

A TOUGH MIND AND A TENDER HEART  
M. L. King, Jr.

“BE YE THEREFORE WISE AS SERPENTS, AND HARMLESS AS DOVES.”  
Text: Matthew 10:16

A French philosopher once said that “No man is so strong unless he bears within his character antitheses strongly marked.”<sup>4</sup> The strong man is the man who can hold in a {living blend} strongly marked opposites. Very seldom do men achieve this balance of ~~opposition~~ opposites. The idealists are not usually realistic, and the realists are not usually idealistic. The militant are not usually passive, and the passive are not usually militant. The humble are very seldom self-assertive and the self-assertive are rarely humble. But life at its best is a creative synthesis. It is the bringing together of opposites into fruitful harmony. As the philosopher [*Georg Wilhelm Friedrich*] Hegel said, “truth is found neither in the thesis nor the antithesis, but in an emergent synthesis which reconciles the two.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus recognized the need for this blending of opposites. He knew that his disciples were going out to take his message into a difficult and hostile world. He realized that they would confront the recalcitrance of political officials, and the intransigence of the protectors of the old order. He knew that they would confront cold and arrogant men whose hearts had been hardened by the long winter of traditionalism. So He said to them: “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves.” Then he goes on to give them a formula for action: “be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.” It is pretty difficult to imagine a single person having the characteristics of the serpent and the dove simultaneously; but this is what Jesus expects.<sup>6</sup> We must combine the toughness of the serpent with the softness of the dove. In other words, Jesus is saying that individual life at its best requires the possession of a tough mind and a tender heart.

Let us consider first the need for a tough mind. This is that quality of life characterized by incisive thinking, realistic appraisal, and decisive judgment. The tough mind is sharp and penetrating. It breaks through the crust of legends and myths, and sifts the true from the false. The tough minded individual is astute and discerning. He has about him a strong, austere quality that makes for firmness of purpose and solidness

of commitment.<sup>7</sup>

No one can doubt that this toughness of mind is one of man's greatest needs. **So few people ever achieve it. All too many are content with the soft mind.** It is a rarity indeed to find men willing to engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an almost universal quest for easy answers, and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than the idea of having to think.

This prevalent tendency to lean toward soft mindedness is found in man's unbelievable gullibility. Take our attitude toward advertisements. We can be so easily lead to purchase a product because a television or radio advertisement pronounces it better than any other. Advertisers have long since learned that most people are soft minded, and they capitalize on this susceptibility with skillful and effective slogans.

This undue gullibility is also seen in the tendency of all too many readers to accept the printed word of the press as final truth. Very few people realize that even our authentic channels of information, the press, the platform and the pulpit, in many instances, do not give us objective and unbiased truth. **So President [Kwame] Nkrumah of Ghana is considered a ruthless dictator because the American press has carefully dissimulated this idea. The great statesman and scholar, Prime Minister [Jawaharlal] Nehru of India, is often considered a noncommitted ingrate because some segments of the American press have given the impression that his policy of non-alignment is at bottom a {vascillating} commitment to nothing. Many social revolutions in the world growing out of the legitimate aspirations of oppressed people for political independence, economic security and human dignity are considered Communist inspired because conservative element of the American press report them as such.** Very few people have the toughness of mind to judge critically, to discern the true from the false, the fact from the fiction. Our minds are constantly being invaded by legions of half-truths, prejudices, and false facts. One of the great needs of mankind is to be lifted above the morass of false propaganda.

The soft minded individuals are prone to be susceptible to all kinds of superstitions. Their minds are constantly invaded by irrational fears. These phobias range from fear of Friday the thirteenth to fear of a black cat crossing one's path. A few months ago I was stopping in one of the large hotels of New York City. As the elevator made its upward climb the lighted sign within designated the number of each floor. I noticed for the

first time that there was no thirteenth floor; the sign revealed that floor fourteen followed floor twelve. On inquiry [inquiring] from the elevator driver the reason for this omission he said: "This practice is followed by most large hotels because of the fear of numerous people to stay on a thirteenth floor." And then he went on to say, "the foolishness of the fear is the fact that the fourteenth floor is actually the thirteenth, and yet we could never designate it so, because no one would stay there." These are just some of the fears that leave the soft mind haggard by day and haunted by night.

The soft minded always fears change. They get a security in the status quo. They have an almost morbid fear of the new. For them, the most pain of all pain is the pain of a new idea. An elderly segregationist in the south was reported to have said a few days ago: "I have come to see now that desegregation is inevitable. But I pray God that it will not take place until I die." He feared living with the change. The soft minded person always wants to freeze the moment, and hold life in the gripping yoke of sameness.

