

Letter From Birmingham Jail Summary

“Letter from Birmingham Jail” is addressed to several clergymen who had written an open letter criticizing the actions of Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) during their protests in Birmingham. Dr. King tells the clergymen that he was upset about their criticisms, and that he wishes to address their concerns.

First, he notes their claim that he is an “outsider” who has come to Birmingham to cause trouble. He defends his right to be there in a straightforward, unemotional tone, explaining that the SCLC is based in Atlanta but operates throughout the South. One of its affiliates had invited the organization to Birmingham, which is why they came.

However, he then provides a moral reason for his presence, saying that he came to Birmingham to battle “injustice.” Because he believes that “all communities and states” are interrelated, he feels compelled to work for justice anywhere that injustice is being practiced. Dr. King believes the clergymen have erred in criticizing the protestors without equally exploring the racist causes of the injustice that is being protested.

He then explains in detail his process of organizing nonviolent action. First, the SCLC confirmed that Birmingham had been practicing institutionalized racism, and then attempted to negotiate with white business leaders there. When those negotiations broke down because of promises the white men broke, the SCLC planned to protest through “direct action.” Before beginning protests, however, they underwent a period of “self-purification,” to determine whether they were ready to work nonviolently, and suffer indignity and arrest. When they decided they could, they then prepared to protest.

However, the SCLC chose to hold out because Birmingham had impending mayoral elections. Though the notorious racist Eugene “Bull” Connor was defeated in the election, his successor, Albert Boutwell, was also a pronounced segregationist. Therefore, the protests began.

Dr. King understands that the clergymen value negotiation over protest, but he insists that negotiations cannot happen without protest, which creates a “crisis” and “tension” that forces unwilling parties (in this case, the white business owners) to negotiate in good faith. He admits that words like “tension” frighten white moderates, but embraces the concepts as “constructive and nonviolent.” He provides examples that suggest tension is necessary for humans to grow, and repeats that the tension created by direct action is necessary in this case if segregation is to end.

He next turns to the clergymen criticism that the SCLC action is “untimely.” After insisting that Albert Boutwell was not different enough to warrant patience, he launches into an extended claim that “privileged groups” will always oppose action that threatens the status quo. They will always consider attacks on their privilege as “untimely,” especially because groups have a tendency towards allowing immorality that individuals might oppose.

In particular, the black community has waited long enough. Dr. King insists that the black

man has waited “more than 340 years” for justice, and he then launches into a litany of abuses that his people have suffered both over time and in his present day. Amongst these abuses is his experience explaining to his young daughter why she cannot go to the “public amusement park” because of her skin color. Because the black man has been pushed “into the abyss of despair,” Dr. King hopes that the clergymen will excuse his and his brethren’s impatience.

Dr. King then switches gears, noting that the clergymen are anxious over the black man’s “willingness to break laws.” He admits that his intention seems paradoxical, since he expects whites to follow laws that protect equality, while breaking others.

However, he then distinguishes between just and unjust laws, insisting that an individual has both a right and a responsibility to break unjust laws. He defines just laws as those that uphold human dignity, and unjust laws as those that “degrade human personality.” Unjust laws, he argues, hurt not only the oppressed, but also the oppressors, since they are given a false sense of superiority.

He then speaks specifically of segregation, describing it as unjust. Because it is a law that a majority forces the minority to follow while exempting itself from it, it is a law worth breaking. Further, because Alabama’s laws work to prohibit black citizens from fully participating in democracy, the laws are particularly unjust and undemocratic. Next, he adds that some just laws become unjust when they are misused. For instance, the law prohibiting “parading without a permit,” which he was arrested for breaking, is a just law that was used in this case solely to support the injustice of segregation.

Dr. King understands that flouting the law with wanton disregard would lead to “anarchy,” but he insists that he is willing to accept the penalty for his transgression. This distinction makes his civil disobedience just. He then provides a list of allusions that support his claim. To sum up his point on just and unjust laws, he notes that the laws of Nazi Germany allowed for Jewish persecution, and that he would have gladly broken those laws to support the oppressed class had he lived there (176).

The next topic Dr. King addresses is that of white moderates, who have greatly disappointed him. He argues that they value “order” over “justice,” and as a result have made it easier for the injustice of segregation to persist. He believes that moderates cannot distinguish between the nonviolent action and the violence of the oppressors. In particular, he is shocked that the clergymen would blame the black victims for the violence of segregation, as he believes they did in their open letter.

He further attacks moderates over their demands for patience. Moderates believe that time will get better if the oppressed blacks are patient, but Dr. King insists that “time itself is neutral” and that change only happens when good men take action.

He then addresses the clergymen’s claim that SCLC action is “extreme.” Dr. King describes himself as standing between two opposing forces for black change. On one hand are the complacent blacks, who are either too demeaned to believe change possible or who have some modicum of success that they are unwilling to sacrifice for true equality.

On the other hand are the more violent factions, exemplified by Elijah Muhammad and his Black Muslim movement. Dr. King argues that he stands between these two extremes, offering a path towards nonviolent, loving protest. He implicitly warns that blacks will turn to the more violent option if Dr. King's path is not favored by the population at large.

However, Dr. King goes further and proudly embraces the label of "extremist." He argues that it is possible to be a "creative extremist" and provides a list of unimpeachable figures whom he considers extremists for positive causes. These include Jesus and Abraham Lincoln. Dr. King is disappointed that white moderates cannot distinguish between these types of extremism, but wonders whether whites can ever truly understand the disgrace that blacks have suffered in America (180).

He next lists a second disappointment, in the white church. Though he once expected the Southern church to be one of his movement's primary allies, they have time and again either opposed his cause or remained "silent", therefore facilitating injustice. Too many of the white church leaders have seen Civil Rights as a social movement, irrelevant to their church, but Dr. King believes this cowardice will eventually make their churches irrelevant unless they change. Whereas the church should be a force for change, a challenge to the status quo, it has become too comfortably a reflection of the prevailing conditions, a de facto supporter of those in power (181-182). Though these doubts make him pessimistic, Dr. King has found some hope in the whites who *have* joined his mission.

Further, Dr. King finds optimism when reflecting on the history of blacks in America. They have survived slavery and persisted towards freedom despite centuries of atrocities, and have in fact provided the center of American history.

Before closing, Dr. King addresses the clergymen's commendation of the Birmingham police, whom they claim were admirably nonviolent when confronting the protests. Dr. King implies that the clergymen are ignorant of the abuses the clergymen used, but also insists that their "discipline," their restraint from violence in public, does not make their actions just. Instead, they use that restraint to perpetuate injustice, which makes them reprehensible.

Dr. King is upset that the clergymen did not see fit to also commend the brave black people who have fought injustice nonviolently. Believing that history will ultimately show this latter group to be the real heroes of the age, he hopes the clergymen will eventually realize what is actually happening.

Finally, he apologizes for the length and potential overstatement of his letter, but hopes they will understand the forces that have led him to such certainty. He signs the letter, "Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood".