



Quotations from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Compiled for the Poverty Scholars Program by the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary

The Poverty Initiative's Poverty Scholars is a network of grassroots religious and community leaders dedicated to building a movement to end poverty led by the poor. In our work, we often study together, and this piece was created as a study tool, excerpting some key passages from Dr. King's speeches and writings. In the final years of his life, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther turned his focus to poverty - recognizing the contradiction that in the richest country in the world there was growing abandonment in the midst of abundance. He came to understand the interrelatedness of militarism, racism, and poverty. At the time of his death, Dr. King and a great many leaders from around the country were organizing the Poor People's Campaign - an effort to unite the poor across colorlines. We take great inspiration from Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign.

1. "...we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered... True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice, which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth... A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

—**"Beyond Vietnam" (April 1967)**

2. "We have more from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights,, an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society. We have been in a reform movement... But after Selma and the voting rights bill, we moved into a new era, which must be the era of revolution. We must recognize that we can't solve our problem now until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power... this means a revolution of values and other things. We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together... you can't really get rid of one without getting rid of the others... the whole structure of American life must be changed. America is a hypocritical nation and [we] must put [our] own house in order."

— **Report to SCLC Staff (May 1967)**

3. "...the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here. And one day we must ask the question, 'Why are there forty million poor people in America?' And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life's marketplace. (Yes) But one day we must come to see that an edifice, which produces beggars needs restructuring. (All right) It means that questions must be raised. And you see, my friends, when you deal with this you begin to ask the question, 'Who owns the oil?' (Yes) You begin to ask the question, 'Who owns the iron ore?' (Yes) You begin to ask the question, 'Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that's two-thirds water?' (All right) These are the questions that must be asked."

—**Last Speech to SCLC Staff entitled, "Where Do We Go from Here?"(August 1967)**

4. "There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it...Why should there be hunger and privation in any land, in any city, at any table, when man has the resources and the scientific know-how to provide all mankind with the basic necessities of life?...There is no deficit in human resources, the deficit is in human will...The time has come for an all-out world war against poverty."
—*Where Do We Go From Here?* (1967)

5. "The prescription for the cure rests with the accurate diagnosis of the disease."
—*Where Do We Go from Here?* (1967)

6. "Education without social action is a one-sided value because it has no true power potential. Social action without education is a weak expression of pure energy. Deeds uninformed by educated thought can take false directions. When we go into action and confront our adversaries, we must be as armed with knowledge as they. Our policies should have the strength of deep analysis beneath them to be able to challenge the clever sophistries of our opponents."
—*Where Do We Go From Here?* (1967)

7. "You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery."
—"I've Been to the Mountain Top" (1968)

8. "History ha[s]...taught... it is not enough for people to be angry—the supreme task is to organize and unite people so that their anger becomes a transforming force."
—"Honoring Dr. Du Bois" (1968)

9. "From time immemorial men have lived by the principle that 'self-preservation is the first law of life.' But this is a false assumption. I would say that other-preservation is the first law of life. It is the first law of precisely because we cannot preserve self without being concerned about preserving other selves. The universe is so structured that things go awry if men are not diligent in their cultivation of the other-regarding dimension. 'I' cannot reach fulfillment without 'thou.' The self cannot be self without other selves. Self-concern without other-concern is like a tributary that has no outward flow to the ocean. Stagnant, still and stale, it lacks both life and freshness. Nothing would be more disastrous and out of harmony with our self-interest than for the developed nations to travel a dead-end road of inordinate selfishness. We are in the fortunate position of having our deepest sense of morality coalesce with our self-interest."
—*Where Do We Go From Here?* (1967)

10. "I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to give my life for those who have been left out... This is the way I'm going. If it means suffering a little bit, I'm going that way... If it means dying for them, I'm going that way."
—cited in *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* by Vincent Harding

11. "We are assembled here together today with common problems. Bringing together ethnic groups that maybe have not been together in this type of meeting in the past. I know I haven't been in a meeting like this. And it has been one of my dreams that we would come together and realize our common problems. Power for poor people will really mean having the ability, the togetherness, the assertiveness, and the aggressiveness to make the power structure of this nation say yes when they may be desirous to say no."
— *Been To The Mountaintop* documentary