

What MLK said

By [David Heim](#)

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I had an English professor who used to get deeply annoyed whenever students would cite some literary passage but not bother to quote it exactly. I recall him telling us, "Look, if you're going to quote somebody, get it right." One could not pretend to be a serious student of literature if one didn't care enough about language to get the quotations right.

When I'm tempted to quote a line or passage from memory, or figure I've got the words close enough, that professor's words nudge me to take the trouble to look the passage up. Often the original is not quite how I remembered it, and often it differs from what I remembered in significant ways. There's a difference, after all, between "Money is the root of all evil" and what the Bible actually says: "The love of money is the root of all evil."

Maya Angelou is among those who have [pointed out](#) that Martin Luther King Jr. did not exactly say, "I was a drum major for justice, peace and righteousness"--though those words are now engraved on one side of his statue at the new MLK memorial in Washington.

The memorial's version of King's words make him seem like an "arrogant twit," Angelou complains--as if he exulted in his leadership of the civil rights movement. In fact, those words were part of a sermon in which he was criticizing the human impulse to stand out from the crowd, to draw attention to oneself and look like the "drum major."

The [sermon](#) is one of King's most memorable statements about the importance of following Jesus in a life of service, rather than seeking glory for oneself. He speaks of Jesus redefining the "norm of greatness" as service to others.

As

the sermon came to a close, King admitted that like everybody else he had the vain desire to be important, but he hoped that this failing would be redeemed by serving a Christlike cause:

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter.

Yes, if you're going to quote MLK, do it right.