Excerpts from a Speech Given by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Sanitation Workers Striking in Memphis, March 18, 1968

In February 1968, more than 1,300 sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee went on strike, demanding decent wages, better safety standards and an effective grievance procedure, better treatment, and recognition of their union, and protesting poor treatment, discrimination, dangerous working conditions, and the deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker – two sanitation workers crushed to death by a malfunctioning truck. As the community got involved, the issues expanded to include police treatment, affordable housing, access to jobs, wage scales, and justice in the schools. The demands continue to resonate today.

On March 18, 1968, Dr. King, invited by local organizers, addressed more than 17,000 people at the Mason Temple in Memphis. At the time, Dr. King and other organizers were organizing the Poor People’s Campaign, a national campaign demanding $30 billion annual investment in antipoverty measures, a government commitment to full employment, enactment of a guaranteed income, and the construction of 500,000 affordable homes. The campaign would be his last – Dr. King was shot in Memphis less than a month later. The following are excerpts from Dr. King’s powerful speech in Memphis on March 18th, 1968.

“You are reminding, not only Memphis, but you are reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages. . . . My friends, we are living as a people in a literal depression. Now you know when there is vast unemployment and underemployment in the black community, they call it a social problem. When there is vast unemployment and underemployment in the white community, they call it a depression. But we find ourselves living in a literal depression... all over this country, as a people. Now the problem isn’t only unemployment. Do you know that most of the poor people in our country are working every day? They are making wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the main stream of the economic life or our nation. They are making wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the main stream of the economic life of our nation. . . . And it is criminal to have people working on a full time basis and a full time job getting part time income.”

“You are here tonight to demand that Memphis do something about the conditions that our brothers face, as they work day in and day out for the well being of the total community. You are here to demand that Memphis will see the poor.”

“Now, you’re doing something else here. You are highlighting the economic issue. You are going beyond purely civil rights to questions of human rights. That is distinct. . . . Now our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality. For we know, that it isn’t enough to integrate lunch counters. What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn’t have enough money to buy a hamburger? What does it profit a man to be able to eat at the swankest integrated restaurant when he doesn’t even earn enough money to take his wife out to dine? What does it profit one to have access to the hotels of our cities, and the hotels of our highways, when we don’t earn enough money to take our family on a vacation?
What does it profit one to be able to attend an integrated school when he doesn’t earn enough money to buy his children school clothes?”

“So we assemble here tonight. . . to say, ‘We are tired. We are tired of being at the bottom. We are tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. We are tired of our children having to attend overcrowded, inferior, qualityless schools. We are tired of having to live in dilapidated, substandard housing conditions where we don’t have wall to wall carpet, but so often end up with wall to wall rats and roaches. We are tired…smothering in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society. We are tired of walking the streets in search for jobs that do not exist. We are tired of working our hands off and laboring every day and not even making a wage adequate with the daily basic necessities of life . . . . We are tired.’”

“So in Memphis, we have begun. We are saying, ‘Now is the time. . . Got the word across to everybody in power this time. . . in this town that is in the time . . . to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to make an adequate income a reality for all of God’s children, now is the time for city hall to take a position for that which is just and honest, now is the time. . . justice rolls down like water, and righteousness like a might stream. Now is the time.’”

“Let it be known everywhere that along with wages and all of the other securities that you are struggling for, you’re also struggling for the right to organize and be recognized. We can all get more together than we can apart. We can get more organized together than we can apart. This is the way to gain power—power is the ability to achieve purpose. Power is the ability to affect change. We need power. . . . I want you to stick it out so that you will be able to make Mayor Loeb and others say yes, even if they want to say no.”

“Now the other thing is that nothing is gained without pressure. . . . Never forget that freedom is not something that is voluntarily given by the oppressor. It is something that must be demanded by the oppressed. Freedom is not some lavish dish that the power structure, and the white forces imparted with making decision will voluntarily hand down on a silver platter while the negro furnishes the appetite. If we are going to get equality, if we are going to get adequate wages, we are going to have to struggle for it.”