

Primary Source Reading 16-1 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

### Letter From Birmingham Jail

#### □ About the Selection

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was arrested and jailed many times during his crusade to end segregation and advance the cause of racial equality. In 1963 he was imprisoned for leading a demonstration in Birmingham, Alabama. While in prison there, he wrote the following letter to members of the clergy who had criticized him for using direct-confrontation tactics and for "moving too quickly" to change race relations in the South.

#### Reader's Dictionary



- repudiated:** renounced
- emulate:** copy
- integral:** essential
- scintillating:** bright, sparkling

#### GUIDED READING

As you read, determine what—according to King—are the two opposing forces in the African American community. Then answer the questions that follow.

CHAPTER 16

April 1, 1963

My Dear Fellow Clergymen:

... I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. ...

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice. And that when [law and order] fail in this purpose, they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase. [It marks] the transition from an obnoxious, [hateful] negative peace, in which all [people] will respect the dignity and worth of human personality.

Actually, 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.

[Injustice is] 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. ... You speak of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist. I began thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community.

One is a force ... made up, in part, of Negroes 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 segregation. And, in part, of a few middle-class Negroes who—because of a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by segregation—have become insensitive to the problems of the masses.

(continued)

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The other force is one of bitterness and hatred. And it comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up across the nation—the largest and best-known being Elijah Muhammad’s Muslim movement. Nourished by the Negro’s frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination, this movement is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is [hopelessly a] devil.

I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need to emulate neither the “do-nothingism” of the complacent nor the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro church, the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle.

If this philosophy had not emerged, by now many streets of the South would, I am convinced, be flowing with blood. And I am further convinced that if our white brothers dismiss [us] as “rabble-rousers” and “outside agitators” . . . and if they refuse to support our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes will, out of frustration and despair, seek solace and security in black nationalist [ideas]—a development that would inevitably lead to a frightening racial nightmare. . . .

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader, but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother.

Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities. And in some not-too-distant tomorrow, the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood  
Martin Luther King, Jr.

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**READER RESPONSE**

**Directions:** Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What does King hope to receive from white moderates?
2. According to King, why do African Americans join the Muslim movement?
3. To what should injustice be exposed in order to heal it?
4. What, according to King, caused some middle-class African Americans to become complacent about segregation?
5. **Critical Thinking** What do you think King accomplished by writing this letter?

CHAPTER 16

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