

from

Letter from Birmingham City Jail

by **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask, "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are just and there are unjust laws. I would agree with Saint Augustine that "An unjust law is no law at all."

Now what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. . . .

An unjust law is a code inflicted upon a minority which that minority had no part in enacting or creating because they did not have the unhampered right to vote. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up the segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout the state of Alabama all types of conniving methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters and there are some counties without a single Negro registered to vote despite the fact that the Negro constitutes a majority of the population. Can any law set up in such a state be considered democratically structured? ^A

These are just a few examples of unjust and just laws. There are some instances when a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I was arrested

Read with a Purpose

Read to discover why King believes that breaking the law is sometimes a just and moral act.

Build Background

King was in Birmingham to lead a boycott against discriminatory stores. The goals of the boycott were to desegregate store facilities and establish fair hiring practices. On April 12, 1963, King defied an injunction against marching and led about fifty protesters in a peaceful march toward City Hall. Four blocks into the march, he was arrested. In this letter, as he makes a plea for nonviolent resistance to unjust laws, King quotes the racist language of individuals who opposed the Civil Rights movement. As you read, ask yourself why King would quote racist words in this letter.

A Literary Focus Questions Used in Argument Are the questions in this paragraph rhetorical? For each, explain why or why not.

Vocabulary **segregation** (seh ruh GAY shuhn) *n.*: separation of one racial group from another or from the rest of society.

application (ap luh KAY shuhn) *n.*: act of using; putting to use.