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Martin Luther King, Jr., The Advice Columnist



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We can think of Martin Luther King, Jr. in many ways: pastor, prophet, husband, father, son, and organizer. But a little-known side of him is “advice columnist.”

Today, we want to look at some excerpts King wrote for Ebony Magazine in September of 1957 to December of 1958 for a new column called “Advice for Living.”

He was invited to pen the column by Lerone Bennett, Jr. a former college classmate and associate editor for Ebony. King accepted the offer after his success with the Montgomery bus boycott. He was gaining a national audience that made his appearance in the magazine profitable for both the magazine and for promoting King’s new organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Letters came in from all over the country seeking his advice on everyday problems as well as his opinions about racial politics in America. The writers came from a broad selection of ages, race, gender, marital status, occupation, and education.

For our small group exercise read some of the questions sent to him and propose your own answers. Next, read King’s answer and compare it to yours. What do you see?

Are these timeless questions that have meaning today or are they questions locked in the past? What about his answers? Are they based on common sense, or philosophy, or theology, or something else? Does King come out with clear advice, or does he dodge? Does King’s “moral authority” make his answers the same or different from yours?

The Question	King's Answer
<p>1. <i>"My worst fault is a nasty temper. When I'm angry, I say things to those I love that hurt them terribly. How can I overcome my bad temper?"</i></p> <p>Your Answer</p>	<p>"You are certainly on the right road of getting rid of your bad temper. You recognize that you have this weakness, and you honestly admit it. The first step toward eliminating any moral weakness is a recognition of a weakness to be eliminated. You should also seek to concentrate on the higher virtue of calmness. You expel a lower vice by concentrating on a higher virtue. If you will continually concentrate on the necessity of being calm and even tempered you will soon remove your nasty temper by this higher concentration. A destructive passion is harnessed by directing that same passion into constructive channels. Finally, you should submit your will to the power and scrutiny of God. Ultimately one is changed by totally surrendering his will to God's will. You cannot solve the problem alone. You must realize the need for depending on a higher power."</p>
<p>2. <i>"Our family has had more than its share of pain and trouble. Does God send pain and anguish to punish us for our sins and the sins of our fathers?"</i></p> <p>Your Answer</p>	<p>"You are really raising the question, "Why do men suffer?" It is often true that we suffer because of sins we consciously or unconsciously commit. There are moral laws of the universe just as abiding as the physical laws, and when we disobey these moral laws we suffer tragic consequences. It is also true that the interrelatedness of human life often necessitates our suffering for the sins of our forefathers. We must admit, however, that we are often the victims of pain and suffering that cannot be explained by sins committed by ourselves or our forefathers. We must admit that there is some mystery surrounding God's being. There are certain things that happen in our lives and in the life of the universe that we just can't explain in rational terms. You must live by the faith that all suffering has some purpose which the finite mind of man can never comprehend."</p>

<p>3. <i>“My husband follows the horses closely. He says that it is legally right to gamble, but I say it is morally wrong. Is it possible to reconcile our conflicting viewpoints?”</i></p> <p>Your Answer</p>	<p>“Your husband is correct in saying that gambling is often legally right. You, however, are correct in saying that gambling is morally wrong. One should live by the principle that he will not take from society without giving to it. The orderly existence of society is dependent upon this type of reciprocity. Gambling is based on the principle of taking from society without giving anything in return. It is really getting something for nothing. Powerful, organized gambling makes for a breakdown in the structure of social life and a breakdown in the moral principles of any society. You should seek to get this idea over to your husband by patiently explaining the moral issues involved. You should make it clear to him that a thing may be legally right and morally wrong.”</p>
<p>4. <i>“Young parents nowadays cater to every whim and wish of their children. I was in a home the other day where a three-year-old child read the riot act to his mother. The mother took it with a sheepish smile. This, I am told, is permissiveness. It seems to me that what modern children need is a large dose of parental permissiveness applied to their backsides. Do you agree?”</i></p> <p>Your Answer</p>	<p>“It is quite true that many modern parents go too far in allowing their children to express themselves with hardly a modicum of discipline. Many parents justify this by arguing that the children must have freedom. But freedom can very easily run wild if not tempered with discipline and responsibility. This almost “lunatic fringe” of modern child care has been responsible for most strange and fantastic methods of child rearing in many American homes. The child is permitted to almost terrorize the home for fear of having its individuality repressed. Somewhere along the way every child must be trained into the obligations of cooperative living. He must be made aware that he is a member of a group and that group life implies duties and restraints. Social life is possible only if there exists a balance between liberty and discipline. The child must realize that there are rules of the game which he did not make and that he cannot break with impunity. In order to get all of these things over to the child it is often</p>

