…As you know, we are involved in a difficult struggle. It was about a hundred and four years ago that Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the Negro from the bondage of physical slavery. And yet we stand here one hundred and four years later, and the Negro still isn’t free. One hundred and four years later, we still have states like Mississippi and Alabama where Negroes are lynched at whim and murdered at will. One hundred and four years later, we must face the tragic fact that the vast majority of Negroes in our country find themselves perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred and four years later, fifty percent of the Negro families of our country are forced to live in substandard housing conditions, most of whom do not have wall-to-wall carpets; many of them are forced to live with wall-to-wall rats and roaches. One hundred and four years later, we find ourselves in a situation where even though we live in a nation founded on the principle that all men are created equal, men are still arguing over whether the color of a man’s skin determines the content of his character. Now this tells us that we have a long, long way to go.

And I’m going to still need your prayer; I’m going to still need your support. Because the period that we face now is more difficult than any we’ve faced in the past. But this morning I did not come to Mount Pisgah to give a civil rights address; I have to do a lot of that; I have to make numerous civil rights speeches. But before I was a civil rights leader, I was a preacher of the gospel. This was my first calling and it still remains my greatest commitment. You know, actually all that I do in civil rights I do because I consider it a part of my ministry. I have no other ambitions in life but to achieve excellence in the Christian ministry. I don’t plan to run for any political office. I don’t plan to do anything but remain a preacher.
And what I’m doing in this struggle, along with many others, grows out of my feeling that the preacher must be concerned about the whole man. Not merely his soul, but his body. It’s all right to talk about heaven. I talk about it because I believe firmly in immortality. But you’ve got to talk about the earth. It’s all right to talk about long white robes over yonder, but I want a suit and some shoes to wear down here. It’s all right to talk about the streets flowing with milk and honey in heaven, but I want some food to eat down here. It’s even all right to talk about the New Jerusalem. But one day we must begin to talk about the new Chicago, the new Atlanta, the new New York, the new America.

And any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that cripple the souls—the economic conditions that stagnate the soul and the city governments that may damn the soul—is a dry, dead, do-nothing religion in need of new blood. And so I come to you this morning, to talk about some of the great insights from the scripture in general, and from the New Testament in particular. I want to use as a subject from which to preach: “Why Jesus Called A Man A Fool.”

“Why Jesus Called A Man A Fool.”

I want to share with you a dramatic little story from the gospel as recorded by Saint Luke. It is a story of a man who by all standards of measurement would be considered a highly successful man. And yet Jesus called him a fool. If you will read that parable, you will discover that the central character in the drama is a certain rich man. This man was so rich that his farm yielded tremendous crops. In fact, the crops were so great that he didn’t know what to do. It occurred to him that he had only one alternative and that was to build some new and bigger barns so he could store all of his crops. And then as he thought about this, he said, “Then I’m going to do something after I build my new and bigger barns.” He said, “I’m going to store my goods and my fruit there, and then I’m going to say to my soul, ‘Soul, thou hast much goods, laid up for many years. Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.’” That brother thought that was the end of life.
But the parable doesn’t end with that man making his statement. It ends by saying that God said to him, “Thou fool. Not next year, not next week, not tomorrow, but this night, thy soul is required of thee.”

And so it was at the height of his prosperity he died. Look at that parable. Think about it. Think of this man: If he lived in Chicago today, he would be considered “a big shot.” And he would abound with all of the social prestige and all of the community influence that could be afforded. Most people would look up to him because he would have that something called money. And yet a Galilean peasant had the audacity to call that man a fool.

Now Jesus didn’t call the man a fool because he made his money in a dishonest fashion. There is nothing in that parable to indicate that this man was dishonest and that he made his money through conniving and exploitative methods. In fact, it seems to reveal that he had a medium of humanity and that he was a very industrious man. He was a thrifty man, apparently a pretty hard worker. So Jesus didn’t call him a fool because he got his money through dishonest means….

I’d like for you to look at this parable with me and try to decipher the real reason that Jesus called this man a fool. Number one, Jesus called this man a fool because he allowed the means by which he lived to outdistance the ends for which he lived…. The house we live in—that’s a part of the means by which we live. The car we drive, the clothes we wear, the money that we are able to accumulate—in short, the physical stuff that’s necessary for us to exist.

Now the problem is that we must always keep a line of demarcation between the two. This man was a fool because he didn’t do that.

…Somehow in life we must know that we must seek first the kingdom of God, and then all of those other things—clothes, houses, cars—will be added unto us. But the problem is all too many people fail to put first things first. They don’t keep a sharp line of demarcation between the things of life and the ends of life.
And so this man was a fool because he allowed the means by which he lived to outdistance the ends for which he lived…. Somehow he became so involved in the means by which he lived that he couldn’t deal with the way to eternal matters. He didn’t make contributions to civil rights. He looked at suffering humanity and wasn’t concerned about it.

