

# 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 demonstration against segregation, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in longhand this letter to respond to a public statement of concern and caution issued by eight white religious leaders of the South. King, who was born in 1929, did his undergraduate work at Morehouse College and attended the integrated Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, where 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 present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I answer all of the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have time for little else, and I would have no time for important work. But since I feel that you are men of

good will and your criticisms are sincerely offered, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

I think I should give the reason for my being in Birmingham, since you feel we are "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization working in every Southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, and we are joined by 85 other organizations all across the South, one being the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Whenever necessary and possible, we share staff, training and money with these organizations. Several months ago a group here in Birmingham invited us to be on call for a nonviolent direct-action program, so we readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promises. So I am here, along with several members of my staff, because we were invited here.

Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth-century prophets Amos, Hosea, Jonah and Micah left their little villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to almost every village and city in the Greek and Roman world, I too feel I must carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own hometown.

### **"Injustice Anywhere Is A Threat To Justice Everywhere"**

Moreover, I am aware of how all communities and states are connected to one another and I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta watching what is happening in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, because we are tied together in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one, directly affects all. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow view of the "outsider," since anyone who lives inside the United States can never be seen as an outsider.

You hate the demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham, but I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations here. I am sure that each of you would want to go beyond the effects and find the underlying causes. I would agree it is unfortunate that these demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham at this time, but I would say more clearly that it is even more unfortunate that the white people in control of this city left the Negro community with no other alternative.

In any nonviolent action there are four basic steps: collection of facts to find injustices, negotiation, self-purification and direct action. We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States and its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of this country. Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a shameful reality. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in this nation. These are the hard, brutal and unbelievable facts. Negro leaders tried to negotiate with the city fathers, but the political leaders refused.

### **"We Prepared For Direct Action"**

Then came the opportunity last September to talk with some of the leaders of the business community. In these negotiating sessions certain promises were made by the store owners. There was the promise to remove the humiliating racial signs from the stores. Because of these promises, Reverend Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights

agreed to call a moratorium and stop any more demonstrations. As the weeks and months passed we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. The signs remained in place. As in the past, the dark shadow of a deep disappointment settled upon us, so we had no other choice. We prepared for direct action. We would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community. We were aware of the difficulties involved, so we decided to go through a process of self-purification to control anger. We started having workshops on nonviolence where 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. We knew a strong united refusal to spend money would hurt businesses and would be the result of direct action. We felt that this was the best time to bring pressure on the merchants for the needed changes. Then we realized that the March election was ahead and we discovered that 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.

### **"I Am Not Afraid Of The Word 'Tension'"**

You may well ask, "Why direct action, why sit-ins at lunch counters, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create tension so a community will move toward negotiation. This may sound rather shocking, but I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." There is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth. Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise above half-truths. We must see the need of having nonviolent protest to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the darkness of prejudice and racism to the light of understanding and brotherhood. So, the purpose of direct action is to create a crisis that will open the door to negotiation. We therefore agree with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a monologue rather than a dialogue.

One of the basic points in your statement is that our acts are untimely. Some have asked, "Why didn't you give the new leaders time to act?" We believe we will be sadly mistaken if we think that the election of Mr. Boutwell will bring the millennium to 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. The hope I see in Mr. Boutwell is that he knows he cannot stop desegregation. But we will not see this without pressure. My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without nonviolent pressure. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that groups that have a better life seldom give up their privileges on their own. Individuals may see the right thing to do, but, as Professor Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more sinful and selfish than individuals.

### **"This 'Wait' Has Almost Always Meant 'Never'"**

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 is a familiar ringing in the ear of every Negro. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." It is a calming drug for the emotional stress of the moment, but like the drug Thalidomide which caused many birth defects, this drug gives birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. 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 to freedom and we still creep toward the gaining of 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," for they have not seen vicious mobs lynch their mothers and fathers or drown their sisters and brothers. They have not seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill black brothers and sisters and not be punished. They have not seen most of our 20,000,000 Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the middle of a rich society. You do not suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you try to explain to your 6-year-old daughter why she cannot go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television. You have not seen tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children. You have not seen the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky. You have not seen her begin to change her little personality by developing a bitterness toward white people. You don't have to try and 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 night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you. You don't have to be humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored." When your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are), your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs." and you are forever fighting a sense of "nobodiness," then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. I hope, sirs, you can understand our real and unavoidable impatience.

You are anxious about our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a real concern. We urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools. Well, it is 1963, and your segregated schools are breaking the law. 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. I would agree with St. Augustine that "An unjust law is no law at all."

