

**“Letter From a Birmingham Jail”**

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was an important leader in the US Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. A Baptist minister most of his life, he was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1929, and fatally shot on his hotel balcony in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968. This letter was written by King in the spring of 1963, while serving prison time in Birmingham, Alabama for his protest of the treatment of Black people in the city. This took place only a few months before the historic ‘March on Washington’ and his iconic “I Have a Dream...” speech.*

**Vocabulary...**

compelled (v)	reiterate (v)	admonish (v)
cognizant	deplore (v)	grapple (v)
engulfs (v)	moratorium (n)	conscience (n)
earnestly (adj)	monologue (n)	futility (n)
whim (n)	affluent (adj)	ominous (adj)
paradoxical (adj)	enacted (v)	provocation (n)
evading (v)	anarchy (n)	precipitate (v)
complacency (n)	emulate (v)	languished (v)

**Reading Questions...**

1. According to King, what is the purpose of direct action? What are some examples he gives?
2. How does King feel about his activism being labeled as “extreme”? Why?

**Discussion Questions...**

1. The famous line “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” comes from this letter. Why has this line become so well-known? Why was it taken up by the Civil Rights movement? Is it still relevant today?
2. Unlike King’s “I Have a Dream...” speech, this letter was intended to be read, not heard. How does this change King’s writing style? How does it change his tone? Which style is more effective for conveying King’s message?

**Activities and Assignments...**

1. Do King’s words still have relevance today? What might he think of the #BlackLivesMatter movement? Compare King’s project, as outlined in this letter, with the mission statement of #BlackLivesMatter. Are there similarities? differences?
2. The Civil Rights movement made getting arrested (for protesting or civil disobedience) a symbolic act, rather than a punishment. King describes his own arrest in this way. Is this still viewed the way today? Research current activists and provide examples to back up your answer.



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