Soft mindedness has often invaded the ranks of religion. This is why religion has all too often closed its eyes to new discoveries of truth. Through edicts and ~~bills~~ {bulls}, inquisitions and excommunications, the church has attempted to {prorogue} truth and place an impenetrable stone wall in the path of the truth-seeker. **So, many new truths, from the findings of Capernicus and Galileo [Galilei] to the Darwinian theory of evolution, have been rejected by the church with dogmatic passion.**<sup>8</sup> The historical ~~philosophical~~ {philological} criticism of the Bible is looked upon by the soft minded as a blasphemous act, and reason is often looked upon as the exercise of a corrupt faculty which has no place in religion. The soft minds have re-written the Beatitudes to read: "Blessed are the pure in ignorance for they shall see God."<sup>9</sup>

All of this has led to the widespread belief that there is a conflict between science and religion. But this isn't true. There may be a conflict between soft minded religionists and tough minded scientists, but not between science and religion. Their respective worlds are different and their methods are dissimilar. Science investigates. Religion interprets. Science gives man knowledge which is power. Religion gives man wisdom which is control. Science deals mainly with facts. Religion deals mainly with values. The two are not rivals. They are each other's complement. Science keeps religion from sinking into the mores of crippling {irrationalism} and paralyzing obscurantism. Religion

prevents science from falling into the marsh of obsolete materialism and moral nihilism.

We do not have to look very far to see the dangers of soft mindedness. We have seen its ominous consequences in the modern world. Dictator after dictator has capitalized on soft mindedness, and lead men to acts of barbarity and terror that are unthinkable as existing {realities} in civilized society. It came to its most tragic expression in Adolph Hitler. He realized that soft mindedness was so prevalent among his followers that he said on one occasion: "I use emotion for the man and reserve reason for the few." In Mein Kamph, he asserted:<sup>10</sup>

Soft mindedness is also one of the basic causes of race prejudice. The tough minded always examines the facts before they reach conclusions; in short they post-judge. The tender minded will reach a conclusion before they have examined the first fact; in short they pre-judge, hence they are prejudiced. All race prejudice is based on fears, suspicions, and misunderstandings that are usually groundless. **So there are those who are soft minded enough to believe that the Negro is inferior by nature because of Noah's curse upon the children of Ham.**<sup>11</sup> There are those who are soft minded enough to believe in the superiority of the white race and the inferiority of the Negro race in spite of the tough minded research of anthropologists like Margaret ~~Mild~~ {Mead} and Ruth Benedict revealing the falsity of such a notion. There are those who are soft minded enough to argue that racial segregation should be maintained because Negroes lag behind in academic, health and moral standards. They are not tough minded enough to see that if there are lagging standards in the Negro they are themselves the result of segregation and discrimination. They are not discerning enough to see that it is both rationally unsound and sociologically ~~untelable~~ {untenable} to use the tragic effects of segregation as an argument for its continuation. All too many politicians in the south recognize this disease of soft mindedness which engulfs their constituency, and with insidious zeal they make inflammatory statements and disseminate distortions and half-truths which result in arousing abnormal fears and morbid antipathies within the minds of uneducated and underprivileged whites, leaving them in such a state of confusion that they are led to acts of meanness and violence. that no normal person would commit. **Little Rock, Arkansas will always remain as a shameful reminder to the American people that this nation can sink to deep dungeons of moral degeneracy when an irresponsible,**

**power-thirsty head of a state appeals to a constituency that is not tough minded enough to see through his malevolent designs.**<sup>12</sup>

There is little hope for us in our personal and collective lives until we become tough minded enough to break loose from the shackles of prejudice, half-truths, and downright ignorance. The ~~hope~~ {shape} of the world today does not permit us the luxury of soft mindedness. A nation or a civilization that continues to produce soft minded men is using an installment plan to purchase its own spiritual death.

But we must not stop with the cultivation of a tough mind. The gospel also demands a tender heart. Tough mindedness without tender heartedness is cold and detached. It leaves one's life like a perpetual winter devoid of the ~~warmt~~ warmth of spring and the gentle heat of summer. There is nothing more tragic than to see a person who has risen to the disciplined heights of tough mindedness and has at the same time sunk to the passionless depths of hard heartedness.

