



Martin Luther King at prayer over dinner with his family.

Source: William Diehl, courtesy of Virginia Gunn.

INTRODUCTION

This book is different from every other book about Martin Luther King Jr. In tracing the evolution of King's prayer life, from his childhood in Atlanta, Georgia, to his rise as the most famous and celebrated civil rights leader in American history, this book is critical to our understanding of *how* and *why* King became what Gardner C. Taylor calls "the most authentic spiritual genius in this land."¹ It explains how King combined a deep personal piety with intellectual ability and a profound social vision, and it also helps us to better understand the mystical dimensions of this extraordinary figure.

King said as much about the meaning, significance, and necessity of prayer as any other religious figure in his time, and references to praying regularly appear throughout his sermons, speeches, interviews, and writings. He defined prayer as the human "response to God,"² characterizing it as the heart and soul of the Judeo-Christian tradition. He often appealed to the biblical roots of prayer as an authority and guide in his own life and experience of prayer. Some of King's favorite prayer lines came from the psalmist and the Hebrew prophets, who, in his thinking, embodied the biblical ideal of prayer. He delighted in quoting Psalm 139:7-12, which begins with the psalmist's question to God: "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence?" For King, this passage spoke of God's universal presence and reminded the

person who prays that the face of God is never absent.³ King was also known to quote Isaiah 45:15, in which the prophet blends confession, adoration, and wonder, declaring that, “Truly you are God, who hides Yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior.” And there was Habakkuk 1:2, in which King pictured the prophet complaining about Jehovah’s silence in the midst of his prayer for help: “Oh Lord, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear!”⁴ The civil rights leader apparently had a biblically informed conception of prayer, and he found in these and other Hebrew Bible sources insights into the essence of prayer and support for his view of prayer as a daily conversation and walk with God.

Equally important for King were prayer lines from the New Testament, which appear more frequently in his sermonic discourse. The prayer of the publican or tax collector in Luke 18:13—“God be merciful to me a sinner”—filters through some of King’s messages on the nature of the human condition and on the need to keep the “soul open to God.”⁵ In Luke 22:42, Jesus’ cry in the Garden of Gethsemane—“Father, if Thou be willing, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless not my will, but Thine be done”—became King’s own prayer, and so did Jesus’ sublime utterance from the cross as recorded in Luke 23:34: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” The same might be said of Jesus’ prayer amid “the agony and darkness of the cross” in Matthew 27:46: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”⁶ All of these prayer lines underscored for King the nature of the human condition, the power of love, and the bitter suffering that awaits those determined to transform and redeem society.⁷ Jesus’ prayers and statements concerning prayer touched King’s heart and mind in profound ways while also providing a blueprint for the ideal prayer life. The Lord’s Prayer as recorded in Matthew 6:9-13, the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, was the one King recited most frequently from the New Testament.⁸ When it came to the content, discipline, and activity of prayer, Jesus became perhaps more paradigmatic for King than any other biblical, spiritual, and historical example.

But King found other great models of prayer in the history and traditions of the Christian church, beginning with the church

fathers. From the *Confessions* of St. Augustine (354–430), the most influential of the fathers of the Western church, King quoted: “Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.” King also noted that there is something in the yearning spirit that “causes us to cry out with Saint Augustine,” “Lord, make me pure but not yet.” In King’s estimation, St. Augustine acknowledged humanity’s utter dependence upon God, captured the emptiness and meaninglessness of the prayerless life, and spoke emphatically to the need for humans to “shake the lethargy from our souls.”⁹ The following prayer from Francis of Assisi (1182–1226), the thirteenth-century saint and founder of the Franciscan Order, also figured prominently among King’s favorite spiritual resources:

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may
not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.¹⁰

