

LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL (1963)

Letter from Birmingham Jail is an open letter written by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that provides a detailed explanation of King's approach to nonviolent resistance. King wrote the letter after he was arrested for protesting as part of the Birmingham campaign. While in jail, he read a statement by several clergyman protesting his methods. Letter from Birmingham Jail was his response to that letter.

KEY TERMS**Segregation**

In the United States, a series of laws, often called Jim Crow laws, legally separated white Americans and African Americans in public spaces. These policies created widespread social and economic inequality because the facilities available to African Americans were often significantly inferior to those available to whites.

Birmingham, Alabama

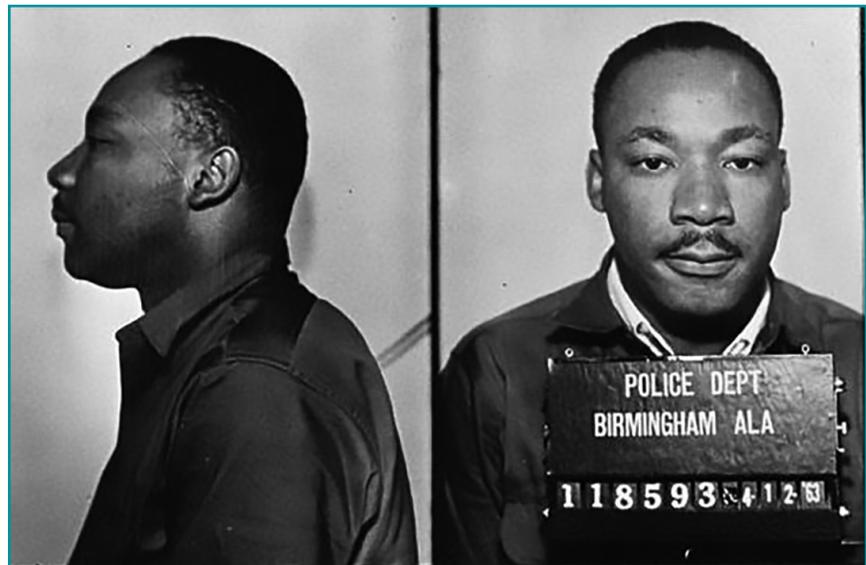
Birmingham, Alabama was targeted by King and other protestors for its endemic segregation and harsh conditions for African Americans. During the Birmingham campaign, protestors waged a series of marches, lunch counter sit-ins, direct actions, and mass meetings against segregation during the Easter season in 1963.

Nonviolent Protest

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. popularized a style of non-violent protest that was inspired by the approach used by Mohandas Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau. Based on his training as a Christian reverend, King believed that the most effective protests countered hate with love in order to effect real social change.

SUMMARY OF LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL

In Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. lays out an argument about why nonviolent protest against segregation was both immediately needed and the most effective option to correct the social ills faced by millions of African Americans. The letter was a response to a statement titled "A Call for Unity" in a newspaper smuggled to King in jail in which a group of clergymen denounced King's actions. The authors of "A Call for Unity" felt that segregation could be most effectively countered through the courts. King's response focuses on how taking protests to the streets was a legal, political, and religious obligation.



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s mugshot from his arrest in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963

One of the overwhelming themes of King's letter was the idea that protests should be nonviolent. King had developed a theory of nonviolent protest during his seminary studies that was inspired by the examples of Mohandas Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau.

LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL (1963)

As part of this approach, he utilized nonviolent methods such as sit-ins and marches to create what he called “constructive” tension. This tension would help forward meaningful discussions about race relations in America in a way that was not possible through the courts. According to King, going through the courts would not allow for real change. Only highly visible nonviolent protests would accomplish that goal because “freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.” King also rooted his argument in Letter from a Birmingham Jail in a legal argument that drew widely from Supreme Court decisions and from the founding documents of the United States. He quotes Chief Justice Earl Warren saying “justice too long delayed is justice denied” as part of his argument for why his campaign to end segregation could not be delayed. He also repeatedly mentions that he and his followers are simply advocating for the rights already given to them by the U.S. Constitution and its Equal Protection Clause.

During the course of his letter, King also makes the argument that an unjust law does not have to be obeyed. In doing so, he echoes the ideas found in the works of Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke and the works of prominent Christian theologians such as St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. In King’s opinion, segregation laws do not have to be obeyed because they treat one group of people differently than another. As such, it is not morally wrong to disobey the laws. He wrote that the citizens of the United States have “not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws” and also “to disobey unjust laws.” Under this paradigm, protesting segregation is both the legal and the moral thing to do.



Segregated seating at a Greyhound bus station in Georgia

As would be expected from his role as a Christian minister, King also used religious arguments to convince his audience about the need to protest segregation. In doing so, he provided a precedent for later American movements to unite the language of religion and social change in their protests. Both the pro-life movement and the women’s rights movements drew heavily on the example provided by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

KEY PASSAGE

“You may well ask: “Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn’t negotiation a better path?” You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize

LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL (1963)

the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word “tension.”

I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.

One of the basic points in your statement is that the action that I and my associates have taken in Birmingham is untimely. Some have asked: “Why didn’t you give the new city administration time to act?” The only answer that I can give to this query is that the new Birmingham administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one, before it will act. We are sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Albert Boutwell as mayor will bring the millennium to Birmingham. While Mr. Boutwell is a much more gentle person than Mr. Connor, they are both segregationists, dedicated to maintenance of the status quo. I have hope that Mr. Boutwell will be reasonable enough to see the futility of massive resistance to desegregation. But he will not see this without pressure from devotees of civil rights. My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.

According to King, how is “constructive, nonviolent tension” necessary for growth?

Write or type in this area.

Why did he choose this time to act?

Write or type in this area.

Is King’s claim here supported by U.S. history? Why or why not?

Write or type in this area.

LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL (1963)

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was “well timed” in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

What are the ways that an oppressed group can demand freedom? How did King advocate for his followers to protest?

Write or type in this area.

LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL IN THE CED

PRD-1.A.2: The leadership and events associated with civil, women's, and LGBT rights are evidence of how the equal protection clause can support and motivate social movements, as represented by:

- Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and the civil rights movement of the 1960s
- The National Organization for Women and the women's rights movement
- The pro-life (anti-abortion) movement

NOTES

Write or type in this area.