

B. Contemporary Social Issues

READING 47

Letter from Birmingham Jail

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was born in 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. He attended Morehouse College and during his senior year decided to follow in his father's footsteps and become a Baptist minister. Upon graduating in 1948, he entered Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. There he was deeply influenced by Mohandas Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence and became convinced that black Americans should use this strategy to attain their civil rights. King received his bachelor of divinity degree in 1951. He then began doctoral studies in theology at Boston University, completing his degree in 1955. While still working on his doctorate, King became pastor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. In 1954 he led a boycott of the city transit company to protest segregated seating on buses. Within a year the buses were desegregated. Encouraged by this success, King began to work for civil rights on a national basis by forming the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In 1960 he moved to Atlanta, where he directed the Conference and served as copastor (with his father) at Ebenezer Baptist Church. In 1963 he and many others were arrested and jailed for participating in a demonstration in Birmingham. Later that year King helped organize a massive demonstration in Washington, D.C., for civil rights legislation. King addressed the crowd, proclaiming "I have a dream"—a dream of interracial equality and harmony. The following year King received the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1968, while in Memphis to support a strike by sanitation workers, he was killed by a sniper's bullet.

King's works include *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958), *Why We Can't Wait* (1964), and *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967).

Our reading is from King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (published in *Why We Can't Wait*), an essay King wrote in 1963 when in jail for protesting segregation at lunch counters and discrimination in hiring practices. King's essay is a response to eight members of the clergy who had published a statement criticizing his civil rights activities as "unwise and untimely." King explains that blacks in America have waited for more than three centuries to gain their basic human rights—and that they should wait no longer. In answer to the objection that his nonviolent activities sometimes violate laws, King distinguishes between just and unjust laws. Just laws should be obeyed, but unjust laws are not binding because they contradict moral laws and degrade human beings. There are some situations in which even just laws are not binding, however. For example, a law requiring a permit for a parade is just, but it need not be obeyed when it is used for the unjust purpose of denying citizens the right of peaceful assembly and protest. King explains that a person who breaks a just law as a form of protest must do so openly and with a willingness to accept the penalty. Responding to the charge that he is an extremist, King points out that nonviolent protest is certainly less extreme than violence. He admits, however, that in a certain way he is an extremist—an extremist for love and justice.

Letter from Birmingham Jail Martin Luther King, Jr.

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April 16, 1963

MY DEAR FELLOW CLERGYMEN:

[INTRODUCTION]

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms. . . .

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative. . . .

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."¹

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; 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, and see tears welling up in her eyes when

¹This quotation is attributed to the British politician William Ewart Gladstone (1809–1898). [D. C. ABEL]