

Examining Primary Sources:

Letter from Birmingham Jail

Martin Luther King, Jr.

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My Dear Fellow Clergymen,

While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities “unwise and untimely.” ...

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 the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.

I guess 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, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your 20 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 the tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, ...then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait....

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. ... The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: There are just and there are unjust laws. I would agree with Saint Augustine that “An unjust law is no law at all.” ...

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....

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.

1. How does Dr. King react to accusations that his actions were “unwise and untimely”?

2. What injustices does Dr. King describe?

3. According to Dr. King, what does segregation do to the segregator and to the segregated?

4. Do you find Dr. King’s argument convincing? Why or why not?

