

Letter from Birmingham Jail (1963) Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Historical Background

Since the late 19th century, African-Americans had been oppressed and subjugated through state legislation known as “Jim Crow” laws. These laws kept black from voting by creating poll taxes and often bogus literacy tests. Jim Crow laws segregated black in public places, including schools, train cars, theaters, and restaurants. In addition, blacks were brutalized and terrorized in their daily lives through the violent actions of the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacists. Although the 14th and 15th amendments affirmed the rights of blacks and weak civil rights legislation had been passed at the federal level, little to no federal intervention occurred to protect these rights. That changed in 1954 when the Supreme Court decided, in the Brown vs. Board of Education case, that segregation was illegal in schools. This decision catalyzed a wave of popular action known as the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist preacher, became the de facto leader of this social movement, staging non-violent demonstrations meant to encourage southerners to abide by the federal policies, and to encourage the federal government to intervene. In 1963, most of the South was still segregated and southern governments fought the extension of rights to black Americans. Dr. King staged one of his protests in Birmingham, Alabama, and as with most demonstrations for racial equality, it was met with violence. The police beat the peaceful protesters, turned attack dogs on them, and turned powerful fire hoses on young students. Dr. King was arrested, and while he was in jail, eight members of the local clergy wrote to him, urging him to stop his movement for rights and equality. They said that although his protests were non-violent, they invited and incited violence. They argued that the South was not ready for racial equality and that he should be more patient. One century after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, beginning by scribbling in the margins of a newspaper he had in his cell, Dr. King wrote a response to those who thought blacks should continue to wait and suffer through oppression.

Historical Significance

Many of Dr. King’s speeches and writings were important in furthering the cause of civil rights for all, but the Letter from Birmingham Jail addressed a large and compelling issue – one that superseded laws, traditions, or religious doctrine. Dr. King’s letter was an articulate, impassioned plea for justice, and he raised the issue of what was/is just in a civilized society. The laws of the south ensured that blacks were kept powerless and in fear for their safety. The laws of America were not protecting a substantial percentage of American citizens. This letter, like the works of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells and others civil rights activists who came before Dr. King, made plain that black Americans did not enjoy the same rights of citizenships as other Americans, and that he and his followers would not back down. Two months later, President John F. Kennedy addressed the nation on television, echoing the sentiments expressed in King’s letter and calling for sweeping civil right reform, leading to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: non-violent resistance, civil disobedience, direct action; universal effects of injustice. At the conclusion of this lesson, you will be able to

- define and distinguish the terms non-violent resistance, civil disobedience, and direct action, and state King's arguments in favor of each;
- illustrate King's idea that injustice done to anyone in one place threatens justice everywhere with examples of how this idea might apply in other cases;
- describe and evaluate the essential strategy and the specific steps that are necessary for bringing about political change, according to King;
- give examples of how King might advocate addressing problems in the world today analogous to those faced by African-Americans in 1963;

Questions to Explore

1. What was King's rationale for being in Birmingham? Do you think he was an "outside agitator" whose presence was unjustified?
2. When should we patiently endure an injustice? When should we take action against it? What are the arguments for and against patiently bearing injustice, and how does King respond to those who think he should wait longer?
3. King was challenging the established laws and practice of southern states. Do you agree that the law can sometimes be "unjust?" If not, why not? If so, what standard can we look to outside the law to evaluate it?
4. Even if laws are sometimes unjust, are citizens ever justified in breaking them? What are the strongest arguments on either side of this question? Is it possible to respect the law and resist it at the same time?
5. If you think that civil disobedience is sometimes a good idea, what guidelines might help insure that it does the most good and the least harm possible?