### **"Any Law That Uplifts Is Just"**

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is man-made and follows the law of God. An unjust law goes against natural law. Any law that uplifts is just. Any law that degrades is unjust. All segregation laws are unjust because segregation degrades. To use the idea of Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher, segregation makes a person a thing. Paul Tillich has said that separation is sin. So I can urge people to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court because it is right and it uplifts. I can urge them to disobey segregation laws because they are wrong and degrade.

The majority forces a law on the minority, but the majority doesn't follow that law. That is unjust, but if the majority follows the law, too, then it is just.

Let me give another explanation. An unjust law is a code forced upon a minority which that minority had no part in creating because it did not have the right to vote. Alabama set up its segregation laws, but throughout the state of Alabama there are rules to prevent Negroes from voting. There are some counties where most are Negro, but not one Negro 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 also goes against our First Amendment right to peaceful protest.

### **"Lukewarm Support Is Much More Frustrating Than Outright Hate"**

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of protest. It was seen in the Bible when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar because God's law was being disobeyed. The early Christians faced hungry lions instead of following unjust laws of the Roman Empire. Socrates protested, too. He had to die because he broke an unjust law teaching the young to think in new ways.

We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was "legal." It was "illegal" to help a Jew in Hitler's Germany. But I am sure that if I had lived in Germany during that time, I would have helped my Jewish brothers. Everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." If I lived in a Communist country today that attacks the Christian faith, I would disobey these anti-religious laws.

However, I must be honest with my Christian and Jewish brothers. Over the last few years I have been very disappointed with the average, moderate white community. I am beginning to think that the Negro's great stumbling block in our march toward freedom is not the Ku Klux Klan or other haters, but the average white moderate, who is more interested in order than justice. They say, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action." Like a patient father, they set the timetable for another man's freedom and advise the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season." Lukewarm support is much more frustrating than outright hate.

In your statement you say our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they cause violence. Is this logical? Isn't this criticizing a man with money who is robbed, saying he caused the robbery because he had money? Isn't this criticizing Socrates for making young people think? So, he caused his own death when forced to drink poison. Isn't this like criticizing Jesus for his love of God? So, he caused his own crucifixion. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber.

### **"Time Is Neutral And Does Not Care"**

I received a letter this morning from a white brother in Texas. He wrote, "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but is it possible that you are in too great of a religious hurry? It has taken Christianity almost 2,000 years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth." 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 come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of what will be. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be coworkers with God.

You spoke of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. I am not an extremist. In reality I stand in the middle of two opposing groups in the Negro community. One is a group of Negroes who, being victims of years of cruelty, have been so completely drained of self-respect and a sense of "somebodyness," that they have gone along with segregation. This group also includes a few Negroes in the middle class, who are educated and have business skills that make money from segregation. They are no longer aware of the problems of most Negroes. 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. It is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have lost faith in Christianity and have concluded that the white man is a devil. They want their own Negro nation. I have tried to stand between these two groups. There is a more excellent way, of love and nonviolent protest. I'm grateful to God that, through the Negro church, has brought nonviolence into our struggle. Without this, I am convinced that by now many streets of the South would be flowing with floods of blood. We are not "rabble-rousers" and "outside agitators." Without our nonviolent direct action, millions of Negroes, out of frustration and despair, will strike back causing a frightening racial nightmare.

### **"Freedom Will Eventually Come"**

Freedom will eventually come. Something within the American Negro has reminded him of his birthright of freedom. Something in the outside world has connected the American Negro with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean. He is moving with a sense of cosmic energy toward the promised land of racial justice and the result has been public demonstrations. The Negro has many pent-up feelings and frustrations. He has to get them out. So let him march and pray on the steps of city hall. Understand why he 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 in awful violence. This is not a threat, it is a fact of history.

But as I continued to think about the matter, I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love? He said, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them..." Was not Amos an extremist for justice? He said, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ? He said, "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist? He said, "Here I stand; I can do no other so help me God." Was not John Bunyan an extremist? He said, "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a mockery of my conscience." Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist? He 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." So the question is not whether we will be extremist, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate, or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice, or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?

I had hoped that the average white moderate would see this. Maybe I expected too much. I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has been cruel to another race, can understand and feel the Negroes' pain. 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 with us on the freedom ride buses. They have slept in filthy roach-infested jails, suffering the abuse of brutal policemen.

### **"I Have Been Disappointed With The Church"**

Let me rush on to mention my other disappointment, the disappointment with the white church and its leadership. Of course, some are working for change. This past Sunday Reverend Stallings welcomed Negroes to his Baptist Church and Catholic leaders of this state have integrated Springhill College.

But despite these notable exceptions, I must honestly say I have been disappointed with the church. I say it as a minister of the gospel who loves the church and will stay true to its teachings.

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.

In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would join our protest. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

### **"Today's Church Is So Often A Weak Voice"**

I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshipers to support desegregation because it is the law. But I have longed to hear white ministers say, integration is right and the Negro is our brother. I have watched white churches stand on the sidelines as Negroes suffer from injustice. 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. It was during that period that the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. 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 "a colony of heaven" and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number, but ended such ancient evils as sacrificing children and making Christians face the lions in the arena.

Things are different now. Today's church is so often a weak voice with an uncertain sound that changes nothing. It is so often a strong supporter of the status quo or the way things are. 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 and 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 for the 20th century. I meet young people every day whose disappointment with the church has risen to outright disgust.

### **"The Goal Of America Is Freedom"**

But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are presently misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. Before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of

Jefferson scratched across the pages of history the majestic word of the Declaration of Independence, we were here. For more than two centuries slaves labored here; they made cotton king; and they built the homes of their masters in the midst of brutal injustice and shameful humiliation - and yet out of the vitality of our people, we continue to thrive and develop. If the cruelties of slavery could not stop us, nothing will. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God echo our demands.

I must close now. But before closing I must mention one other point in your statement that troubled me deeply. You warmly praised the Birmingham police force for keeping "order" and "preventing violence." I don't believe you would have so warmly praised the police force if you had seen its angry violent dogs biting six unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I don't believe you would so quickly commend the policemen if you would observe their ugly and inhuman treatment of Negroes here in the city jail, watching them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls, slapping and kicking old Negro men and young boys, or refusing to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I'm sorry that I can't join you in your praise for the police department.

It is true that they have been rather disciplined in their public handling of the demonstrators, and in this sense they have been publicly "nonviolent." But for what purpose? To preserve the evil system of segregation. Over the last few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek.

### **"My Feet Is Tired, But My Soul Is Rested"**

I wish you had praised the Negro demonstrators of Birmingham for their perfect courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of most inhuman cruelty. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, courageously facing jeering and hostile mobs and the agonizing loneliness just to attend college. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a 72-year-old woman of Montgomery, Alabama, named Mother Pollard, who refused to ride the segregated buses, and responded with ungrammatical perfection, "My feet is tired, but my soul is rested." They will be young high school and college students, young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders courageously and 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 in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage.

Never before have I written a letter this long - or should I say a book? 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, but what else is there to do when you are alone for days in the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts and pray long prayers? If I have said anything in this letter that is an understatement of the truth and is indicative of an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me.

If I have said anything in this letter that is an overstatement of the truth and is indicative of my having a patience that makes me patient with anything less than 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 According to King, even fair laws may be used to harm certain groups in society. Which paragraph from the section "Any Law That Uplifts Is Just" BEST supports the idea outlined above?
- 2 All four selections given below help make the claim that church leaders have not shown true support for the idea of racial equality. Which of the following is the STRONGEST piece of evidence to support the claim?
- (A) However, I must be honest with my Christian and Jewish brothers. Over the last few years I have been very disappointed with the average, moderate white community.
  - (B) Is this logical? Isn't this criticizing a man with money who is robbed, saying he caused the robbery because he had money? Isn't this criticizing Socrates for making young people think? So, he caused his own death when forced to drink poison.
  - (C) 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.
  - (D) I have watched white churches stand on the sidelines as Negroes suffer from injustice. I have heard so many ministers say, "Those are social issues which the gospel has nothing to do with."
- 3 Which statement BEST reflects one of the author's beliefs?
- (A) Time will fix all problems, but may take many years to do so.
  - (B) Tension serves a useful purpose in creating dialogue for change.
  - (C) Ignorant or uninvolved churches are the cause of many of society's ills.
  - (D) The only way to effect change is through a combination of direct action and violence.
- 4 Which answer choice BEST explains the author's purpose in this article?
- (A) to highlight the different methods of protesting segregation and weigh the effectiveness of each type discussed
  - (B) to demonstrate to church leaders the timeliness and necessity of the actions of nonviolent protesters in Birmingham
  - (C) to explain to church leaders how the challenges of segregation have affected the African-American community, especially the children
  - (D) to argue to church leaders that they must join the nonviolent protest movement for desegregation, or else face moral and legal consequences