

# Primary Sources: Martin Luther King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail

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Rev. Ralph Abernathy (left) and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (right) are taken by a policeman after they led a line of demonstrators into the business section of Birmingham, Alabama, on April 12, 1963. Photo: AP

*Editor's Note: From the Birmingham jail, where he was imprisoned for a nonviolent protest against segregation, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote this letter. He sent it to eight white religious leaders of the South who said they were concerned about the protest. King was born in 1929. He graduated from Morehouse College and attended Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. He was one of six black pupils among 100 students and served as the president of his class. He won a fellowship to Boston University for his Ph.D.*

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling our protest "unwise and untimely." I feel that you are men of genuine good will and your criticisms are sincere. So, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be a patient and reasonable way.

You feel we are "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a group found in every Southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We are joined by 85 other groups all across the South. Whenever necessary and possible, we share staff, training and money with these groups. Several months ago people here in Birmingham invited us to be on call for a nonviolent direct-action program. We said we would come. When the hour came, we lived up to our promise. So I am here, along with several members of my staff, because we were invited here.

### **"I Am In Birmingham Because Injustice Is Here"**

Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. We are like the eighth-century prophets Amos, Hosea, Jonah and Micah, who left their little villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond their hometowns. We are like the Apostle Paul, who left his little village of Tarsus and carried the words of Jesus Christ to almost every village and city in the Greek and Roman world.

Moreover, I am aware of how all cities and states are connected to one another. I cannot sit in Atlanta watching what is happening in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider.

You hate the protests that are taking place in Birmingham. Why do you not hate the reasons and conditions that brought the protests here? I am sure that each of you would want to find the real causes for the protests. I would agree it is unfortunate that these protests are taking place in Birmingham. But I would say it is more unfortunate that the white people in control of this city have ignored the black Americans living here.

In any nonviolent action there are four basic steps: collect facts to find injustices, meet, talks and negotiate, learn to control anger, and begin a direct action. We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham. Birmingham is probably the most segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of this country. Its unjust treatment of black Americans in the courts is shameful. There have been more unsolved bombings of black homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in this nation. Black leaders tried to talk with city leaders. They refused.

### **"We Were The Victims Of A Broken Promise"**

Last September there were some talks with some of the leaders of the businesses in Birmingham. Certain promises were made by the store owners. There was the promise that stores would remove racial signs that bullied black people. Reverend Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to stop any more protests because of this promise. As the weeks and months passed we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. The signs stayed in place. We prepared for direct action. We were aware of the

difficulties involved, so we decided to start having workshops on nonviolence to control anger. We asked ourselves the questions, "Can you be hit, and not hit back?" and "Are you able to take the painful test of being in jail?" We decided to set our direct-action program around the Easter season. Except for Christmas, this was the busiest time for shopping during the year. Our direct action would be to not spend money. This would hurt businesses. We felt that this was the best time to bring pressure on the businessmen for the needed changes. Then we realized that the March election was ahead. Mr. Conner was in a race to be the leader of public safety. We decided to postpone action until after election day because we did not want our actions to cloud the issues. We wanted to see Mr. Conner defeated, so we patiently waited to begin our direct action.

You may well ask, "Why direct action, why sit-ins at lunch counters, marches and so forth? Isn't talking a better path?" You are exactly right. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create tension so a community will begin to talk and negotiate. I am not afraid of the word "tension." There is a type of helpful nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth. Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind to question half-truths. Nonviolent protest creates tension in society that will help men move from prejudice and racism toward understanding and brotherhood. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down by silence. We need a dialogue where both sides begin to talk and negotiate.

You state our protests are untimely and should wait. Some have asked, "Why didn't you give the new leaders time to act?" The only answer that I can give is that the election of Mr. Boutwell will not change Birmingham. While Mr. Boutwell speaks well and is more gentle than Mr. Conner, they are both segregationists. They want the status quo and are against change. My friends, history is the long and tragic story of the fact that groups with privileges, or benefits, do not give up those privileges on their own. One person may see the right thing to do, but, as Professor Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more sinful and selfish than the single person.

### **"This Is Why We Can No Longer Wait"**

Frankly, I have never been part of a direct-action movement that was "well timed" for the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "wait." It painfully rings in the ear of every black American. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." We must come to agree with a 19th-century leader of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied." We have waited for more than 340 years for our God-given and constitutional rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward freedom. Yet we still creep toward getting a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say "wait." You have not seen vicious mobs hang your mothers and fathers or drown your sisters and brothers or not seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters, and not be punished. You have not seen most of your 20,000,000 black brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the middle of a rich society. You do not

have to explain to your 6-year-old daughter why she cannot go to the amusement park that has just been advertised on television. You have not seen tears in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children. You have not seen her mind begin to change. You have not seen her begin to change the way she thinks about white people. You don't have to answer your daughter's question, "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?" When you take a cross-country drive, you don't have to sleep in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will let you in. Every day, you don't have to see those awful "white" and "colored" signs. When your middle name becomes "boy" (even if you are a man), you will understand. When your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs.," you will understand. We are forever fighting a sense of "nobodyness." This is why we can no longer wait.

