

Letter from birmingham jail by martin luther king, jr. and its political undertone...

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



The Whats and Whys of the Letter

Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is a persuasive letter that has some political undertones. King uses various techniques to get his point across. He was a knowledgeable, Christian man who supported non-violence and wanted nothing more than for justice to be served. The letter that he wrote to his fellow clergymen when arrested for parading without a permit during a horribly unjust time in Birmingham, Alabama exemplifies his beliefs and demonstrates how great he was with his words. He was not requesting change; he was demanding it, and doing so because he believed that there was no other option.

King begins by stating his authority. He lets it be known that he did not generally take time out of his busy schedule to comment on the criticisms of those who did not believe in the same principles that he did. He says, "If I sought to answer all of the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would be engaged in little else in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work," (King 426). He explains his position in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which happened to be the president. He wanted the men he is writing toward to understand that he is no lesser than them. He held impressive roles in society, and on the day in Birmingham in which he was arrested, he was merely doing his duty. He says, "So I am here, along with several members of my staff, because we were invited here. I am here because I have basic organizational ties here. Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here," (King 426). King knows that the men who arrested him do not understand the problem.

Therefore, he begins the letter by explaining briefly why he is even in Birmingham. He made sure that they understood that he was not an outsider only coming into the city to cause trouble. He was an advocate for justice, and “(i)njustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” (King 427). If one place is being threatened with an injustice, then other places can use that as a reasonable excuse as to why they are allowing injustices. However, the same can be said about changing this. If King could make progress toward fairness in Birmingham, then progress could be made elsewhere. The demonstrations taking place were the last resort, and he establishes respect early in the letter so that he can continue and explain why.

King advises the audience of the letter by explaining the four basic steps of a nonviolent campaign. This shows that he does indeed know what he is doing, and why he is prepared to do it. The steps are as follows: “(1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, (2) negotiation, (3) self-purification, and (4) direct action,” (King 427). He shares his own collection of facts, describing the brutality taking place in the city. He goes on to explain that peaceful negotiation did happen, but that the terms that were agreed upon were never put into place. He says, “ As the weeks and months unfolded we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise,” (King 428). So, King and his followers put themselves through intricate training. They had to be able to deal with whatever punishment or criticism that they were given, without retaliating in a negative way. This is the self-purification step. Finally, there was nothing left to do but direct action. He explains that this was the only way to get anything done, saying, “ Nonviolent direct

action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue," (King 428). He is stating that his and others actions were indeed justified, and that they did not go in without understanding what they were getting themselves into.

He then moves on, using historical references to show what has been done wrong in the past. He knows that the men reading need examples to see how they are recreating parts of the past that the country had worked so hard to move past. He touches on morality by saying, " History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their unjust posture," (King 429). Therefore, the demonstrations needed to be given and the parades marched, because King believed that citizens did not comprehend that what they were doing was wrong. He had to force them to realize it. He also stressed the importance of not waiting. He says that he is absolutely tired of being told to wait and that "(t)his ' Wait' had almost always meant ' Never'," (King 429). King then uses the highly persuasive method of appealing to one's emotions. He explains how segregation is not possibly doing any good and he uses several examples, one being " when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television," (King 430). He is trying to get his reader to think about the consequences of segregation, and what it says about one's integrity if they support it.

Since he is actually in jail while writing this, he does feel the need to defend himself. He explains why breaking certain laws is acceptable. There is a substantial difference between a just and an unjust law. King says, " A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law," (King 430). He describes how breaking an unjust law to create a just response is well worth it. He also explains why the law that he broke was unjust, saying, " Now there is nothing wrong with an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade, but when the ordinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and peaceful protest, then it becomes unjust," (King 431). He understands that in order to break these laws and still be respectable, one must be willing to accept the consequences. King uses several examples of how this civil disobedience has been practiced in the past and has done what it was supposed to do. He is well aware that him being arrested has created tension, and he is welcoming toward it.

King writes about the use of time. He disproves the notion that time will cure anything. He says, " Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively," (King 433). He discusses how important it is to use time wisely, and was disappointed that so much time was wasted with hatred. He presses on, saying that in any situation, one who is oppressed will eventually long for freedom. Once that longing becomes a fight, there are only two ways to do it: peacefully or not peacefully. King urges the clergymen to stop resisting these non-violent acts. He says, " If his repressed

emotions do not come out in these non-violent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence," (King 434). The protestors are offering the kind way to go about establishing change, and King thinks that it is necessary to support the non-violent way, and does not appreciate being considered an extremist for this.

He then discusses God to a great extent. He shares his journeys throughout the South, and how he has seen how different people worship, but are still allowing cruel treatment in their own communities. King explains the importance of reclaiming faith in God and to stop straying from doing the right thing. He also addresses the police brutality occurring in Birmingham. He states the situation upfront, knowing that the clergymen have been praising the police for fighting the protests. King says, " I don't believe you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its angry violent dogs literally biting six unarmed, nonviolent Negroes," (King 438-439). He finishes by showing his respect for the men he is writing toward. He knows that he has criticized their way of thinking and doing and wants them to realize that he only wants the misunderstanding to be cleared away. He justifies his own words by saying, " If I have said anything in this letter that is an overstatement of the truth and is indicative of an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me," (King 440). At the end of the letter, he writes of a hope a better America, which is the point in all of the protests.

Martin Luther King Jr. was not afraid of the repercussions that followed his actions. He fought for what he believed in, and used this letter to attempt to convince others that what he believed in was worth any punishment he

received. He addressed the clergymen in an honorable way and used his knowledge and persuasive skills to get his point across.