This prayer gave expression to King’s core spiritual and social values and affirmed his conviction that genuine self-realization and fulfillment comes through both reverent petitions to God and unselfish action in the interest of the common good. Prayers offered by the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546),

the English Puritan preacher John Bunyan (1628–1688), and the Methodist founder John Wesley (1703–1791), carried similar meanings for King; and they, as much as any other sources of spirituality, echoed his belief that the person of faith must always act on the basis of conscience.¹¹ In the following, well-chosen quotation from the prayers of the Methodist revivalist George Whitefield (1714–1770), King found support for his ecumenical vision, especially his view that Christian outreach at its best is cooperative in nature: “God help us, God help us all, to forget party names, and to become Christians indeed, and in truth.”¹² King brought these prayer sources together in his consciousness with theologians in his own time, such as Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Howard Thurman, and others, thus showing his indebtedness to that broader heritage of the Christian church for much of his understanding and practice of prayer. Needless to say, King’s own prayers and prayer life became and remain a distinctive and enduring contribution to that rich spiritual heritage.

But King’s sense of the importance and “power of persistent prayer”¹³ extended beyond its central place in the so-called Judeo-Christian tradition. Evidently, he had other reasons for highlighting prayer as a primary, indispensable, and all-engaging force in the world, as “one of the elemental functions of human life,” and as a reliable path in the search for truth and the complete life.¹⁴ As King studied the vast landscape of human history, he saw that the vitality and efficacy of prayer in personal devotional life had been demonstrated continuously in the experiences of men and women everywhere. He also saw that all of the world’s great religions shared a devotion to the practical, spiritual, and ritualistic dimensions of prayer, that prayer was a unifying element among peoples of different faith traditions.¹⁵ Moreover, King understood that prayer has a unique role in any serious and legitimate effort to achieve social transformation.

King’s prayer life and attitude toward prayer deserve special attention for several reasons. First, it is a critical and curiously neglected side of King’s life and ministry, let alone of his theology and ethics. Even King scholars have said little or nothing about the

place of prayer in King's life and thought. This pattern of omission in King scholarship must be corrected if we are to more fully grasp King's spiritual magnitude and theological and ethical fortitude.¹⁶

Second, a study of this nature is necessary for the fascinating lens it affords into King's personal spiritual life. King never separated intellectual ability, moral responsibility, and social praxis from deep personal spirituality and piety. In other words, King realized that the resources of mind, heart, soul, and spirit came together as a necessary precondition for vibrant and successful ministry and mission. Prayer, as he viewed it, was an essential ingredient in this equation.

Third, there is a certain beauty and dynamism in King's practice of and experiences with prayer. He crafted and recited some of the most strikingly and profoundly moving prayers in all of sacred literature.¹⁷ One is immediately struck by the exquisite beauty, eloquence, poetry, and florid prose of those prayers, and how prayer became one of his most effective ways of witnessing, pastorally and prophetically.

Finally, King's conception and practice of prayer are meaningful for persons of faith in contemporary society and the world. His experiences with prayer, theoretically and practically, are informative, instructive, and inspirational, and they invite readers in all ages to a journey of self-exploration, self-analysis, self-surrendering, and self-discovery. Put another way, King's prayer life constitutes one angle from which we might look anew at what he means for our own troubled times.

This study of King's prayer life consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 discusses King in relation to what Harold A. Carter calls "the prayer tradition of black people."¹⁸ In it I conclude that for King the imperative to pray came not only from a sense of his own personal finitude before God but also from a deep consciousness grounded in the African American religious experience, especially the traditions of the black church. Although King challenged and rejected some elements of folk religion such as its rigid biblical fundamentalism and hypermoralism, he retained its strong belief in and practice of praying. This is perhaps the most sweeping conclusion in this chapter. As it further reveals, King fully embodied

the genius and power of the black prayer tradition, and what he thought, said, and wrote about prayer are as significant for locating him in that tradition as his own personal prayer life.¹⁹

The substance of this first chapter goes far beyond what is provided in the works of Harold Carter,²⁰ James M. Washington,²¹ O. Richard Bowyer et al.,²² and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,²³ all of which explore certain aspects of the African American prayer tradition. Although these sources, with the exception of Carter's groundbreaking piece, offer virtually nothing on King's place in and indebtedness to that tradition, they nevertheless proved beneficial to the development of the conceptual and/or theoretical framework of *Never to Leave Us Alone*.

