

**“A Study of Understanding, Healing, and Hope”
A Look at the Writings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches

Session 7:

“Letter from Birmingham City Jail” (pages 289 - 302)

Daniel 3

Galatians 6:11-18

Matthew 5:43-48

Background on the Letter:

Dr. Martin Luther King wrote this “letter” on April 16, 1963, from the Birmingham, Alabama, city jail as an open response to an “open” letter written by eight white Christian clergy sent to Dr. King and published in the local Birmingham paper. The letter penned by the clergy encouraged Dr. King to allow local and federal court action to run its course in Birmingham, rather than his nonviolent resistance inciting further disturbance. Dr. King penned his response letter from jail after participating in nonviolent demonstrations in Birmingham, addressing their letter, the nonviolent movement, injustice in Birmingham, and Christian discipleship. This letter is probably the most reprinted writing of Dr. King’s numerous writings.

Questions to Reflect on as we Journey Through our Texts:

- (1) Dr. King’s letter was a response to direct criticism from clergy from the Birmingham community. How do you handle criticism? How does Dr. King handle it calmly and collectively? What can we learn from his approach?
- (2) The clergy labeled Dr. King’s actions as extremist actions. His response was that we are all called to be extremists, just what kind of extremists are we going to be. What kind of “extremist” do you want to be?
- (3) Dr. King did not hold back on calling out the church in Birmingham and across the South. Do you think the Christian Church today is more of a “tail light” or a “head light” for social justice? Do you think FBC Elon is a “tail light” or a “head light”? What do you think we need to be?

Diving Into the Letter...

Answering Criticism

Dr. King began this letter by stating the reason for pausing to answer this particular letter of criticism. To answer all his critics would take too much time. He first addressed the issue of being an “outsider coming in” to Birmingham. As president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, their organization has 85 affiliate organizations, one being the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. In sharing funds and staff, this affiliate asked for assistance in participating in a non-violent direct action program and invited Dr. King to be a part of this event. The organizational ties were deep in Birmingham.

Dr. King then shared that he was in Birmingham because injustice was there. Like the Old Testament prophets and like Paul, he was carrying the message where it needed to be taken. Furthermore, one does not sit idly by when injustice exists anywhere. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” (p. 290) Indirectly or directly. Dr. King stated that we are all connected across the United States (and even more so now, the world!).

In answering the criticism, Dr. King turned the tables and said while the demonstrations have been the focus, maybe the conditions needed to be the focus instead. What caused my presence to be here in the first place?

Leading to a Nonviolent Campaign

Four basic steps lead to a nonviolent campaign: (1) collection of facts to determine if injustices exists, (2) negotiation with leadership, (3) self-purification, and (4) direct action. (p.290) Dr. King shared that all four steps were followed before the nonviolent campaign took place.

Facts: Birmingham was probably the most segregated city in the U.S. Police, courts, and bombings of African American homes and churches all are evidence to this point.

Negotiations: African American leaders sought to talk with city leaders, but they refused to negotiate. In September, economic negotiating took place with promises made to remove racist signs from storefronts. If they were removed, demonstrations would not happen. Months passed with promises being unfulfilled.

Self-purification: Non-violent training workshops took place to prepare participants to avoid retaliation. Action was initially planned to affect a major economic period, but then delayed to avoid the election run-off.

Direct Action: Delayed until after the election, when Mr. Connor was defeated. This created a needed tension that can no longer be ignored. This is necessary for growth. Mr. Boutwell, while new, is still a segregationist and is dedicated to maintaining the status quo. "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." (p. 292) Dr. King was trying to share with the clergy (and to the world) that nonviolent action is never "well timed" in the eyes of the oppressor.

The African American community had been "waiting" for too long. Justice had been delayed for too long. Dr. King had been seeing it in the eyes and hearing it in the voices of his children. Impatience runs thin.

Following or Breaking the "Law"

Dr. King addressed the concern of the clergy about the willingness to break the law through nonviolent resistance. As he had in previous writings, Dr. King discusses the difference between "just" and "unjust" laws. He first uses St. Augustine who states that, "An unjust law is no law at all." (p. 293) He goes on to share that an unjust law is one that is out of line with the moral law of God. Using Aquinas, he further explains that an unjust law degrades human personality. Dr. King shares that segregation law is unjust because it distorts the soul – making one superior and one inferior. In the end, it is sinful.

Dr. King goes on to explain that segregation law is unjust because the law is not binding on the whole group, only on a part of the group. He goes one step further in stating that the law was enacted in Alabama where many methods were used to prevent or not allow African Americans to vote in the first place. (p. 294)

Dr. King stated that he was not advocating anarchy. He was not opposed to following the law. If one breaks the law, he must be ready to accept the penalty (the reason he was in jail while he was writing the letter, but also to arouse the conscience of the community!). Speaking to clergy, he said civil disobedience was not something new. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were prime examples to the laws of Nebuchadnezzar. Early Christians in the Roman Empire. Socrates as well. Those who assisted the Jews in Hitler's Germany.

Dr. King expressed his disappointment with the moderate white individuals, which the clergy fell into, that were more devoted to order than justice. His hope was that they would see that law and order's goal would be about establishing justice rather than serving as obstacles to social progress. The nonviolent resistance movement is only making visible a tension that has been present for centuries. This movement is not creating the tension, like the clergy had suggested in their letter.

The Time is Now

Dr. King shared that he received a letter that stated that maybe there was too much of a hurry for the Civil Rights movement. Eventually it would happen. Christianity took time too. Dr. King reminded the clergy (and us) that time is neutral. Time can be used constructively or destructively, and as he said, it seems that people have used it negatively more effectively. Human progress is not inevitable either. It comes through hard work too. "We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right." (p. 296)

Dr. King addressed the label of his activities being called extreme. He felt he currently fell in the middle of two forces in the African American community, between the complacent, adjusted group and the bitter, hatred violent group. He shared that if it were not for the nonviolent movement, much blood shed would exist in a racial nightmare. The nonviolent movement creates a positive avenue for this pent up discontent to be channeled. Therefore, at first being disappointed at being called an extremist, now I accept that label. Jesus was an extremist in love. Amos. Paul. Martin Luther. Paul Bunyan. Abraham Lincoln. Thomas Jefferson. "So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation for injustice – or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?" (p. 298)

Call to the White Church

Dr. King was addressing this letter to the eight white clergy who penned this initial letter in January, but realized this "open" letter was being read across the South. Dr. King shared that he thought that he would have support across the South from the white churches and the clergy as they began their Civil Rights work, beginning with the Montgomery bus protest and continuing through to the

present. He had been disappointed. Not just lack of support, but opposition in some cases. Speaking specifically to Birmingham, he had hoped for support from the clergy for their arrival and support for integration for the “moral right”, rather than the legal right. Instead, the church was supporting the status quo. The church was “standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.” (p. 299)

Dr. King shared his deep love for the church. He spoke of the time where the church was seen as “agitators” because they followed God, not man. He shared that the church is “so often the arch-supporter of the status quo.” (p. 300) However, Dr. King spoke of the inner spiritual church, the *ecclesia*, that he still believed that is still prevalent in the church today. These are the individuals that have spoken up, stepped out, and joined his movement (and other movements) to make a difference in the world.

Dr. King hoped the church would step up in Birmingham, but he was not worried about the outcome. Freedom will come, there, and across America.

Before he closed his letter, Dr. King addressed one more thing in the clergy’s letter. The clergy commended the police force in Birmingham for keeping order and preventing violence. Dr. King addressed what happened behind the scenes in the city jail that the clergy did not see. In addressing the cruelty in the jail cells, he talked about the means not fitting the ends. He shared that hopefully one day they would commend the peaceful, nonviolent protesters who ushered in justice within their city and across the nation.

He also hoped that they would be able to sit down and talk one day soon, not as a Civil Rights leader, but as a fellow clergyman.

Scriptural Foundations for the Text...

Daniel 3...

Dr. King addressed the issue of “just” and “unjust” laws in his letter to the clergy in Birmingham. He specifically referenced Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, from Daniel chapter 3 as examples from the Old Testament of individuals who practiced civil disobedience, following a higher moral law. These three Jewish men chose not to bow down to the golden idol of King Nebuchadnezzar even though it resulted in them being thrown into the fiery

furnace. Have you ever felt constrained by rules or a law that you felt was unjust? Were you willing to face the punishment for violating the rules? In both Dr. King and the Old Testament cases, the laws were “morally” unjust. Is your example?

Galatians 6:11-18...

Dr. King shares a list of names when talking about being an “extremist” – Jesus, Amos, Paul, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson. The passage he uses for Paul comes from the end of Galatians chapter 6, when Paul says, “From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.” Dr. King was proud of being called an extremist. Paul is reiterating those same feelings at the end of his letter to Galatia. What do you take “great pride in” in your life? What do you take “great pride in” in your faith walk? What do you look forward to in your faith walk? Or to put it another way – what do you hope to take pride in as you continue in your faith journey?

Matthew 5:43-48...

Dr. King’s nonviolent movement was rooted in love. He echoed this again in his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail”. In so many occasions, his response could have easily turned differently towards his enemies. Matthew 5:43-48 embodies the foundation for his nonviolent resistance movement. How can this be a foundation for your life today? How can this be a foundation for your fight for justice today? How can this be a foundation for our church’s fight for justice today?

Next Week – Wednesday, August 19 6:30 PM
Session 1: “God and The Pandemic” by N.T. Wright
Chapter 1: Where Do We Start?