	<p>necessary to subject the child to disciplinary measures.”</p>
<p>5. <i>“Since Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the church has almost always been on the side of the rich, the powerful, and the prejudiced. Preachers and priests have ever been the defenders, the supporters of the status quo. In view of these facts, why do ministers maintain that Christianity coincides with the struggles of the disadvantaged peoples of the world?”</i></p> <p>Your Answer</p>	<p>“Honesty impels me to admit that the church has often been on the side of the rich, powerful, and prejudiced. The church has often been relegated to an institution which served to crystallize the patterns of the status quo. Even ministers of the gospel have often turned to the Bible to find some erroneous justification for the preservation of the old order. This, however, is not the whole church. The church at its best has always stood as the conscience of society. It has been willing to broaden horizons, challenge customs and even break mores. There has always been and always will be that section of the church that joins in the struggle of the disadvantaged and disinherited peoples of the world. Although they are far too few there are still those ministers who recognize that the power of the gospel can never be clothed in the garments of a particular class. Whenever the church is true to its genius it recognizes as Jesus did, that it must preach the gospel to the poor and deliver those who are captives.”</p>
<p>6. <i>“I have been in the South only once in my life. Now my husband, who is in the air force, has been transferred to Georgia. Our little girl, who is 9, is an honor student in a very good school in our community. She knows little about prejudice and discrimination. My parents say I should not take her out of the integrated New York school and expose her to the bias of Georgia. Do you agree?”</i></p> <p>Your Answer</p>	<p>“There is a great deal of truth in the advice that your parents have given you. It would certainly be a difficult transition for a child who has attended integrated schools all her life to suddenly be shifted to a segregated school with inadequate facilities and an inferior curriculum. Such a transition could easily lead to inner conflicts and other psychological problems. However, your problem may be solved if your husband lives on the base. It is a definite policy now, as a result of a Federal executive order, that there can be no segregation in schools on army,</p>

	<p>naval and air force bases. If you can get your daughter in an integrated school on the base, I don't think the other aspects of southern life would do her extreme harm since she would have little contact with segregation per se. If living quarters cannot be arranged on the base it might be better for you to sacrifice a few months and keep your daughter in the New York school."</p>
<p>7. <i>"Do you think God approves the death penalty for crimes like rape and murder?"</i></p> <p>Your Answer</p>	<p>"I do not think God approves the death penalty for any crime—rape and murder included. God's concern is to improve individuals and bring them to the point of conversion. Even criminology has repudiated the motive of punishment in favor of the reformation of the criminal. Shall a good God harbor resentment? Since the purpose of jailing a criminal is that of reformation rather than retribution—improving him rather than paying him back for some crime that he has done—it is highly inconsistent to take the life of a criminal. How can he improve if his life is taken? Capital punishment is against the best judgment of modern criminology and, above all, against the highest expression of love in the nature of God."</p>
<p>8. <i>"I was raised in a Christian environment. My father placed great stress on premarital virginity. Of late, I have begun to doubt the validity of his teaching. I am now 29. Over the years, I have lost many boyfriends to other girls who had a more liberal attitude toward sex. I recently met a wonderful fellow, who says no general rule is applicable to all situations. Is he right?"</i></p> <p>Your Answer</p>	<p>"I think you should hold firm to the principle of premarital virginity. The problems created by premarital sex relationships are far greater than the problems created by premarital virginity. The suspicion, fears, and guilt feelings generated by premarital sex relations are contributing factors to the present breakdown of the family. Real men still respect purity and virginity within women. If a man breaks a relationship with you because you would not allow him to participate in the sexual act, you can be assured that he did not love you from the beginning."</p>

<p>9. <i>"I have attended the Methodist Church, the Baptist Church, the Church of Christ and the Church of God in Christ. I have also talked to members of the Jehovah Witnesses. All of them say they are right, that their way is the only way to salvation. They can't all be right because in many instances the doctrines are contradictory. Is there a one and only way to God?"</i></p> <p>Your Answer</p>	<p>"I would answer your question with an emphatic NO. No denomination can validly claim that it is the one and only way to God. God is bigger than all of our religious denominations. The boundless sweep of God's revelation can never be limited to any particular church. It is true that most of the denominations have certain doctrinal and ritualistic differences, but there is a deeper unity which makes them all one. Although there need not be uniformity between the various religious denominations, there should be unity. Actually, no major denominations within Protestantism claim to possess absolute truth. So I would suggest that you join the church which can best serve your religious and spiritual needs, realizing all the time that no church possesses absolute truth."</p>