

VOCABULARY

“Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

English IV/Mr. Sáenz

DIRECTIONS: Please study your vocab to know and understand meaning, pronunciation, spelling, part of speech, and use.

Justice (n) is the ideal and the application of fairness and moral righteousness. It is the principle of equal treatment under the law. **Injustice** is the opposite. Dr. King writes of “**racial injustice**” in his letter. **Racial injustice** means different laws exist for different races to the advantage of one race and disadvantage of the other, or the same law is applied in a favorable way for one race and unfavorable way for the other. A **just** (adj) person or a **just** law is one that treats people fairly and to their benefit or the benefit of the common good. Remember that **justice** applies to moral, ethical, and legal questions. You may experience something unpleasant or detrimental in your life; however, that does not mean it is “unjust”.

Righteousness (n) is similar to **justice** but some people may use it more to describe their personal morality as opposed to the fairness of law or the ethics of a profession. However, that is not always the case. Interestingly, to refer to both personal and community morality, Protestants tend to use the word **righteousness** while Catholics tend to use **justice**. **Righteous** is the adjective. A **righteous** person is a morally good person: her behavior displays goodwill and an adherence to a moral code of conduct.

Cognizant (adj), **cognition** (n): **Cognition** is awareness, consciousness, a state of thinking and knowing. To be **cognizant** of something is to be aware of it, to have knowledge of it.

Conscience (n): generally, the place or power of awareness and thinking, although we usually call this our “consciousness” or, as above, our “cognition”. More specifically, **conscience** refers to our moral thinking, our awareness of right and wrong. It’s that inner place where we judge what we are thinking, saying, or doing as in harmony, or concord, with right or wrong. A **conscientious** (adj) objector is an objector characterized or affected by moral thinking.

Dr. King uses **self-purification** (n) in its primary sense – cleaning out the trash in a person’s life, the stuff that makes us think and act immorally. Since it is **self-purification**, each one of us must do it himself. This may include getting rid of habits or actions some view as “natural” but which prevent us from achieving a higher moral standard. In wider use, **self-purification** may mean getting rid of mental garbage – thoughts, memories, presuppositions, inclinations, emotions – which messes up our thinking and brings us down emotionally. Some might even use **self-purification** in a physical sense to mean the process of ridding our bodies of toxins and waste. If we have gotten rid of moral, psychological, or physical garbage, we have **purified** ourselves, which is both a verb (**purify**) and a modifier: We can drink **purified** water, water that’s been made clean.

Destiny (n): the ultimate outcome or goal toward which a person lives; the place or state a person will arrive at because of the kind of life he or she lives. Depending on one's beliefs, a person's choices may partly or completely cause his or her **destiny**; or outside forces beyond a person's control may push that person to a **destiny**. If before cognition or birth or existence a person's **destiny** has been selected for them by another person or force, we say that person's fate has been "**predestined**" or "**predetermined**" and that he or she did NOT have free will in the matter.

Gainsay (v): dispute or deny. Usually this verb is used in the negative, as in Dr. King's letter, where he says, "There can be no **gainsaying** of the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community." In other words, there is no **denying** that racial injustice engulfs Birmingham, Alabama.

A **moratorium** is a delay, hold, or suspension of an action or activities that normally occur. We see the word often used in protests or official business or government activity. A federal judge might order a **moratorium** on executions until she has examined the constitutionality of a certain kind of death penalty law. We cannot order a moratorium on the action of gravity, but we can order a moratorium on our consumption of nachos and cheese and Mountain Dew until we've lost the weight we wanted to lose.

When two people or parties (sides) disagree, they can **negotiate** (v). When they **negotiate**, they each discuss what they want and how they want to get it, and the conflicts between their wants. Their common goal is to reach an agreement. The discussion to resolve conflicts and to reach an agreement is called a **negotiation**. Two businesses might **negotiate** a merger. Two governments might negotiate a peace treaty or a trade pact.

Prejudice is prejudice, the development of an opinion or an evaluation before one experiences and knows someone or something (the judgment is made **before** you know, "pre"). Prejudice is **anti-knowledge**. Instead of knowledge, prejudice uses superficial considerations like appearance, skin color, dress, customs, speech, disfigurement, lameness, mental limitation, sex, etc. to make a judgment about a person's or a group's worth. Prejudice couples with ignorance to spawn **bias**, a skewed emotional and intellectual filter through which people incorrectly interpret experiences and ideas and show **partiality**. An emotional investment in sustained bias fosters **bigotry**, the vain arrogance by which one, in word or deed, assembles an arsenal of negative thoughts and attitudes and foists them on the person or group she despises in a pattern of abuse. Avoid **prejudice**. Get to know someone. If you are holding bad thoughts and attitudes before you know someone or by basing them on a superficiality, you are being **prejudicial** (adj).

Concur: agree. ex.: "I concur with you. To keep our markets free, we must make them fair."

A speech or commentary by one person is a **monologue**. A conversation between two or more people is a **dialogue**.

Inevitable (adj) is unavoidable or inescapable. **Inevitably** (adv) is inescapably. **Inevitability** (n) is the certain occurrence of something. Exs.: “That he and his gang would be pursued and eventually caught by the cops was an **inevitability** of which Roger was cognizant.” “The **inevitable** moment arrived. Sammy’s girlfriend stood in front of him, arms folded, shoe tapping on the wooden floor. ‘Where were you Saturday night?’” “**Inevitably**, Tony would have to take the test. He had used the sickness excuse last week. (Mom writes just like Dr. Thomas!) The week before that, his dear uncle had “died”. (He really had been very ill!) And the week before that his half-brother, Franco, had arrived at Miami International with no one to pick him up except... Tony! The well was empty. Tony slipped his bookbag over his shoulders and prepared for the worst.” There is **no stopping** an inevitable occurrence!

Millenium: a thousand years, any period of a thousand years. Biblically, **the Millennium** is the thousand year reign of Christ on Earth after he returns, a time of peace and law and order. However, the Devil gets one more chance to mess things up, which he does. He brings on Armageddon, the final battle between good and evil. When God wins, the old earth and heavens are destroyed and a new earth and heavens are made. When Dr. King says electing Mr. Boutwell and ousting Mr. Connor will not bring “the **millennium** to Birmingham”, he means Boutwell is nicer than Connor but is still a segregationist and won’t change a thing.

Futility (n): ineffectiveness in action; uselessness in taking action; lack of power or ability to make a difference. **Futile** (adj) means ineffectively. Exs.: Trying to find the last number in pi is an exercise in **futility**. Rhonda tried to reason with Tyler, but it was **futile**. He couldn’t believe she could be just friends with another guy.

Lynch (v) means to execute a person without the due process of law (accusation, right to defense, rebuttal, trial by jury of peers, right to appeal, etc.). This execution was usually by hanging (one of the modes of execution we talked about the other day.) Therefore, a **lynching** (n) is an unlawful execution or an execution outside the boundaries of a formal legal process. A **lynch mob** (noun phrase with “lynch” as a modifier of “mob”) is one that seeks the person or group its members believe are guilty so that it may (or does) execute them. Whites would often form **lynch mobs** that would hunt down blacks they thought committed crimes or who threatened the white social order. That was unlawful and unconstitutional, not to mention immoral.

Impunity (n) comes from a Latin word that means “no penalty”. A person who acts with impunity is a person who acts without the danger of punishment or harm befalling him. **Impunity** is freedom from legal or moral consequences.

Affluent: rich and prosperous; owning lots of things. As a noun, **affluent** means rich and prosperous people (“the affluent”).

Paternal (adj), **paternalistic** (adj), **paternalistically** (adv): These words mean “as a father”, “like a father”, or “in the manner of a father”. **Paternal** also means “on the father’s side”. Your paternal grandfather, for instance, is your father’s father. Paternal is a neutral word. A negative thread of meaning runs through **paternalistic** and **paternalistically**. That thread gives us the sense of a domineering fatherliness that treats a person like a child who needs supervision. It is in this sense that Dr. King uses the word “paternalistically” in Graf 19.

Crucifixion (n): a method of execution used by the Romans at the time of Christ. In this method, the convict is nailed or tied to a cross, from which he hangs. It is said to be painful in the extreme, and it gives us the word **excruciating**, an adjective which intensifies the meaning of pain, as in “excruciating pain”, which is pain as agonizing as the pain of hanging from a cross. Dr. King uses **the crucifixion** to show that Christ’s holy life did not cause (precipitate), much less justify, the guilty verdict and execution meted out to him. Similarly, Dr. King’s protest of segregation did not cause the police to act harshly under the guise of law and order, nor did it justify their actions.

Precipitate (v): cause, set up to happen. **Precipitation** (n) would also mean “cause” as a noun, but we usually hear precipitation in its meteorological sense when it refers to rain, snow, or hail.

Stagnation (n) means a state of motionlessness, of not flowing, of going nowhere. Swamps or vegetation-cluttered ponds may be **stagnant** (adj-motionless) and stinky. Quicksand is stagnant, which is why people don’t see it, step in it, and sink, often too far. But one’s life or career may be in **stagnation**. They might be headed nowhere. Such a life or career would be **stagnant** (adj), too.

A **complacent** person is one who is smugly satisfied and does not want to make any further effort. **Complacency** is smug satisfaction accompanied by a lack of effort or ambition.

Peril (n), **perilous** (adj), **perilously** (adv). Peril is danger. Perilous is dangerous, and perilously means dangerously. Nuff said!