a shoe shop quite often, known as the Gordon Shoe Shop. And there was a fellow in there that used to shine my shoes, and it was just an experience to witness this fellow shining my shoes. He would get that rag, you know, and he could bring music out of it. And I said to myself, "This fellow has a Ph.D. in shoe shining." (*That's right*)

What I'm saying to you this morning, my friends, even if it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, go on out and sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures; sweep streets like Handel and Beethoven composed music; sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry; (*Go ahead*) sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will have to pause and say,

"Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well."

If you can't be a pine on the top of a hill
Be a scrub in the valley—but be
The best little scrub on the side of the hill,
Be a bush if you can't be a tree.
If you can't be a highway just be a trail
If you can't be the sun be a star;
It isn't by size that you win or fail—
Be the best of whatever you are.

And when you do this, when you do this, you've mastered the length of life. (*Yes*)

This onward push to the end of self-fulfillment is the end of a person's life. Now don't stop here, though. You know, a lot of people get no further in life than the length. They develop their inner powers; they do their jobs well. But do you know, they try to live as if nobody else lives in the world but themselves? (*Yes*) And they use everybody as mere tools to get to where they're going. (*Yes*) They don't love anybody but themselves. And the only kind of love that they really have for other people is utilitarian love. You know, they just love people that they can use. (*Well*)

A lot of people never get beyond the first dimension of life. They use other people as mere steps by which they can climb to their goals and their ambitions. These people don't work out well in life. They may go for awhile, they may think they're making it all right, but there is a law. (*Oh yeah*) They call it the law of gravitation in the physical universe, and it works, it's final, it's inexorable: whatever goes up can come down. You shall reap what you sow. (*Yeah*) God has structured the universe that way. (*Yeah*) And he who goes through life not concerned about others will be a subject, victim of this law.

So I move on and say that it is necessary to add breadth to length. Now the breadth of life is the outward concern for the welfare of others, as I said. (*Yeah*) And a man has not begun to live until he can rise above the narrow confines of his own individual concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity. (*All right*)

One day Jesus told a parable. You will remember that parable. He had a man that came to him to talk with him about some very profound concerns. And they finally got around to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" (*All right*) And this man wanted to debate with Jesus. This question could have very easily ended up in thin air as a theological or philosophical debate. But you remember Jesus immediately pulled that question out of thin air and placed it on a dangerous curve between Jerusalem and Jericho. (*He did, he did*) He talked about a certain man who fell among thieves. (*Right*) Two men came by and they just kept going. And then finally another man came, a member of another race, who stopped and helped him. (*Oh yeah*) And that parable ends up saying that this good Samaritan was a great man; he was a good man because he was concerned about more than himself. (*Oh yeah*)

Now you know, there are many ideas about why the priest and the Levite passed and didn't stop to help that man. A lot of ideas about it. Some say that they were going to a church service, and they were running a little late, you know, and couldn't be late for church, so they kept going because they had to get down to the synagogue. And then there are others who would say that they were involved in the priesthood and consequently there was a priestly law which said that if you were going to administer the sacrament or what have you, you couldn't touch a human body twenty-four hours before worship. Now there's another possibility. It is possible that they were going down to Jericho to organize a Jericho Road Improvement Association. That's another possibility. And they may have passed by because they felt that it was better to deal with the problem from the causal source rather than one individual victim. That's a possibility.

But you know, when I think about this parable, I think of another possibility as I use my imagination. It's possible that these men passed by on the other side because they were afraid. You know, the Jericho Road is a dangerous road. (*That's right*) I've been on it and I know. And I never will forget, Mrs. King and I were in the Holy Land some time ago. We rented a car and we drove from Jerusalem down to Jericho, a distance of about sixteen miles. You get on that Jericho road—I'm telling you it's a winding, curving, meandering road, very conducive for robbery. And I said to my wife, "Now I can see why Jesus used this road as the occasion for his parable." (*Yes*) Here you are when you start out in Jerusalem: you are twenty-two hundred feet above sea level, and when you get down to Jericho sixteen miles later—I mean you have sixteen miles from Jerusalem—you're twelve hundred feet below sea level. During the days of Jesus that road came to the point of being known as the "Bloody Path." So when I think about the priest and the Levite, I think those brothers were afraid. (*All right*)