You are upset because we break laws. I understand your feelings. But, today in 1963, your separate, segregated schools do not obey the 1954 Supreme Court's decision. One may well ask, "How can you break some laws and obey others?" The answer is that there are just laws, and there are unjust laws.

### **"Any Law That Puts People Down Is Unjust"**

Now, what is the difference between the two? A just law is man-made. It is right and follows the law of God. Any law that uplifts is just. Any law that puts people down is unjust. All segregation laws are unjust because they separate and put down a person. Paul Tillich has said that separation is sin. The great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber said segregation makes a person a thing. I urge people to disobey segregation laws because they are wrong. But, I urge them to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court because it is right and it uplifts.

When a large group of people force a law on a small group of people, but the large group does not have to follow that law, then that law is unjust. If the large group follows the law, too, then the law is just.

Let me give another explanation. Alabama voted and set up its segregation laws. Throughout the state of Alabama, there are rules to prevent black Americans from voting. There are some counties where most are black people, but not one black person can vote.

There are some situations when a law is just, but it is used in an unjust way. For instance, I was arrested Friday on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong with this law. But when our protest cannot get a parade permit, the law becomes unjust. It goes against our First Amendment right to peaceful protest.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of protest. The early Christians faced hungry lions instead of following unjust laws of the Roman Empire. Socrates had to die because he broke an unjust law teaching the young to think in new ways.

Hitler's evil laws in Germany were "legal." It was a crime to help a Jew, but I know I would have helped my Jewish brothers. In Hungary, freedom fighters broke the laws of Communism, so today I would disobey anti-religious laws in a Communist country.

However, I must be honest with my Christian and Jewish brothers. I know that hateful people like the Ku Klux Klan slow the black Americans' great march toward freedom, but I'm beginning to worry more about the average white person's greater interest in order than in justice. Like a patient father, they set the timetable for another man's freedom and advise black people to wait. Lukewarm support is much more frustrating than outright hate.

### **"We Must Protect The Robbed And Punish The Robber"**

In your statement you say our peaceful actions are wrong because they cause violence. Is the man with money who is robbed the cause of the robbery? Is Socrates the cause of his own death because he asked young people to think? Did Jesus cause his own death because of his love for God? No. We must protect the robbed and punish the robber.

It is strange to me that people think the flow of time will surely cure all ills. Actually, time is neutral and does not care. It can be used to destroy or build. We must use time to build and not wait for what could be.

You spoke of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. I am not an extremist. However, I stand in the middle of two very different groups in the black community. One is a group of black Americans who, being victims of years of cruelty, go along with segregation. This group also includes a few black Americans in the middle class who, because of their education and business skills, make money from segregation. They are no longer aware of the problems of most black people. The other group is one of bitterness and hatred and comes very close to calling for violence. The largest and best known group is Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement, which is made up of people who have lost faith in America and Christianity. They want their own black nation. I have tried to stand between these two groups. The more excellent way is love and nonviolent protest. God and the black church has brought nonviolence into our struggle. We are not "rabble-rousers" and "outside agitators." Without our nonviolent direct action, millions of black Americans, out of frustration and despair, will spread a violent nightmare across America.

Freedom is coming, because something within the African-American community has reminded him that he was born with the right to freedom. Something in the outside world has connected the African-American with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean. He is moving with a special energy toward the promised land of justice. Black people have many built-up feelings and frustrations. They have to get them out. So let them march and pray on the steps of city hall. Understand why they must have sit-ins at lunch counters and freedom rides on buses. If these emotions do not come out in these nonviolent ways, they will come out as awful violence. This is not a threat. It is a fact of history.

## **"Maybe I Am An Extremist"**

As I think more about it, maybe I am an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love? Jesus said, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them..." Was not the prophet Amos an extremist for justice? He said, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist? Lincoln said, "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist? He said, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Will we be extremists for hate, or will we be extremists for love?

I had hoped that the average white person would see this. Maybe I expected too much. I am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and joined it. They are still all too small in number, but they are big in quality. Ralph McGill, Lillian Smith, Harry Golden and James Dabbs have written about our struggle in understanding terms. Others have marched with us down nameless streets of the South. They sat in with us at lunch counters and rode in with us on the freedom rides. They have slept in filthy roach-infested jails, suffering the abuse of brutal policemen.

Let me mention my other disappointment. I have been let down by the white church and its leadership. Of course, some are working for change. This past Sunday Reverend Stallings welcomed black people to his Baptist Church and Catholic leaders of this state have integrated Springhill College.

