

**Background for Classroom Discussion of
*Socrates and Martin Luther King:
Lessons in Civil Disobedience*
by Van Bryan, posted on [Classical Wisdom](#), Jan 16, 2023.**

In this article, there are many references to *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Here are a few quotes from the *Letter* which you may find helpful to read before discussing Martin Luther King's activism, speeches and writing. The *Letter* was addressed to "My Dear Fellow Clergymen." It is dated 16 April 1963. NCLG used a [copy posted by African Studies Center at University of Pennsylvania](#).

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Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.

Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.

One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" 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. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.

One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

In your statement you assert that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But is this a logical assertion? Isn't this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical inquiries precipitated the act by the misguided populace in which they made him drink hemlock?

[We African Americans are] moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. And now this approach is being termed extremist. But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you.".... [Jesus] was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

Over the past few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. I have tried to make clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends

Some religious leaders told their congregations to follow the new desegregation law not because it is right to obey the law, but because integration is morally right. LBJ - paraphrase

Dr. King was once asked in an interview if he could only have two books, what would he choose? After the Bible, he said he would choose Plato's Republic, because in it there is some reflection upon almost everything of value concerning existence, society, and government. LBJ - paraphrase