

Sawyer Robinson

December 7, 2020

The Legacy of Dr. King

On April 12, 1963, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed in Birmingham, Alabama after he ignored the states order, and led a march without a permit. While in jail, King wrote what is now considered his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Plenty can be taken out of this letter; however, the three most prominent themes are his understanding of law and justice, racism, and his nonviolent approach to end racial discrimination. Through his deep and personal understanding of these themes, King was profound and rational in his approach to the realization of racial justice and equality.

King understood that law and justice are not the same thing. When a law strays from justice it becomes an unjust law, which demands a response. After receiving criticism for his willingness to break laws, King decided to educate those who clearly lacked any understanding of them. He states that “One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.” Since this is the basis for his argument, it’s essential to know the difference between the two. A just law is a code that agrees with both the moral law and the law of God. An unjust law is a code that breaks the balance of the moral law. In the terms of St. Augustine, “An unjust law is no law at all.” However, to the oppressors every law is a just law because they’ve never felt the oppression of the unjust laws. Due to this fact, King’s mission was centered around shining light on these moral contradictions, which many people would rather just ignore. All of this together shows just how brilliant King

really was. Instead of firing back after receiving backlash, he had the courage to educate those completely blind to reality. This in turn, helped to further realize racial justice and equality.

King, among many others, had a very personal relationship with racism during this time. He understood that it was embedded deep within our culture, which would make it that much more difficult to uproot. However, that did not stop King from inspiring others to join the cause and work to put an end to racial discrimination once and for all. He summarizes racism best by describing some encounters that he and many others have experienced. In one heartbreaking paragraph, he talks about how no person should ever feel the need, “to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she cannot go to the public amusement park that has been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children.” Or “when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos, Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?” By describing these experiences, he articulates exactly what the root of racism is. When you receive hate for something you can’t control, it unconsciously develops into a resentment for those causing your frustration. And when hate battles against hate, there’s never a winner. In summary, King understood that racism was a difficult problem to solve. Since it stems from the mind, the only way to solve it is to change the popular opinion. However, King chooses to address this challenge by describing the hard truth that is racism.

King understood that civil disobedience and nonviolent protests were sometimes the only possible solutions to realize racial justice and equality. He noticed that throughout history civil disobedience, in fact, could display a higher moral character. Examples of this included “the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks before submitting to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire.” In King’s letter, he

articulates that in any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: “collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, negotiation, self-purification, and direct action.” By following these steps, it becomes evident which side is morally in the right. And when peaceful protesters are sprayed down with high pressured hoses and beaten excessively for marching in the street, people begin to wake up from their blind reality in which racism doesn’t exist.

In conclusion, King understood that law and justice are not always equivalent. Many laws are unjust and it's our moral responsibility to ignore and reform them. Specifically, what makes many of these laws unjust is the deep-rooted racism embedded within them. King experienced this ubiquitous and unseen racism and realized it would be a tough problem to overcome. This is because he knew racism stemmed from the mind and therefore he needed to change people's minds. He did this by taking the moral high ground through nonviolent protests, which he knew was the only way to realize racial justice and equality.