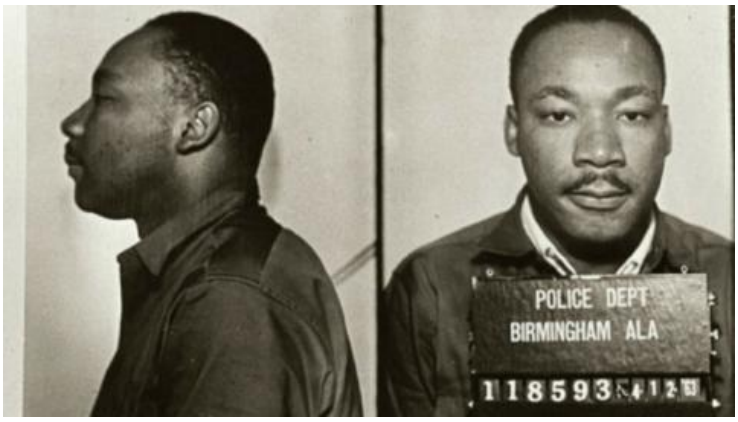
Letter From Birmingham Jail - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



"Mugshot" of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., taken after his April 12, 1963 arrest in Birmingham, Alabama. Public domain.

> *I am in Birmingham because Injustice is here. ...*
> *I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned*
> *about what happens in Birmingham.*
> *Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.*
>
> Excerpt from Dr. King's April 16, 1963 Letter
> Known as "Letter From Birmingham Jail"

In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was in Birmingham, Alabama. He was there to participate in a non-violent demonstration against segregation in America.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was not-yet law. Instead, "Jim Crow" was still separating African-Americans from full participation in American life.

"Separate but equal," even though outlawed by the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v Board of Education*, was still plaguing American schools.

Dr. King was fed-up by all the promises of change. Promises of change were not turning into actions of change. Even if he could not pass new laws, since he was not a member of Congress, Dr. King could peacefully demonstrate against bad laws.

Because Birmingham was such a segregated town, Dr. King thought it would be a very good place to hold a demonstration. However, on the 10th of April, 1963—two days before a peaceful march would take place in the city—a Birmingham judge issued a circuit-court injunction against King. The order prohibited any protests.

Ignoring that court order, Dr. King led a non-violent demonstration to protest segregation in Birmingham (specifically) and discriminatory laws against African-Americans (generally).

On April 12, 1963—Good Friday that year—Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor arrested Dr. King and Rev. Ralph Abernathy for violating the injunction.

Sometimes, when Dr. King demonstrated against bad laws, he was arrested for disturbing the peace (and other related charges). This time, however, he was arrested—and placed in solitary confinement—because he did not have permission to conduct his protest.

Knowing he could be arrested, for violating a court order, Dr. King was not surprised when he was locked-up in a Birmingham jail cell.

He may have been surprised, however, when eight other clergymen—one Jewish rabbi and seven white pastors—wrote a letter to a local Birmingham newspaper urging black people to be patient (among other things).

In "A Call for Unity," published in *The Birmingham News*, these men also accused Dr. King of being an "outsider" who was inciting people (in spite of his non-violent approach to change and the invitation he'd received, to come to Alabama, in his role as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference).

Dr. King believed that black people had been patient-enough. Now was a time for change.

Locked-up in his small cell, in the Birmingham City Jail, King read the clergymen's "Open Letter." A friend had smuggled-in a copy of *The Birmingham News* for King to see. He began to make notes in the newspaper margins. He scribbled thoughts on other available scraps of paper. Those notes eventually became a long response.

After all, while he was incarcerated, the civil-rights leader had lots of time to think and write.

In his book, *Why We Can't Wait*, Dr. King recalls how he constructed his response to the eight clergymen:

> *Begun on the margins of the newspaper in which the statement appeared while I was in jail, the letter was continued on scraps of writing paper supplied by a friendly black trusty, and concluded on a pad my attorneys were eventually permitted to leave me.* (See *Why We Can't Wait*, by Dr. King, at page 64.)

Hereafter are some of the points Dr. King made in the longest letter he ever wrote. He starts with rejecting the clergymen's admonition to "wait" for laws making segregation illegal:

> *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 stiff*[ly] *creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.*

Not only is it unfair to keep waiting for laws to change, Dr. King asks the eight clergymen if *they* know what it is like to be fearful just because their skin is a different color. Have *they* ever had to tell little children they can't participate in televised fun events because the law won't let them? Have *they* ever had to sleep in their car all night because motels are closed to them?

> *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-country 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 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 go 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.*

Dr. King explains that he, and other civil-rights leaders, *must* take "direct action" (such as peaceful demonstrations), in order to force change-resistant people to negotiate:

> *The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.*

King also challenges the churches, and the clergy, to help rather than hinder the cause of justice and civil rights:

> *So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent — and often even vocal — sanction of things as they are.*

Then Dr. King poses a pointed question: Will you be an extremist of love or an extremist of hate?

> *Was not Jesus an extremist in love? – "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you." ... Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist? – "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist? – "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." So the question is not whether we will be extremist, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate, or will we be extremists for love?*

Although Dr. King's letter is dated April 16, 1963—four days after the clergymen's letter was published in the local newspaper—it actually took longer for him to put it together.

And ... when Dr. King's response was sent as a press release, during the first two weeks of May ... what became known as "Letter From Birmingham Jail" didn't go to the men who'd written "A Call for Unity." It never really was intended for those eight people.

The letter was intended for a much-wider audience. It was intended to make people throughout the country think about what was fair and right. It was intended to force government leaders—including in Washington—to take action against discriminatory laws.

The *New York Times* initially refused to publish Dr. King's letter, although other publications did (including *The Christian Century* and the *Atlantic Monthly*).

The letter produced results. President Kennedy announced that he would introduce sweeping civil-rights litigation to the Congress. Although his assassination prevented Kennedy's further involvement, President Johnson continued the initiative and signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

Before that landmark event occurred, however, several additional attacks, in 1963, caused more harm to African-Americans—particularly to children:

- During a Children's Crusade in Birmingham, between the 2nd and 7th of May, police in the Alabama city turned fire hoses and set dogs against young people who were marching for their civil rights. More than 1,000 demonstrators—mostly high-school students—were arrested and jailed.

- After a settlement with the city was reached on May 8th—to allow hiring of African-Americans and to desegregate schools, stores and restaurants—charges against the protestors were dropped.

- The day after that settlement was reached, segregationists bombed the Gaston Motel (where Dr. King was

staying).

- In the late summer of that same year, four African-American girls who were attending Sunday School at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church died when a dynamite blast killed them on September 15.

“Letter From Birmingham Jail” still resonates throughout the world. It continues as a cry for justice and fairness for all people.

Credits:

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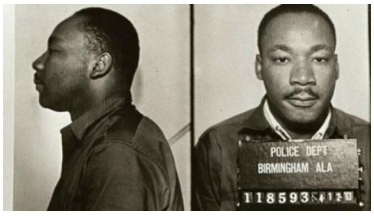

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Birmingham Jail
Mug Shot of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., after his arrest in Birmingham, Alabama on April 12, 1963. Public Domain.
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Birmingham Jail Cell - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
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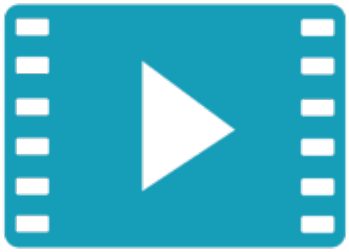

JFK - June 11, 1963 Speech on Civil Rights - Part 1

June 11, 1963 speech on civil rights. Clip online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.
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