The hard hearted person never truly loves.<sup>13</sup> He only engages in a ~~eross~~ {crass} utilitarian love which sees other people mainly in relationship to ~~other~~ their usefulness to him. He never experiences the beauty of friendship because he is too cold to have affection for another and too self-centered to have joy in another's joy and sorrow in another's sorrow.<sup>14</sup> So he ends up as an isolated island with no outpouring of love to link him with the mainland of humanity.

The hard hearted person has not the capacity for genuine compassion. He is unconcerned about the pains and sufferings of his brothers. He passes by unfortunate men every day, but he never really sees them. **He confronts men hungry and feeds them not; he passes men naked and clothes them not; he finds men sick and visits them not.**<sup>15</sup> If he decides to give to a worthwhile charity, he gives his dollars and not his spirit. **He becomes cold, self-centered and heartless.**

The hard hearted individual never sees people as people. He sees them only as objects and impersonal cogs in some every turning wheel. If it is the vast wheel of industry, he sees men as hands rather than persons. If it is the massive wheel of big city life, he sees men as digits in a multitude. If it is the deadly turning wheel of army life, he sees men as numbers in a regiment. He ends up depersonalizing individual life, and seeing men as little more than useful things.<sup>16</sup>

Jesus told many parables to illustrate the characteristics of the hard hearted. The rich fool was condemned not because he wasn't tough minded but because he wasn't tender hearted.<sup>17</sup> For him, life became

an eternal mirror in which he saw only himself, and not a window through which he saw other selves. Dives went to hell not because he was wealthy, but because he was not tender hearted enough to see Lazarus. He went to hell because he quenched compassion and made no attempt to bridge the gulf between himself and his brother.<sup>18</sup>

So Jesus reminds us in a striking way that the good life demands combining the toughness of the serpent with the tenderness of the dove. To have serpent-like qualities devoid of dove-like qualities is to be passionless, mean and selfish. To have dove-like qualities without serpent-like qualities is to be sentimental, anemic and aimless. We must combine in our characters antithesis strongly marked.

**This text has a great deal of bearing on our struggle for racial justice.** We as Negroes must combine tough mindedness and tender heartedness if we are to move creatively toward the goal of freedom and justice. There are those soft minded individuals among us who feel that the only way to deal with oppression is to adjust to it. They follow the way of acquiescence and resign themselves to the fate of segregation. In almost every pilgrimage up freedom's road some of the oppressed prefer to remain oppressed.<sup>19</sup> Almost 2800 years ago Moses set out to lead the children of Israel from the slavery of Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land. He soon discovered that slaves do not always welcome their deliverers. They would rather bear those ills they have, as Shakespeare pointed out, than flee to others that they know not of.<sup>20</sup> They prefer the "fleshpots of Egypt" to the ordeals of emancipation.<sup>21</sup> But this is not the way out. This soft minded acquiescence is the way of the coward. My friends, we cannot win the respect of the white people of the South or the peoples of the world if we are willing to sell the future of our children for our personal and immediate safety and comfort. Moreover, we must learn that the passive acceptance of an unjust system is to cooperate with that system, and thereby become a participant in its evil. **Noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good.**

There are those hard hearted individuals among us who feel that our only way out is to rise up against the opponent with physical violence and corroding hatred. They have allowed themselves to become bitter. But this also is not the way out. Violence often brings about momentary results. Nations have frequently won their independence in battle. But as I have said to you so many times before, in spite of temporary victories, violence never brings permanent peace. It creates many more

social problems than it solves.<sup>22</sup> So I am convinced that if we succumb to the temptation of using violence in our struggle for freedom, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and our chief legacy to them will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos. There is still a voice echoing through the vista of time saying to every potential Peter, "Put up your sword."<sup>23</sup> History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations that failed to follow this command.

There is a third way open to us in our quest for freedom, namely, non-violent resistance. It is a way that combines tough mindedness and tender heartedness. It avoids the complacency and doing nothingness of the soft minded and the violence and bitterness of the hard hearted. **It is tough minded enough to resist evil. It is tender hearted enough to resist it with love and nonviolence.** It seems to me that this is the method that must guide our action in the present crisis in race relations. Through nonviolent resistance we will be able to rise to the noble heights of opposing the unjust system while loving the perpetrators of the system. We must work passionately and unrelentingly for full stature as citizens, but may it never be said, my friends, that we used inferior methods to gain it. We must never come to terms with falsehood, malice, hate or violence.

