

Study Guide, Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

QUESTIONS

1. Why was King in Birmingham? (Note King gives several reasons.)
2. King says that “in any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps” (226). Describe them, and describe the examples King gives for the first three.
3. How does King respond to those who say that African Americans should “wait,” rather than engage in a campaign of nonviolent direct action?
4. How does King justify the breaking of laws? What are his arguments? What examples does he give to support his case?
5. What is King’s criticism of white moderates?
6. Why does King claim that he is not an extremist? How does he justify his position? What does he believe will be the consequences of not following the path of nonviolent direct action?
7. At the same time he repudiates the “extremist” title, King welcomes it. Why? What kind of extremist would King like to be?
8. Why is King disappointed with the white church? What does King believe the church should be for, and why does he think the contemporary church is in danger of becoming irrelevant?
9. Why does King think the Civil Rights movement will eventually be victorious?
10. How does King end his “letter”? Describe his last three paragraphs.

CONTEXT

- What are the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference?
- To what texts, thinkers, and historical figures does King allude?
- What was happening in Africa around the time of the Civil Rights movement?
- What is the significance of the year 1954?
- Define: Interposition and nullification

QUOTATIONS (continued on reverse side)

“Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word “tension.” I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.”

“How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? 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. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an ‘I it’ relationship for an ‘I thou’ relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things.”

“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”

“We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.”

“I have just received a letter from a white brother in Texas. He writes: ‘All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth.’ Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively . . . Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.”

“Over the past few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. I have tried to make clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends.”