

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day – Excerpts from his, “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” written in 1963

<http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-birmingham-city-jail-0>

This week our nation celebrates the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was assassinated 50 years ago during the pinnacle of our nation’s Civil Rights Movement. We have provided a few key excerpts below from his famous “Letter from the Birmingham Jail” where he responds to a public statement from local clergy condemning the Civil Rights movement in Alabama (click the hyperlink above for the full letter).

Following the excerpts are the Scripture passages we read during the worship service this past Sunday that help remind us about our unity in the gospel. We hope you enjoy considering these truths this week in light of our nation’s celebration of Dr. King’s life and legacy.

In his letter responding to a public statement of concern and caution issued by eight white religious leaders of the South, we remember Dr. King’s historical address defending the largely Christian nonviolent movement that changed our nation. He stated that:

“Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But they went on with the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven" and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." [Speaking of the early Christians, he said] They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest.

Things are different now. The contemporary church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's often vocal sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. I meet young people every day whose disappointment with the church has risen to outright disgust.

I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are presently misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation,... If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

[Before closing his plea for unity with the local clergy detractors, he simply said]

I wish you had commended the Negro demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer, and their amazing discipline in the midst of the most inhuman provocation. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage.

Galatians 3:26-29 (ESV)

²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.

²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Ephesians 2:14-22 (ESV)

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility

¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,

¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.

¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,

²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,

²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.