Chapter 2 traces the development of King's prayer life and thoughts on prayer during his years as a college (1944–48), seminary (1948–51), and graduate student (1951–54).²⁴ As the chapter indicates, King was searching during these years for a deeper and more authentic spirituality. Serious attention to these formative stages in King's personal, spiritual, and theological odyssey inevitably leads to a range of questions: What spiritual path did King take in those early years, and how did prayer figure into his spiritual quest? What was his definition of prayer? What forms of prayer did he recite, and in what particular contexts did he offer them? To what extent did he embrace prayer as a personal vocation, and how did he go about the task of praying? Did he develop what might be described as *a theology of prayer*? In this second chapter, I offer answers to these and other questions.²⁵

Chapter 3 focuses on King's spirituality as revealed in his sermonic prayers from 1954 to 1968. Here the discussion extends beyond King's private prayer life to his public prayer life, primarily in congregational settings. I examine in some measure his prayerful approach to reading Scripture and preaching. The chapter reveals that King never engaged in prayer-less preaching, or prayer-less sermonizing.²⁶ I highlight to some degree the space prayer occupied throughout his sermonic discourse as well as the dialogical character of his sermonic prayers. This approach has considerable

merit, especially since King is known for his dynamic, effective, and gospel-centered preaching but not his poetic, picturesque, and moving sermonic prayers.²⁷ These prayers yield rich insights into King's public life and his sense of radical public piety.

King's mode of pastoral prayer from 1954 to 1968 is the subject of chapter 4. The central argument I advance here is that King approached his role as pastor in a prayerful attitude and that he personified pastoral prayer in its purest form.²⁸ I explore in some depth King's view that pastoral conversation takes many forms, from proclamation to moral discourse to the act of praying itself. I also consider on some levels the ways King utilized prayer in his pastoral and priestly functions, another topic that awaits careful treatment by scholars.

Because King functioned in congregational contexts, his pastoral prayers, as chapter 4 shows, often assumed the form of communal or collective public prayer. Apparently, King understood that part of his responsibility as a pastor involved leading congregational prayers. I examine to some extent his stress on prayer as a resource in the collective experience of worship. It becomes clear that King always approached public prayer in a pastoral demeanor and spirit, regardless of the context.

King's practice of prayer during mass meetings, boycotts, street demonstrations, and other civil rights activities in the period from 1955 to 1968 is the topic of chapter 5.²⁹ This chapter explains how prayer became a wellspring of power and inspiration for King personally and for the movement he led. It tells us much about King's prayerful mood in the midst of struggle, about his reliance on prayer as a stabilizing and reenergizing force, and about the model of ministry that characterized his activities as a civil rights leader. The contention here is that King's movement prayers arose out of, and indeed modeled, a practical spirituality and that this practical posture in prayer made it impossible for him to divorce spirituality from ethical responsibility and social transformation.

The sixth and final chapter highlights the relevance of King's prayers and prayer life for people of faith today. It concludes that King's spiritual legacy is meaningful today, especially when

considered from the standpoint of his attitude toward and experiences with prayer. In an age when the faithful are experimenting with prayer in different forms and arenas, King's prayer life remains a spiritual resource and a model for reflection. To be sure, King's prayer life actually affords lessons about how to become authentic and inspiring voices of faith and praise in a rapidly changing world.

The discussion that follows is based on a careful reading of King's private and public prayers, as he himself recorded them. I have filtered those sources in order to distill what they tell us about King's inward spiritual journey as a student, preacher, pastor, prophet, and civil rights activist.³⁰ King ultimately emerges not as some spiritually misguided and excessively pious figure but as a man with vibrant and unique spiritual gifts. *Never to Leave Us Alone* plumbs the depths of those gifts while opening a window into the soul of this phenomenal figure.