They were just like me. I was going out to my father's house in Atlanta the other day. He lives about three or four miles from me, and you go out there by going down Simpson Road. And then when I came back later that night—and brother, I can tell you, Simpson Road is a winding road. And a fellow was standing out there trying to flag me down. And I felt that he needed some help; I knew he needed help. [*laughter*] But I didn't know it. I'll be honest with you, I kept going. [*laughter*] I wasn't really willing to take the risk. (*That's right*)

I say to you this morning that the first question that the priest asked was the first question that I asked on that Jericho Road of Atlanta known as Simpson Road. The first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" (*That's right*) But the good Samaritan came by and he reversed the question. Not "What will happen to me if I stop to help this man?" but "What will happen to this man if I do not stop to help him?" This was why that man was good and great. He was great because he was willing to take a risk for humanity; he was willing to ask, "What will happen to this man?" not "What will happen to me?" (*All right*)

This is what God needs today (*Yes*): Men and women who will ask, "What will happen to humanity if I don't help?" (*Oh yeah*) What will happen to the civil rights movement if I don't participate? (*Yes*) What will happen to my city if I don't vote? (*Oh yeah*) What will happen to the sick if I don't visit them?" This is how God judges people in the final analysis. (*Oh yeah*)

Oh, there will be a day, the question won't be, "How many awards did you get in life?" Not that day. (*Yeah*) It won't be, "How popular were you in your social setting?" That won't be the question that day. (*Yeah*) It will not ask how many degrees you've been able to get. (*All right*) The question that day will not be concerned with whether you are a "Ph.D." or a "no D." (*That's right*) It will not be concerned with whether you went to Morehouse or whether you went to "No House." (*Yes*) The question that day will not be, "How beautiful is your house?" (*That's right*) The question that day will not be, "How much money did you accumulate? How much did you have in stocks

and bonds?" The question that day will not be, "What kind of automobile did you have?" On that day the question will be, "What did you do for others?" (*That's right*)

Now I can hear somebody saying, "Lord, I did a lot of things in life. I did my job well; the world honored me for doing my job. (*Oh yeah*) I did a lot of things, Lord; I went to school and studied hard. I accumulated a lot of money, Lord; that's what I did." It seems as if I can hear the Lord of Life saying, "But I was hungry, and ye fed me not. (*That's right*) I was sick, and ye visited me not. I was naked, and ye clothed me not. I was in prison, and you weren't concerned about me. So get out of my face. What did you do for others?" (*That's right*) This is the breadth of life. (*Oh yeah*)

Somewhere along the way, we must learn that there is nothing greater than to do something for others. And this is the way I've decided to go the rest of my days. That's what I'm concerned about. John, if you and Bernard happen to be around when I come to the latter-days and that moment to cross the Jordan, I want you to tell them that I made a request: I don't want a long funeral. In fact, I don't even need a eulogy (*No*) more than one or two minutes. (*All right*) I hope that I will live so well the rest of the days—I don't know how long I'll live, and I'm not concerned about that—but I hope I can live so well that the preacher can get up and say, "He was faithful." (*Yes*) That's all, that's enough. (*That's right*) That's the sermon I'd like to hear: "Well done my good and faithful servant. You've been faithful; you've been concerned about others." (*That's right*) That's where I want to go from this point on the rest of my days. (*Oh yeah*) "He who is greatest among you shall be your servant." I want to be a servant. (*Yes*) I want to be a witness for my Lord, to do something for others.

And don't forget in doing something for others that you have what you have because of others. (*Yes, sir*) Don't forget that. We are tied together in life and in the world. (*Preach, preach*) And you may think you got all you got by yourself. (*Not all of it*) But you know, before you got out here to church this morning, you were dependent on more than half of the world. (*That's right*) You get up in the morning and go to the bathroom, and you reach over for a bar of soap, and that's handed to you by a Frenchman. You reach over for a sponge, and that's given to you by a Turk. You reach over for a towel, and that comes to your hand from the hands of a Pacific Islander. And then you go on to the kitchen to get your breakfast. You reach on over to get a little coffee, and that's poured in your cup by a South American. (*That's right*) Or maybe you decide that you want a little tea this morning, only to discover that that's poured in your cup by a Chinese. (*Yes*) Or maybe you want a little cocoa, that's poured in your cup by a West African. (*Yes*) Then you want a little bread and you reach over to get it, and that's given to you by the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. (*That's right*) Before you get through eating breakfast in the morning, you're dependent on more than half the world. (*That's right*) That's the way God structured it; that's the way God structured this world. So let us be concerned about others because we are dependent on others. (*Oh yeah*)

