

My Interpretation of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Letter from a Birmingham Jail

Submitted By

Mr. TaDarius Jai Smith, 11th Grade
St. John Paul II Catholic High School
Tallahassee, Florida

First, I would like to thank my uncle, C. Edward Mack, Esquire, for having a long discussion with me about the Civil Rights Movement, encouraging me to research further, to read the letter at a minimum of three (3) times; and then to put myself in today's time and current issues, and look at the letter from the position of being an African American Male, and observing black people being disproportionately discriminated against, arrested, and even murdered, without a JUST cause and without the oppressors being held accountable. Thank you again, Uncle Charles!

My interpretation of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, Letter from a Birmingham Jail primarily was a reaction to the White Clergy who believed Dr. King was a proponent of violence. At the time this letter was written, he found himself in jail because he was accused of being a radical outsider. Currently is demonstrating because of the killing of George Floyd and other innocent black people unjustly by the police, "unwise and untimely?" That is what the White Preachers of Birmingham were saying to Dr. King about his protest. Dr. King had been invited to Birmingham by the black people who lived there because they were being victimized by unjust laws and the unjust way good laws were being distorted in an effort to use against them. Dr. King and the black citizens who called upon him to come to Birmingham engaged in nonviolent direct action by demonstrating just like all of the people who have been marching today because Black Lives Matter (BLM). They demonstrated because injustice was there, just as it is here now.

Dr. King felt that he could not sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham, just as we cannot sit idly by in Tallahassee and not be concerned about what happens in all cities in the United States of America, because "**Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere!**" Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. President Trump and his followers and supporters disapprove of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations taking place now, just like the white Birmingham citizens. Their lack of concern for the killing of innocent black people have left the demonstrators with no other peaceful alternative. In any nonviolent campaign, I have learned there are **four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self purification; and direct action.** The BLM protestors have gone through all these steps just as Dr. King and his supporters had in Birmingham. The revolting record of police brutality is widely known and black people have experienced horribly unjust treatment by the police and in the courts. These are just the hard and cruel facts. This was the type of injustice Dr. King was addressing in his letter. The politicians,

police, and the government have refused to engage in good faith negotiation about the concerns of the BLM Coalition, just as in Birmingham.

Dr. King mentioned several reasons the demonstrations were delayed until the circumstances dictated they had to take action despite what was going on in Birmingham, just like the current BLM demonstrators felt compelled to demonstrate even though the great COVID-19 pandemic threatened their very lives!

Just like in Birmingham in 1963, the nonviolent direct action of BLM protests seek to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that the police, politicians and government 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. The BLM coalition opposes violence and their type of constructive, nonviolent tension is necessary for growth; although many law enforcement officers believe they are of a violent nature. It is also to help men rise from the depths of prejudice and racism to the grand heights of understanding and brotherhood, so valid negotiations can be made to resolve this issue. The current administration is committed to maintenance of the status quo. Black people have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Unfortunately, it is a historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Justice, like freedom, is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. "**Justice too long delayed is justice denied.**" We have waited for more than 400 years to be treated justly and equally. " But when you have seen vicious policemen lynch your mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers at a whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters on videos, all righteous, good and moral people can endure it no longer and must do something just as they did in Birmingham. Black parents have to have the talk with their children, especially the boys, in hopes of getting them past a police encounter when they are innocently apprehended or confronted. White parents and their children don't worry about being contacted by the police who they perceive as there to protect and serve them.

The laws which allow a police officer to detain a person for probable cause that they have committed a crime and to use deadly force to defend their lives and the lives of others; are laws that are just on their face, however, unjust in their application against black people. These laws become unjust when it is used to kill black citizens **without justification or excuse**, and when the murdering police officers and their partners, who did not intervene, go unpunished and without prosecution. Just as Dr. King said, "we should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal." That is the argument that is being used against BLM, which is just as ludicrous.

Though Dr. King was disappointed with the white moderates, today the white moderates have help bring the BLM movement to the attention of the nation and the world. As a matter of fact, there are demonstrations all over the world for BLM. These demonstrations have brought to the surface the truth of these unjustified killings. They bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with, because it can never be healed as long as it is covered up, but must be opened with all its ugliness because injustice must be exposed. The white preachers condemned Dr. King's demonstrations because they precipitate violence; however, the violence generated was violence used against Dr. King and his followers! Dr. King was concerned about the

appalling silence of the good people not willing to take a stand against injustice, and his other major disappointment was with the white church and its leadership. Currently Trump and the Evangelical White Church are not only a disappointment for appalling silence, but are actively speaking out against BLM and redirecting the attention from innocent blacks being murdered by the police to a blind support for police regardless of what they do or what the circumstances are, under a banner of law and order.

The BLM Coalition, like Dr. King, stand between a force of contentment, made up in part of blacks who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have adjusted to (these killings); and in part of a few middle-class blacks who, because of a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by (the status quo), have become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence. So just like Dr. King, BLM seeks to prevent violence and address the problem.

My hope is that one day the nation, like Dr. King said of the South, will recognize its real heroes. When Colin Cappernick kneeled before his San Francisco 49er football games to call attention to this issue, he was branded as unpatriotic and fired. He had the noble sense of purpose that enabled him to face jeering and hostile mobs, and with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will also be heroes who rose up with a sense of dignity and protested, willingly going to jail for conscience' sake. They were standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Until recently, I only looked at January 1st (New Years Day) as bringing in a new year with hope and high expectations. In further research, I learned it is also a day to keep in mind the history that lead up to this day. As we approach the 158th Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation; I am sadden to report, we have made minuscule progress in Equality and Justice for ALL!