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# 1

## WHY WE CAN'T WAIT FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE

John Perkins

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**WELL, MARTIN,** there've been a few risings and settings of the sun since you wrote your letter from that Birmingham jail. You could not have known what that letter and your death would do to propel the cause of equal rights in this nation. Many of us during that time dared to dream the same dream that you gave words to. And many have paid the ultimate price to see that dream come to fruition. Thank you for giving voice to our struggle. Thank you for trusting in God and serving him in both life and death.

God worked in mysterious ways to prepare my life for engagement with the struggle that you gave your life to and for. His most powerful shaping came in the form of the death of my mother.

I was born in 1930 in New Hebron, Mississippi. My mother died of starvation when I was seven months old. My earliest memory is hearing the words, "Your mother is dead." Even as a young child, I knew that there was something really wrong with a person dying because of the lack of resources to buy food. I suppose this reality set the course of my life—at least subconsciously, Martin—on a track to champion the rights of those who were disenfranchised: the poor.

After my mother's death, the five children in our family, three boys and two girls, were taken in by my grandmother. She had already given birth to and was raising nineteen of her own children. My people were poor sharecroppers. The sharecropping system was an extension of the slave system. For those slaves who did not have land and had been

property themselves, the sharecropping system put them back to work on a system that was semislave. It was a hard life. There was no such thing as economic justice for the sharecropper. His survival was dependent on a God-given ability to do much with little—and his willingness to remain silent when he was taken advantage of.

I learned this lesson of survival early in life. When I was about eleven or twelve years old, I worked a whole day hauling hay for a white gentleman. I was expecting to get a dollar or a dollar and a half for that day of work. But at the end of the day, he gave me a dime and a buffalo nickel . . . one dime and one buffalo nickel. What I really wanted to do with it was take it and throw it on the ground, because I had value and worth. My value and my worth were well placed in my labor. I wasn't asking for him to give me anything. So I was completely affronted. It affronted my whole being. That's when I discovered that I had dignity, but I didn't have any way to protect it.

The harsh realities of bigotry and racism stirred the embers of anger and bitterness in my heart. I had not come to know the Lord yet, so this internal storm was raging towards a dangerous end.

My brother Clyde served faithfully in World War II, fighting Hitler's war. He survived the horrors of that war only to be reminded that he still had no rights in this country as a black man. When Clyde was murdered by a white police officer in 1947, I knew that I had to leave Mississippi—to stay would have meant certain death for an angry seventeen-year-old boy. So I went to California to get a fresh start.

California provided an environment far from the glare and oppression of Southern racism. It was the ideal place to start a family, so I married Vera Mae Buckley and was soon drafted to serve two years in the military. After my return from the military, our family began to grow and the first two of our children were born.

Our four-year-old son, Spencer, began attending a church and I was able to see a change in him, as he insisted on quoting a Bible

verse before every meal. I went along to hear what he was learning. It was here that I heard the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ preached. The words of Galatians 2:20 (KJV) spoke directly to my heart: *I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.* Martin, my life changed at that very moment. I learned that I was loved by a holy God. As I look back on everything, it seems like since that moment I've been carried along by the hand of God.

When I visited a prison in California to share my faith, staring at me from behind the prison bars were young black men who looked just like me. Many of them had come from the Deep South to make a new start, but just didn't make it. As I looked at those young men and interacted with them, I knew God was calling me back to Mississippi. Back to that place of bigotry and racism—there was much that was unfinished in my heart toward Mississippi. There was much that God intended to teach me about His love for people—regardless of color. So at thirty years of age I came back to Mississippi to begin the work that God was calling me to.

In 1963 a group of civil rights workers came and spoke to me about the Voting Rights Drive and we got involved in it. When we heard about all you were doing for the cause, this was an inspiration for our work in voter registration. We got excited about the possibility of One Person—One Vote. This meant recognition of our personhood! It was the affirmation of our dignity as human beings! The Voting Rights Act was the beginning of the end of that old sharecropping system. We helped to organize voters in our county and the surrounding five counties in spite of tremendous threats from the Ku Klux Klan and other organizations that were determined that the Southern system was not going to change.

The great state of Mississippi was not ready yet to yield to the law

of the land. It had a system already in place to handle agitators: jail. You found that out in Birmingham, Martin, when you were unjustly arrested. Darkness seemed to have the upper hand. Those must have been some difficult nights for you. But we already knew that great things can happen in jail. They can imprison your body, but they can't imprison your mind.