I cannot close this morning without applying the meaning of the text to the nature of God. The greatness of our God lies in the fact that he is both tough minded and tender hearted. He has qualities of austerity and qualities of gentleness. The Bible is always clear in stressing both attributes of God. It expresses his tough mindedness in his justice and wrath. It expresses his tender heartedness in his love and grace. So God has two outstretched arms—one that is strong enough to surround us with justice and one that is gentle enough to surround us with grace. On the one hand God is a God of justice who punishes Israel for her wayward deeds. On the other hand he is a forgiving father whose heart is filled with unutterable joy when a prodigal son returns home.

I am thankful this morning that we worship a God who is both tough minded and tender hearted. If God were only tough minded he would be a cold passionless despot who sits in some far off heaven—"contemplating all"—as Tennyson puts it in *Palace of Art*.<sup>24</sup> He would be like Aristotle's "unmoved mover" who was merely self knowing, but not ever other loving. If God were only tender hearted he would be so soft and sentimental that he would be unable to function

when things go wrong and incapable of controlling what he has made. He would be like H. G. Wells' God in God The Invisible King who is a lovable Being strongly desirous of making a good world, but finds himself helpless before the surging powers of evil. No, God is neither hard hearted or soft minded. He is tough minded enough to transcend the world. He is tender hearted enough to be in it. He leaves us not alone in our agonies and struggles. He seeks us in dark places and suffers with us and for us in our tragic prodigality.

There are times when we need to know that God is a God of justice. When **evil forces rise to the throne** and slumbering giants of injustice emerge in the earth, we need to know that there is a God of power who can cut them down like the grass, and leave them ~~writhing~~ witherine like the green herb.<sup>25</sup> When our most tireless efforts fail to stop the surging sweep of **some monster of** oppression, we need to know that there is a God in this universe whose matchless strength is a fit contrast to the sordid weakness of man. But there are times when we need to know that God is a God of love and mercy. When we are staggered by the chilly winds of adversity and battered by the raging storms of disappointment; when through our folly and sin we stray into some destructive far country and are frustrated because of a strange feeling of homesickness, we need to know that there is Someone who loves us, who really cares, who understands, and who will give us another chance. When day grows dark and nights grow dreary we can be thankful that our God **is not a one-sided, incomplete God, but he** combines in his nature a creative {synthesis} of love and justice which can lead us through life's dark valleys into sun-lit pathways of hope and fulfillment.

1. "A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart," pp. 372-378 in this volume.
2. Kennedy, *The Lion and the Lamb*, pp. 161-171.
3. "Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves."
4. E. Stanley Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation*, p. 17: "A French philosopher once said that 'no man is strong unless he bears within his character antitheses strongly marked.'" King annotated a copy of Jones's book and kept it in his personal library.
5. King refers to Hegel's system of dialectical logic.
6. Kennedy, *The Lion and the Lamb*, p. 169: "It may be a little difficult to imagine the serpent and the dove as characteristic of the same person, but this is what Jesus expects of us."
7. Kennedy, *The Lion and the Lamb*, p. 162: "Realistic thinking always

has a bleak, austere quality about it.”

8. The Polish astronomer Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543) disputed the theory of a geocentric universe.

9. King parodies Matthew 5:8: “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.”

10. A summary of a section from *Mein Kampf* was added in the published version: “By means of shrewd lies, unremittingly repeated, it is possible to make people believe that heaven is hell—and hell, heaven. . . . The greater the lie, the more readily will it be believed” (King, *Strength to Love*, p. 4); cf. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), pp. 176-186.

11. Genesis 9:24-25.

12. King refers to the resistance by city and state officials to desegregating the schools in Little Rock, Arkansas.

13. In King’s personal copy of *The Lion and the Lamb*, he underlined the phrase “For when the heart becomes hard, we are shut off from love . . .” He also wrote in the margin next to these words, “It shuts us off from love” (Kennedy, *The Lion and the Lamb*, p. 168).

14. In his copy of Kennedy’s book, King wrote, “It shuts us off from true friends” next to a paragraph on hardheartedness (*The Lion and the Lamb*, p. 168).

15. Cf. Matthew 25:35-36.

16. In the published version: “He depersonalizes life” (p. 5).

17. Luke 12:16-21.

18. Luke 16:19-31.

19. In the published version: “They prefer to remain oppressed ” (p. 5).

20. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 3, sc. 1.

21. Cf. Exodus 16:3.

22. The preceding seven sentences were condensed in the published version: “And there are hardhearted and bitter individuals among us who would combat the opponent with physical violence and corroding hatred. Violence brings only temporary victories; violence, by creating many more social problems than it solves, never brings permanent peace” (p. 6).

23. Cf. John 18:11.

24. Alfred Lord Tennyson, “The Palace of Art ” (1832).

25. Cf. Psalm 37:2.