But don't stop here either. (*No, sir*) You know, a lot of people master the length of life, and they master the breadth of life, but they stop right there. Now if life is to be complete, we must move beyond our self-interest. We must move beyond humanity and reach up, way up for the God of the universe, whose purpose changeth not. (*Right*)

Now a lot of people have neglected this third dimension. And you know, the interesting thing is a lot of people neglect it and don't even know they are neglecting it. They just get involved in other things. And you know, there are two kinds of atheism. Atheism is the theory that there is no God. Now one kind is a theoretical kind, where somebody just sits down and starts thinking about it, and they come to a conclusion that there is no God. The other kind is a practical atheism, and that kind goes out of living as if there is no God. And you know there are a lot of people who affirm the existence of God with their lips, and they deny his existence with their lives. (*That's right*) You've seen these people who have a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds. They deny the existence of God with their lives and they just become so involved in other things. They become so involved in getting a big bank account. (*Yeah*) They become so involved in getting a beautiful house, which we all should have. They become so involved in getting a beautiful car that they unconsciously just forget about God. (*Oh yeah*) There are those who become so involved in looking at the man-made lights of the city that they unconsciously forget to rise up and look at that great cosmic light and think about it—that gets up in the eastern horizon every morning and moves across the sky with a kind of symphony of motion and paints its technicolor across the blue—a light that man can never make. (*All right*) They become so involved in looking at the skyscraping buildings of the Loop of Chicago or Empire State Building of New York that they unconsciously forget to think about the gigantic mountains that kiss the skies as if to bathe their peaks in the lofty blue—something that man could never make. They become so busy thinking about radar and their television that they unconsciously forget to think about the stars that bedeck the heavens like swinging lanterns of eternity, those stars that appear to be shiny, silvery pins sticking in the magnificent blue pincushion. They become so involved in thinking about man's progress that they

forget to think about the need for God's power in history. They end up going days and days not knowing that God is not with them. (*Go ahead*)

And I'm here to tell you today that we need God. (*Yes*) Modern man may know a great deal, but his knowledge does not eliminate God. (*Right*) And I tell you this morning that God is here to stay. A few theologians are trying to say that God is dead. And I've been asking them about it because it disturbs me to know that God died and I didn't have a chance to attend the funeral. They haven't been able to tell me yet the date of his death. They haven't been able to tell me yet who the coroner was that pronounced him dead. (*Preach, preach*) They haven't been able to tell me yet where he's buried.

You see, when I think about God, I know his name. He said somewhere, back in the Old Testament, "I want you to go out, Moses, and tell them 'I Am' sent you." (*That's right*) He said just to make it clear, let them know that "my last name is the same as my first, 'I Am that I Am.' Make that clear. I Am." And God is the only being in the universe that can say "I Am" and put a period behind it. Each of us sitting here has to say, "I am because of my parents; I am because of certain environmental conditions; I am because of certain hereditary circumstances; I am because of God." But God is the only being that can just say, "I Am" and stop right there. "I Am that I Am." And He's here to stay. Let nobody make us feel that we don't need God. (*That's right*)

As I come to my conclusion this morning, I want to say that we should search for him. We were made for God, and we will be restless until we find rest in him. (*Oh yeah*) And I say to you this morning that this is the personal faith that has kept me going. (*Yes*) I'm not worried about the future. You know, even on this race question, I'm not worried. I was down in Alabama the other day, and I started thinking about the state of Alabama where we worked so hard and may continue to elect the Wallaces. And down in my home state of Georgia, we have another sick governor by the name of Lester Maddox. (*Yes*) And all of these things can get you confused, but they don't worry me. (*All right*) Because the God that I worship is a God that has a way of saying even to kings and even to governors, "Be still, and know that I am God." And God has not yet turned over this universe to Lester Maddox and Lurleen Wallace. Somewhere I read, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, and I'm going on because I have faith in Him. (*Oh yeah*) I do not know what the future holds, but I do know who holds the future. (*Yes*) And if He'll guide us and hold our hand, we'll go on in.

