

Letter from Birmingham Jail

Lesson Summary

Students read and discuss Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* with facilitation from teachers. Students are encouraged to reach agreement on the meaning of the text and its wider application to principles of civil disobedience, nonviolence, and current events.

Materials

- Excerpts from letter
- Discussion questions

Procedures

1. Begin by telling the class about the context for King's writing of his letter. Ask them what they know about segregation and Jim Crow laws. Tell them about the circumstances in Birmingham that caused him to be involved in protests and to be arrested.
2. Tell the students that you will be reading excerpts from this famous text, stopping to discuss each part. Tell them that they may encounter unfamiliar words or references in the text, and that they should underline those to ask you about after the reading. Tell them that there are no right or wrong answers, but to share their answers with each other so they can develop a shared meaning of the text.
3. Ask for volunteers to read each excerpt and then open up a discussion with questions. As it seems appropriate, take key words from student responses and write them on the board. Feel free to move through questions as interest wanes, but don't feel like you need to get through all of the excerpts or all of the discussion questions.
4. With at least ten minutes left in class, tell the students they should take a minute to summarize their reaction to the text in a sentence. They will have to share this sentence with the group before they leave class. Begin with your examples, and allow students to respond.

1. Essential question
 2. Activating activity
 3. Guided practice
 4. Unguided practice
 5. Assessment
 6. Reflection and Summary
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1. Essential Question: What was Martin Luther King Jr.'s purpose for writing the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and what is his point of view?
 2. Time: 50 minute lesson, one class period
 3. Key Terms: Southern Christian Leadership Conference, affiliated, cognizant, agitator, segregation
 4. Ask students to brainstorm a list of events taking place during the early 1960s. After 3-5 minutes, students will share their ideas with a neighbor/partner and write down additional ideas on their list. Then, call on volunteers to share some of their ideas with the whole group. Next, ask students to describe some of the struggles taking place in the United States based on the discrimination of African Americans.
 5. Introduce Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail." This letter was written after he was arrested during a protest in Alabama. Read the first section together aloud and underline any key/important phrases. Write comments or questions in the margin. Afterwards, volunteers share the question, "What are King's reasons for being in Birmingham?" Students will respond and share their thoughts, ideas, and questions. Write their ideas/responses on the whiteboard. Then, ask the next question, "How does King answer to the charge of being an outsider?" Students will respond – they can write their ideas again in the margin.
 6. Next, divide students into small groups of 3-4 students. Each group will take a section of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter," read it and answer the questions below the passage. WTTM Volunteers will monitor the groups' progress and check in with them to see if there are questions during the next 8-10 minutes. Each group should write down a quote from their section of King's "Letter" that best supports the correct answer to their questions at the end of their passage.
 7. After they discuss the passage and answers in their individual groups, each group will choose a person to present their answers to the class.
 8. Finally, students will answer the last two questions in the lower half of the Brainstorm/Reflection/Assessment organizer. Please collect these forms before you leave.

Whitworth Teaches the Movement 2016

Brainstorm/Reflection/Assessment Squares

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*

<p>List or describe some events taking place during the early 1960s.</p>	<p>What is the most important part of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s letter? What is his purpose and point of view in the "Letter from Birmingham City Jail?"</p>
<p>Why was the Civil Rights Movement significant?</p>	<p>How does the Civil Rights Movement compare to struggles people face today?</p>

Excerpt 1:

I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Frequently we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promise. So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here.

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. What are King's reasons for being in Birmingham?**
- 2. How does King answer the charge of being an outsider?**
- 3. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" is one of King's most famous quotes. What does this mean for people who have ignored the issues in Birmingham? What does this mean today for each of us living in the United States?**

Excerpt 2:

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."

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 airtight 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 she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. The above paragraph in bold is another of King's most well-known statements. Choose an example from United States history that represents the "painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor." Choose an example that illustrates his point that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."**
- 2. King's letter is a response to white moderates asking him to give the City of Birmingham time to act rather than engaging in nonviolent resistance. What case does he make against waiting? Is it persuasive?**

Excerpt 3:

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."

Now, what is the difference between the two? 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. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound; it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Is not segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? Thus it is that I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong.

Let us consider a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is difference made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. King describes two types of law, just and unjust, how does he define each?**
- 2. Can you give other examples in the present of unjust laws you feel a moral obligation to disobey?**
- 3. Would you be willing to accept the consequences?**
- 4. What are the effects of segregation?**

Excerpt 4:

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because

Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.

We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country's antireligious laws.

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. 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 Council 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; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. King lists a number of historical examples of civil disobedience. For each example there were hundreds, thousands, even millions who chose to accept an unjust law. Why do citizens choose to be silent about a law they may find unjust?**
- 2. What are the social and legal consequences for civil disobedience?**

Excerpt 5:

But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . ." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be.

Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We

must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime--the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. Why does King welcome the label extremist?**
- 2. Based on this letter, what is King's view of the proper response of a wise person to a corrupt world?**