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Letter from Birmingham Jail by Martin Luther King Jr.



COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

- King faced criticism for a group of clergymen for being in Birmingham. Explain the context, and his response to it (what is his rationale for being there)?
The clergymen called King a "troublemaker" and "unethical," suggesting they were making the racial tensions in Birmingham worse. King responds by explaining that, as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he was invited by an African American pastor to take part in a "non-violent direct action program" and has now "lived up to his promise." He points out that, more importantly, he is in Birmingham "because injustice is here."
- How does he answer the charge of being an "outsider"?
King points out that "anyone who lives in the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere unless to himself." He also indicates that the citizens of his country's central effort to "live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea."
- Explain King's belief about the interrelationship of communities all across the United States. What does it mean to be interconnected? Do you agree with this concept?
King says that, as human beings, we are "interconnected" so that "whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." He is suggesting that, as humans, we are all entitled to basic rights inherent to all. So that if one person is denied these fundamental rights, it is an attack on the ideal itself, so that we are all in danger of losing those rights taken away. Responses will vary in terms of agreement with this concept.
- What are the four basic steps of nonviolent direct action that King discusses? Why does he include these in his argument?
According to King, the four basic steps are "collection of the facts to determine whether injustice exists; negotiation, self-purification, and direct action." King includes these in his argument to show the clergymen that he and his associates have tried all these steps and that they have all failed. This helps to support his idea stated in the previous paragraph that African Americans have "no alternative" than to use a new approach to further their cause. These four steps are necessary and have no choice but to move directly action.
- How does King reply to the notion that African Americans should "wait" for social justice?
He replies by using the word "wait" almost always means "never" to African Americans. He further points out that "justice too long delayed is justice denied," that is, justice that will never be achieved if they must wait any longer. He points out that the black community has already waited for over 350 years for their "constitutional and God-given rights." In fact, this quote begins a powerful, emotional paragraph that outlines a history of abuses they have endured, illustrating why they cannot live through another day of such injustice.
- How does King differentiate between just and unjust laws? How does he defend his actions through this distinction? What examples does he provide to support his claim?
King states that a just law "uplifts with the moral law" while an unjust law is "out of harmony" with morality. He continues that any law that "degrades human personality is unjust." Thus, he says that segregation laws are unjust because they degrade the segregated and "distort the soul and damage the personality." He defends his actions of "standing without a permit" by pointing out that this particular permit law is being used by "Christian segregationists" and to deny citizens the First Amendment rights of peaceful assembly and protest, and is therefore unjust.
- What is King's response to being called an "extremist"? How does he change the connotation of the word so that it works in his favor?
King says that, while he was first "disappointed" with such a label, he began to feel a "measure of satisfaction" from it. He flips the usual negative connotation of the word "extremist" into something positive. He alludes to several "extremists" in history: from Jesus Christ, an "extremist for love," to Thomas Jefferson, an "extremist for equality."
- What criticisms does King raise against white moderates? What criticisms does he have for the church?
King expresses great disappointment with white moderates who, despite their good intentions, fail to truly understand discrimination and therefore do little to help the cause. "More devoted to order" than to justice, white moderates agree with King's goals, however, they fail to take action. He also has harsh criticism for the "liberal" Christian church, warning that it may become an "unholy social club." It fails to "recreate the spiritual spirit" of the church, which is why he is so angry. He says that the church has been "more cautious than courageous" and have remained silent behind the unshattering security of stained glass windows. "Both groups are silent and stagnant."
- Which two central U.S. documents does King refer to on the last page? Why does he include these historical references—what impact do they have on his argument?
King refers to the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, the founding documents of democracy upon which our country was built. These documents help to reiterate the fact that our country was founded upon ideal of justice and equality for all.

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