

Study Questions—Letter from Birmingham Jail

1. How does he respond to being accused of being an “outside agitator”? Why is he in Birmingham? (530)
 - He’s been invited
 - Because injustice is in Birmingham (“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”)
 - Interrelatedness of all communities and states
2. What are the four basic steps in any nonviolent campaign? (531)
 - 1) collection of the facts, 2) negotiation, 3) self-purification, 4) direct action
3. Why direct action? Shouldn’t negotiation work better? (532)
 - Negotiations have failed (531)
 - Direct action seeks to create a crisis and foster attention (532)
 - Note the Socrates reference! (532)
 - Intended to lead back to negotiation
4. Do privileged groups give up their privileges voluntarily? (532)
 - Groups tend to be more immoral than individuals. (532) Would Thoreau agree?
5. What does King say about “waiting” for change? (533)
6. King’s response to criticism that he advocates breaking the law. How does King define just and unjust laws? Which must be obeyed? Which ones are you morally obligated to break? (534)
 - 1) Just laws “square with” the law of God, which is the moral law. Unjust laws out of harmony with the moral law
 - 2) Just laws uplift human personality; unjust laws degrade human personality
 - 3) Just laws are sameness made legal; unjust laws are difference made legal (534)
7. What does King say about anarchy? How must one go about breaking the law? (535) How do these views compare with Thoreau, with Socrates, with Lincoln?
8. What does King say about the white moderate? Which does the moderate care more for—order or justice? (535)

9. How does King respond to the charge that his direct actions lead to violence? (536)
10. How does King describe the two factions he stands between? (537)
11. How does King respond to being called an “extremist”? (538)
12. Why is King disappointed in the white clergy? (539)
13. What does King say about organized religion vs. “the inner spiritual church”? (541) Do you see this idea of an inner sense of morality as comparable to anything we’ve read before?
14. Is King optimistic or pessimistic about the future? Why? (542)
15. Does King believe that the ends justify the means? (542)