

Excerpts from Martin Luther King Jr.'s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

Selected by Sarah Collinge

On April 10, 1963, Circuit Judge W. A. Jenkins issued a warning toward the civil rights campaign against parading, demonstrating, boycotting, trespassing and picketing. Leaders of the campaign disobeyed this order and were arrested and jailed on April 12.

While in jail, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote a letter to the people of Birmingham. His letter was in response to an article written in the paper that called his actions “unwise.” The letter is some 50 paragraphs long.

In Rob Lloyd Jones’s biography of Martin Luther King Jr., he refers to two lines of this lengthy document, which are shown in bold text below. Why did Jones choose these two lines? Read these excerpts from Martin’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” to find out.

Line 1

There are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, **one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.**

Now, what is the difference between the two?

Any law that uplifts the human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality.

Line 2

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained.