

[Handout for Session 1]

**An Outline of Dr. King's "Letter from a
Birmingham Jail"**

1. Local clergy are questioning the wisdom of direct-action nonviolence as an appropriate and effective method at this time and place. This letter is a response to their concerns.
2. King is accused of being an outsider in the community. In fact, King was invited to Birmingham and his mission is national in scope. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."
3. To explain the wisdom of this approach: When negotiations fail, there must be other nonviolent alternatives. King's methods are designed to restore and bring about successful negotiations:
 - a. Collect the facts to determine the evidence of injustice
 - b. Negotiation
 - c. Self-purification
 - d. Direct action
4. Current circumstances demand an unusual course of action. One cannot wait any longer for the injustice to pass on its own.

"Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

"Justice too long delayed is justice denied."

5. When a law is unjust, it must not be unchallenged. How do we know if a law is just or unjust?

a. Compare the law to God's laws as outlined in scripture. When they are congruent, the human law is just. When they are incompatible, the human law is unjust.

b. Consider if the law applies to everyone equally. If so, the law is just. If a segment of society benefits or is selectively oppressed, the law is unjust.

c. Just laws are democratically designed and must allow input from all citizens. This is not the case for laws supporting segregation.

d. How a law is enforced demonstrates the justice of a system. Laws that are misapplied, such as the law that landed me in jail, are not fulfilling their purpose and an injustice exists.

"I would agree with St. Augustine that 'An unjust law is no law at all.'"

"Any law that degrades human personality is unjust."

"I was arrested Friday on a charge of parading without a permit."

"Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability."

6. Civil disobedience is not a new concept. It is rooted in scripture, early democracy, and the history of America. The current campaign is a continuation of this legacy.

7. King is deeply disappointed with the fact that white clergy are not sharing his point of view. Their mediocrity on the issue of segregation provides cover for ardent segregationists and those who resort to violence. "Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever."

8. King is also deeply disappointed with the organized church which is failing to fulfill its God-given mission to bring about a just society. The church is in danger of losing its relevance as a prophetic change agent. "It is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends...It is just as wrong, or even more, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends."

9. Finally, King appeals to his clergy colleagues to reconsider their opposition and join him in this campaign.

Source: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail,"

https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf.