

Letter from Birmingham Jail – Critical Thinking Questions

Directions: Martin Luther King’s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* is the document in which he most clearly articulates his nonviolent direct action strategy.

Note – To receive full credit, the answers to these questions should contain multiple sentences that reflect thoughtful answers.

Paragraphs 1 – 3

What are King’s reasons for being in Birmingham? How does King answer to the charge of being an outsider?

Paragraph 4

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

What does this mean for individuals who have ignored the issues of Birmingham?
What does this mean today for each of us living in United States?

Paragraphs 5 – 6

What are the four basic steps of nonviolent direct action? For each of the steps state the example in Birmingham. Can you think of another historical (local, national, global) example of nonviolent protest which followed these steps?

Paragraphs 7 – 9

Why did King and others decide to delay their actions?

Paragraphs 10 – 11

What does King mean by “constructive nonviolent tension” and how does he define its goal?

Paragraphs 12 – 13

“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.”

These paragraphs contain another of King’s most well-known statements. Choose an example from United States history which represents the “painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor.” Choose an example which illustrates his point that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

Paragraphs 14 – 15

List the injustices and choose three to compare to the Bill of Rights.

Paragraphs 16 – 18

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

Paragraphs 18 – 19

Do you need to obey a law that you did not participate in creating? Most of you are under 18, do you need to live by a law you did not participate in making? Residents in a country, should they obey laws they did not participate in creating?

Paragraph 20

Breaking an unjust law lovingly? Could you get to this state? Why does he think this would be an expression of respect for the law? What if his actions do not arouse the conscience of the community? Was it worth it?

Paragraphs 21 – 23

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

Paragraphs 24 – 27

In the above segment King describes examples of “negative peace”. What does he mean by this?

Paragraphs 28 – 30

What does King warn will happen if the Negro Community is not allowed to demonstrate through nonviolent actions? Is King threatening them?

Paragraph 31

Why does King welcome the label extremist? What is your favorite quote? Why? How can you connect this to your life or issues in your community today?