I had the strange feeling when I began leading the bus protest in Montgomery several years ago that we would have the support of the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be some of our strongest allies. Instead, a few have refused to understand the freedom movement and all too many others have remained silent behind their stained-glass windows.

## **"I Have Watched White Churches Stand On The Sidelines"**

I have heard many religious leaders of the South call upon their worshipers to support desegregation because it is the law. Still, I have longed to hear white ministers say, integration is right and black Americans are your brothers. I have watched white churches stand on the sidelines. I have heard so many ministers say, "Those are social issues which the gospel has nothing to do with."

There was a time when the church was very powerful. In those days the church was not just a thermometer that measures ideas. It was the thermostat that changed society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town, the leaders of the town called them "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians believed they were "a colony of heaven" and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but ended ancient evils.

Things are different now. Today's church is so often a weak voice that changes nothing. The church no longer bothers those in power but assures them that they approve of the way things are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of today does not recapture the spirit of the early church, it will lose the loyalty of millions, and become an unimportant social club with no meaning in the 20th century.

### **"We Will Win Our Freedom"**

Even if the church does not help us, we will reach the goal in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, we were here. For more than two centuries slaves labored here. They made cotton king and they built the grand homes of their masters. If the cruelties of slavery could not stop us, nothing will. We will win our freedom.

I must end my letter now. But before ending it, I must mention one of your statements that troubled me deeply. You warmly praised the Birmingham police force for keeping "order" and "preventing violence." Have you seen their angry violent dogs biting six unarmed, nonviolent black protestors? Have you seen their ugly, cruel treatment of blacks here in the city jail? If you would watch them push and curse old black women and young black girls, if you would see them slap and kick old black men and young boys, if you would observe them refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together, you would not praise the police department.

### **"One Day The South Will Recognize Its Real Heroes"**

I wish you had praised the black demonstrators of Birmingham for their perfect courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing control. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. One will be James Meredith, courageously facing jeering and hostile mobs and agonizing loneliness just to attend college. One will be 72-year-old Mother Pollard of Montgomery, Alabama, who walked, instead of sitting in the back of a bus, and said, "My feet is tired, but my soul is rested." They will be young high school and college students and young ministers nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail. One day the South will know that when these children of God sat down at lunch counters they were standing up for the best in the American dream.

Never before have I written a letter this long. I'm afraid that it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk. What else is there to do when you are alone for days in a narrow jail cell, but write long letters, think strange thoughts and pray long prayers? If I have said anything in this letter that is not the truth, I beg you to forgive me.

If I have said anything in this letter that is not in praise of brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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## Quiz

- 1 Read the section "I Am In Birmingham Because Injustice Is Here." Select the paragraph that provides specific examples supporting the need to hold a protest in Birmingham.
  
- 2 Which sentence from the article BEST supports the idea that conversation alone could not effectively lead to changes in the status of African-Americans?
  - (A) Last September there were some talks with some of the leaders of the businesses in Birmingham.
  - (B) You may well ask, "Why direct action, why sit-ins at lunch counters, marches and so forth? Isn't talking a better path?"
  - (C) Nonviolent direct action seeks to create tension so a community will begin to talk and negotiate.
  - (D) Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down by silence.
  
- 3 Read the selection from the section "This Is Why We Can No Longer Wait."

*You do not have to explain to your 6-year-old daughter why she cannot go to the amusement park that has just been advertised on television. You have not seen tears in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children. You have not seen her mind begin to change. You have not seen her begin to change the way she thinks about white people. You don't have to answer your daughter's question, "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"*

What is the author's MAIN purpose in including the above selection?

- (A) to argue that segregation causes all black children to hate white people
- (B) to show that children were the most hurt by the segregation that African Americans faced
- (C) to demonstrate that church leaders' daughters could be hurt by segregation as well
- (D) to help his readers to better connect with the challenges that African-Americans faced

- 4 Read the selection from the article.

*You spoke of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. I am not an extremist. However, I stand in the middle of two very different groups in the black community. One is a group of black Americans who, being victims of years of cruelty, go along with segregation. This group also includes a few black Americans in the middle class who, because of their education and business skills, make money from segregation. They are no longer aware of the problems of most black people. The other group is one of bitterness and hatred and comes very close to calling for violence. The largest and best known group is Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement, which is made up of people who have lost faith in America and Christianity. They want their own black nation. I have tried to stand between these two groups.*

How does the viewpoint of the first group of black Americans described above compare with the viewpoint of the second group?

- (A) The first group believes that segregation must be ended through businesses, while the second group believes that violence is the answer.
- (B) The first group believes that segregation must be ended through businesses, while the second group believes that nonviolent protest is the answer.
- (C) The first group does not care or notice much about the problems of segregation, while the second group believes that violence should be used to end segregation.
- (D) The first group does not care or notice much about the problems of segregation, while the second group believes that nonviolent protest should be used to end segregation.