

**ON 'LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL'  
WILLIE MACK  
LOS ANGELES**

**“Unless we fight evil and injustice, we cannot say we are working for good. The same applies to our struggle for kosen-rufu. Unless we defeat evil, we cannot realize kosen-rufu” (SGI President Ikeda, May 11 *World Tribune*, p. 4).**

In the spring of 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. went to Birmingham, Ala., to lead protests demanding that segregation come to an end in the city. At that time, Birmingham was considered the most racist and segregated city in the United States. For years, civil rights leaders in Birmingham had been trying to break the stronghold that racism and segregation held on the city. These protests would often become violent, as police in riot gear and armed with nightsticks beat and bloodied the peaceful protestors.

Many white segregationists believed that violence was the only way to stop these protests. Blacks were beaten into quiet submission and fear. Things began to change when Dr. King—along with many other religious and community leaders—began practicing and teaching nonviolent civil disobedience along with direct action.

Through his work with the civil rights movement, Dr. King emphasized the importance of justice and denouncing injustice. He taught that justice allows people to reach their ultimate potential, while injustice does the opposite, it holds people back.

While in Birmingham, Dr. King was arrested and thrown in jail. He was criticized by many of his white religious colleagues, who, while sympathizing with the struggle for equal rights, felt that Dr. King was moving too fast. These moderate ministers believed that the only way for the Negro to get ahead was through negotiations and patience. They also blamed the nonviolent protestors for the violence that was perpetrated against them. Dr. King was up against a wall, but he held fast to his convictions and used this seemingly impossible situation to his advantage.

President Ikeda has spoken about the importance of fighting injustice, especially at the most perilous times: “What matters most is that we fight thoroughly against injustice with a lofty, dauntless spirit. While waging a determined struggle against evil that nearly cost him his life, Nichiren Daishonin cried out [to Shijo Kingo, as they were being led to the executions grounds at Tatsunokuchi], ‘What greater joy could there be?’ (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 767). And he wholeheartedly anticipated that his disciples would form their ranks and follow him” (*Learning from the Gosho*, p. 243).

This can be compared with Dr. King and the perils he faced in Birmingham. He was in prison alone, and many of his colleagues had left him or spoken out against him. But instead of hiding or giving up, Dr. King took this opportunity to write a letter, which is known as the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” to answer any doubts as to why he and so many other black and white Americans believed so strongly in their cause and their course of action. He attacks the idea of moderation and patience over direct action and outlines why nonviolent civil disobedience is so effective. “Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue”

(*The History of Our Time*, ed. by William H. Chafe and Harvard Sitkoff, p. 184).

Dr. King also describes to America why segregation will without a doubt, come to an end and the true spirit of America, that all men are created equal, will prevail: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. ...Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds” (*The History of Our Time*, p. 183). Here, Dr. King makes it clear that as Americans, we all take responsibility for our fellow Americans. And as human beings, we each share a common humanity. He believed in the power of the human spirit to look past the differences in skin color, regional differences and ethnic differences. By overcoming these differences, he believed we could create a truly harmonious society.

“In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action” (*The History of Our Time*, p. 183).

Dr. King was determined to teach nonviolent civil disobedience as a means to achieving their goal. Many people who attacked his beliefs criticized him for breaking laws and encouraging others to do the same. They would ask, “How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?” Dr. King’s response was simple and direct: “The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that ‘an unjust law is no law at all.’...To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust” (*The History of Our Time*, p. 187).

Dr. King clearly states any law that does not work for the betterment of society or individuals is unjust. President Ikeda states, “Justice is like the sun. A society that lacks justice is shrouded in darkness. No one can stop the sun from rising. No cloud can hide the rays of the sun indefinitely. ‘Opening the eyes’ means causing those hearts steeped in darkness to recognize the rising sun of justice” (*Learning from the Gosho*, p. 59). Dr. King took this to heart. Although he never spoke to President Ikeda, he knew this was his purpose and that as long as he was working for the happiness of others, he was fighting for justice.

Today we do not face the same problems that Dr. King and others faced during the civil rights movement. But each of us has the ability to decide in our hearts what we feel is just and unjust. Dr. King used his strong belief in the human spirit to fight for what he believed was justice. Through his passionate desire to change the world and make it a better place for all, he was able to move people in ways that no one else had been able to do in the past. Dr. King knew in his heart that all men were created equal and any laws that prevented people from working together or discriminated against any certain groups of people were wrong.

Dr. King dedicated his life to uplifting humanity from the discrimination and hate that was corroding away the human spirit. He knew that to do this he would have to make the ultimate sacrifice. He believed in his cause 100% and never gave in to his own fears or persecution from others. When people criticized him, he calmly answered their attacks and stood by his belief in love and humanity. When he was

threatened with violence, he knew that his life was a small price to pay for the rest of humanity. When he was accused of being too extreme he responded, “Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?” (*The History of Our Time*, p. 192).

Dr. King forced America to look at itself for the first time. He made people self-reflect on their actions toward other. He taught us that to live for others is the greatest life to live and to love others like brothers and sisters. Upholding Dr. King’s spirit is a lifelong process. How do we bring that spirit to our everyday lives? How do we fight injustice? What is injustice? President Ikeda addressed these questions by saying: “The powerful may appear great, but in reality they are not. Greatest of all are ordinary people. If those in power lead lives of idle luxury it is because the people are silent. We have to speak out. With impassioned words, we need to resolutely attack abuses of power that cause people suffering. This is fighting for justice. It is wrong to remain silent when confronted with injustice. Doing so is tantamount to supporting and condoning evil” (*Faith Into Action*, p. 226).

Dr. King never told us to live exactly as he has, he only taught us to love one another and respect each other as you would respect yourself. When we live a life striving for justice, we live a truly golden life.

Dr. King ends his letter by signing, “yours for the cause of peace and brotherhood” (*The History of Our Time*, p. 195). Each of us can make Dr. King’s dream a reality in our everyday lives by making causes toward peace within our families, our workplaces and our friendships.