…Now number two, this man was a fool because he failed to realize his dependence on others. Now if you read that parable in the book of Luke, you will discover that this man utters about sixty words. And do you know in sixty words he said “I” and “my” more than fifteen times? This man was a fool because he said “I” and “my” so much until he lost the capacity to say “we” and “our.” He failed to realize that he couldn’t do anything by himself. This man talked like he could build the barns by himself, like he could till the soil by himself. And he failed to realize that wealth is always a result of the commonwealth.

Maybe you haven’t ever thought about it, but you can’t leave home in the morning without being dependent on most of the world. You get up in the morning, and you go to the bathroom and you reach over for a sponge, and that’s even given to you by a Pacific Islander. You reach over for a towel, and that’s given to you by a Turk. You reach down to pick up your soap, and that’s given to you by a Frenchman. Then after dressing, you rush to the kitchen and you decide this morning that you want to drink a little coffee; that’s poured in your cup by a South American. Or maybe this morning you prefer tea; that’s poured in your cup by a Chinese. Or maybe you want cocoa this morning; that’s poured in your cup by a West African. Then you reach over to get your toast, and that’s given to you at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. Before you finish eating breakfast in the morning you are dependent on more than half of the world.

And oh my friends, I don’t want you to forget it. No matter where you are today, somebody helped you to get there. It may have been an ordinary person, doing an ordinary job in an extraordinary way. Some few are able to get some education; you didn’t get it by yourself. Don’t forget those who helped you come over.
…In a larger sense we’ve got to see this in our world today. Our white brothers must see this; they haven’t seen it up to now. The great problem facing our nation today in the area of race is that it is the black man who to a large extent produced the wealth of this nation. And the nation doesn’t have sense enough to share its wealth and its power with the very people who made it so. And I know what I’m talking about this morning. The black man made America wealthy….

Now this nation is telling us that we can’t build. Negroes are excluded almost absolutely from the building trades. It’s lily white. Why? Because these jobs pay six, seven, eight, nine and ten dollars an hour, and they don’t want Negroes to have it. And I feel that if something doesn’t happen soon, and something massive, the same indictment will come to America—”Thou fool!”

That man said he didn’t know what to do with his goods, he had so many. Oh, I wish I could have advised him. A lot of places to go, and there were a lot of things that could be done. There were hungry stomachs that needed to be filled; there were empty pockets that needed access to money. America today, my friends, is also rich in goods. We have our barns, and every day our rich nation is building new and larger and greater barns. You know, we spend millions of dollars a day to store surplus food. But I want to say to America, “I know where you can store that food free of charge: in the wrinkled stomachs of the millions of God’s children in Asia and Africa and South America and in our own nation who go to bed hungry tonight.”

There are a lot of fools around. Because they fail to realize their dependence on others.

Finally, this man was a fool because he failed to realize his dependence on God. Do you know that man talked like he regulated the seasons? That man talked like he gave the rain to grapple with the fertility of the soil. That man talked like he provided the dew. He was a fool because he ended up acting like he was the Creator, instead of a creature….

One day Moses had to grapple with it and God sent him out and told him to tell the people that “I Am sent you.” And Moses wondered about it, and he said, “Well, what am I to tell the folk?” He said, “Just go on and tell them that I Am sent you. And then if you
need a little more information, let them know that my first name is the same as my last, “I Am that I Am.”” And God is the only being in the universe that can say that “I Am,” and stop there. Whenever I say, “I am,” I have to say, “I am because of”—because of my parents, because of my environment, because of hereditary circumstances. And each of you has to say you are because of something. But God is life supreme. Now God, the power that holds the universe in the palm of his hand, is the only being that can say, “I Am,” and put a period there and never look back. And don’t be foolish enough to forget him….

God is still around. One day, you’re going to need him. The problems of life will begin to overwhelm you; disappointments will begin to beat upon the door of your life like a tidal wave. And if you don’t have a deep and patient faith, you aren’t going to be able to make it. I know this from my own experience. The first twenty-five years of my life were very comfortable years, very happy years; didn’t have to worry about anything. I have a marvelous mother and father. They went out of the way to provide everything for their children, basic necessities. I went right on through school, I never had to drop out to work or anything. And you know, I was about to conclude that life had been wrapped up for me in a Christmas package.

Now of course I was religious; I grew up in the church. I’m the son of a preacher, I’m the great-grandson of a preacher, and the great-great-grandson of a preacher. My father is a preacher, my grandfather was a preacher, my great-grandfather was a preacher, my only brother is a preacher, my Daddy’s brother is a preacher. So I didn’t have much choice, I guess. But I had grown up in the church, and the church meant something very real to me, but it was a kind of inherited religion and I had never felt an experience with God in the way that you must have it if you’re going to walk the lonely paths of this life. Everything was done, and if I had a problem I could always call Daddy, my earthly father; things were solved.

But one day after finishing school, I was called to a little church down in Montgomery, Alabama, and I started preaching there. Things were going well in that church; it was a marvelous experience. But one day a year later, a lady by the name of Rosa Parks decided
that she wasn’t going to take it any longer. She stayed in a bus seat, and you may not remember it because it’s way back now several years, but it was the beginning of a movement where fifty thousand black men and women refused absolutely to ride the city buses. And we walked together for 381 days. That’s what we got to learn in the North: Negroes have to learn to stick together. We stuck together. We sent out the call and no Negro rode the buses. It was one of the most amazing things I’ve ever seen in my life. And the people of Montgomery asked me to serve as the spokesman, and as the president of the new organization—the Montgomery Improvement Association that came into being to lead the boycott—I couldn’t say no. And then we started our struggle together.

Things were going well for the first few days, but then about ten or fifteen days later, after the white people in Montgomery knew that we meant business, they started doing some nasty things. They started making nasty telephone calls, and it came to the point that some days more than forty telephone calls would come in, threatening my life, the life of my family, the life of my children. I took it for a while in a strong manner. But I never will forget one night very late. It was around midnight. And you can have some strange experiences at midnight. I had been out meeting with the steering committee all that night. And I came home, and my wife was in the bed and I immediately crawled into bed to get some rest to get up early the next morning to try to keep things going. And immediately the telephone started ringing and I picked it up. On the other end was an ugly voice. That voice said to me, in substance, “Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren’t out of this town in three days, we’re going to blow your brains out and blow up your house.”

I’d heard these things before, but for some reason that night it got to me. I turned over and I tried to go to sleep, but I couldn’t sleep. I was frustrated, bewildered. And then I got up and went back to the kitchen and I started warming some coffee, thinking that coffee would give me a little relief. And then I started thinking about many things. I pulled back on the theology and philosophy that I had just studied in the universities, trying to give philosophical and theological reasons for the existence and the reality of sin and evil, but the answer didn’t quite come there. I sat there and thought about a beautiful little
daughter who had just been born about a month earlier. We have four children now, but we only had one then. She was the darling of my life. I’d come in night after night and see that little gentle smile. And I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me any minute. And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted, and loyal wife who was over there asleep. And she could be taken from me, or I could be taken from her. And I got to the point that I couldn’t take it any longer; I was weak.

Something said to me, you can’t call on Daddy now, he’s up in Atlanta a hundred and seventy-five miles away. You can’t even call on Mama now. You’ve got to call on that something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about. That power that can make a way out of no way. And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee—I never will forget it. And oh yes, I prayed a prayer and I prayed out loud that night. I said, “Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right. I think I’m right; I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I’m weak now; I’m faltering; I’m losing my courage. And I can’t let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak.” I wanted tomorrow morning to be able to go before the executive board with a smile on my face.

And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.”

And I’ll tell you, I’ve seen the lightning flash. I’ve heard the thunder roll. I 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’m going on in believing in him. You’d better know him, and know his name, and know how to call his name. You may not know philosophy. You may not be able to say with Alfred North Whitehead that he’s the Principle of Concretion. You may not be able
to say with Hegel and Spinoza that he is the Absolute Whole. You may not be able to say with Plato that he’s the Architectonic Good. You may not be able to say with Aristotle that he’s the Unmoved Mover…. 

Don’t be a fool. Recognize your dependence on God. As the days become dark and the nights become dreary, realize that there is a God who rules above.

And so I’m not worried about tomorrow. I get weary every now and then. The future looks difficult and dim, but I’m not worried about it ultimately because I have faith in God. Centuries ago Jeremiah raised a question, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” He raised it because he saw the good people suffering so often and the evil people prospering. Centuries later our slave foreparents came along. And they too saw the injustices of life, and had nothing to look forward to morning after morning but the rawhide whip of the overseer, long rows of cotton in the sizzling heat. But they did an amazing thing. They looked back across the centuries and they took Jeremiah’s question mark and straightened it into an exclamation point. And they could sing, “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.” And there is another stanza that I like so well: “Sometimes I feel discouraged.”

And I don’t mind telling you this morning that sometimes I feel discouraged. I felt discouraged in Chicago. As I move through Mississippi and Georgia and Alabama, I feel discouraged. Living every day under the threat of death, I feel discouraged sometimes. Living every day under extensive criticisms, even from Negroes, I feel discouraged sometimes. Yes, sometimes I feel discouraged and feel my work’s in vain. But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again. “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.” God bless you.