I remember down in Montgomery, Alabama, an experience that I'd like to share with you. When we were in the midst of the bus boycott, we had a marvelous old lady that we affectionately called Sister Pollard. She was a wonderful lady about seventy-two years old and she was still working at that age. (*Yes*) During the boycott she would walk every day to and from work. She was one that somebody stopped one day and said, "Wouldn't you like to ride?" And she said, "No." And then the driver moved on and stopped and thought, and backed up a little and said, "Well, aren't you tired?" She said, "Yes, my feet is tired, but my soul is rested." (*All right*)

She was a marvelous lady. And one week I can remember that I had gone through a very difficult week. (*Yes*) Threatening calls had come in all day and all night the night before, and I was beginning to falter and to get weak within and to lose my courage. (*All right*) And I never will forget that I went to the mass meeting that Monday night very discouraged and a little afraid, and wondering whether we were going to win the struggle. (*Oh yeah*) And I got up to make my talk that night, but it didn't come out with strength and power. Sister Pollard came up to me after the meeting and said, "Son, what's wrong with you?" Said, "You didn't talk strong enough tonight."

And I said, "Nothing is wrong, Sister Pollard, I'm all right."

She said, "You can't fool me." Said, "Something wrong with you." And then she went on to say these words, "Is the white folks doing something to you that you don't like?"

I said, "Everything is going to be all right, Sister Pollard."

And then she finally said, "Now come close to me and let me tell you something one more time, and I want you to hear it this time." She said, "Now I done told you we is with you." She said, "Now, even if we ain't with you, the Lord is with you." (*Yes*) And she concluded by saying, "The Lord's going to take care of you."

And I've seen many things since that day. I've gone through many experiences since that night in Montgomery, Alabama. Since that time Sister Pollard has died. Since that time I've been in more than eighteen jail cells. Since that time I've come perilously close to death at the hands of a demented Negro woman. Since that time I've seen my home bombed three times. Since that time I've had to live every day under the threat of death. Since that time

I've had many frustrating and bewildering nights. But over and over again I can still hear Sister Pollard's words: "God's going to take care of you." So today I can face any man and any woman with my feet solidly placed on the ground and my head in the air because I know that when you are right, God will fight your battle.

"Darker yet may be the night, harder yet may be the fight. Just stand up for that which is right." It seems that I can hear a voice speaking even this morning, saying to all of us, "Stand up for what is right. Stand up for what is just. Lo, I will be with you even until the end of the world." Yes, I've seen the lightning flash. I've heard the thunder roll. I've felt sin-breakers dashing, trying to conquer my soul. But I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone. No, never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. And I go on in believing that. Reach out and find the breadth of life.

You may not be able to define God in philosophical terms. Men through the ages have tried to talk about him. (Yes) Plato said that he was the Architectonic Good. Aristotle called him the Unmoved Mover. Hegel called him the Absolute Whole. Then there was a man named Paul Tillich who called him Being-Itself. We don't need to know all of these high-sounding terms. (Yes) Maybe we have to know him and discover him another way. (*Oh yeah*) One day you ought to rise up and say, "I know him because he's a lily of the valley." (Yes) He's a bright and morning star. (Yes) He's a rose of Sharon. He's a battle-axe in the time of Babylon. (Yes) And then somewhere you ought to just reach out and say, "He's my everything. He's my mother and my father. He's my sister and my brother. He's a friend to the friendless." This is the God of the universe. And if you believe in him and worship him, something will happen in your life. You will smile when others around you are crying. This is the power of God.

Go out this morning. Love yourself, and that means rational and healthy self-interest. You are commanded to do that. That's the length of life. Then follow that: Love your neighbor as you love yourself. You are commanded to do that. That's the breadth of life. And I'm going to take my seat now by letting you know that there's a first and even greater commandment: "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, (*Yeah*) with all thy soul, with all thy strength." I think the psychologist would just say with all thy personality. And when you do that, you've got the breadth of life.

And when you get all three of these together, you can walk and never get weary. You can look up and see the morning stars singing together, and the sons of God shouting for joy. When you get all of these working together in your very life, judgement will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

When you get all the three of these together, the lamb will lie down with the lion.

When you get all three of these together, you look up and every valley will be exalted, and every hill and mountain will be made low; the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh will see it together.

When you get all three of these working together, you will do unto others as you'd have them do unto you.

When you get all three of these together, you will recognize that out of one blood God made all men to dwell upon the face of the earth.

When you get all three of these together... [*recording ends*]