**I KNEW THAT IF I didn't forgive, I would be overcome by the same darkness. I purposed at that moment to preach the gospel strong enough to win whites and blacks—to burn through the bigotry and hatred of racism.**

The apostle Paul called himself a prisoner of Christ, and declared that God can do great things from a prison cell: *but . . . the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel* (Philippians 1:12 KJV). Great revolutions start in jail, and just like the apostle Paul, your prison epistle has been a rallying cry to all people—both black and white—for generations. Your letter spoke hope to us. It expressed the longings of a people for recognition, for respect, for equal access to the American Dream—for economic justice.

I too learned what it meant to be jailed unjustly—first in Mendenhall in December 1969. There was tension everywhere as our people were beginning to be mobilized to vote. Those of us who were helping with voter registration were labeled as troublemakers. I had gone to the jail to make sure a friend was not beaten. Knowing that if I went alone they would likely beat me as well, I took three carloads of children with me. We were all put in jail. As the crowd gathered outside the jail to protest, I was able to address them from my prison cell window on the second floor. I challenged them to be calm and to

not fight hate with hate. We could not win with violence. We would instead boycott the merchants. We began to see that justice was an economic issue. I made up my mind while in the Mendenhall jail that this fight for justice was a worthy fight. There would be no turning back.

Our nonviolent protest and our demands for jobs for blacks, spots on the police force, and an end to police brutality were effective in drawing attention to the plight of blacks in Mississippi. And they were also effective in enraging the white power structure. Two months later twenty-three of us were arrested and put in jail in Brandon, Mississippi. I was met by the demon of racism and hatred in that place. I was tortured in the Brandon jail almost to the point of death. I was broken—almost defeated. I saw the effect of hatred in the eyes of our torturers. They were blinded by their ambition to maintain white supremacy in the South. I saw something that cannot be humanly overcome. Only the love of God could overcome such evil. I knew that if I didn't forgive, I would be overcome by the same darkness. I purposed at that moment to preach the gospel strong enough to win whites and blacks—to burn through the bigotry and hatred of racism.

Justice is birthed from the very heart of God. He revealed divine intent in the act of creation when He created man in His own image, in His own likeness. He put all people on an even plane, regardless of color—worthy of dignity and respect. And oh how our people needed to know that truth, Martin! We were not second-class citizens. God did not intend for us to grovel and beg and have a subsistence living. His heart was for each individual to work and to have their needs met through that work. So, economic justice was a fair and right claim. At its core economic justice is rooted in the proper stewardship of God's resources. The psalmist David boldly declared: *The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein* (Ps. 24:1 KJV). Our resources have been supplied by God to be used in ways that honor Him and demonstrate our love for our fellow man.

But that's not the end of the story. The other side of that truth was that I had to wrap the image of the Southern racist in that same reality. The white racist also bore God's image and I had to allow God to love him through me. In the face of lynchings, beatings, murders, and all manner of inhumane treatment, this was not a man-sized challenge. This challenge could only be met with a power much greater than man: the love of God. In God's economy each individual was to be enriched by the other: our people were to benefit from the bounty of the white who had become enriched by free labor; the whites were to benefit from the character building truths that blacks had learned throughout and because of slavery.

All of this could have happened if America had lived up to the truth of her calling. God blessed this great nation to prosper beyond imagination. And I believe it was because of the desire of the first pilgrims to find a place where they could worship God, free from the tyranny of any government. But our nation is losing a sense of gratitude for the abundance and great bounty that God has bestowed upon us. In America we have witnessed the god of materialism sink his teeth into the fabric of the human soul. He has unleashed a spirit of rugged individualism, fueled by selfish greed. This has become normalized behavior that discourages a care for the other, and especially for the poor. The hope for America is that we will see our responsibility to care for the least among us in recognition of the truth that every person is created in the very image of God.

No, we cannot expect America to abide by the principles of love and justice of our Creator. America is not a Christian nation. But you were right, Martin, to voice strong disappointment in the church. The church should have been our strongest allies in the freedom movement and should have spoken truth to power. But instead they divorced themselves from the responsibility to bear witness to the world through the modeling of biblical love and care for one another. As you

said, “they committed themselves to a completely other worldly religion which made a strange, unbiblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.”

Sadly, that debate still rages in the church today, fifty years later. The church is still today unsure whether we are called to be fully engaged in the social needs of people. It grieves my heart to see how we have missed the opportunity to be fully engaged in the battle for economic justice. We have abundant resources yet have failed to properly steward those resources because we have accommodated an apartheid church. The church was to be the vehicle that would represent the kingdom of God in the world. We were to be a model of oneness, sharing the love of Jesus Christ one to another, and meeting the needs of one another. The church in Acts 2 is a beautiful model of this oneness: Jews and Greeks having all things in common.

Yet there is hope for the church. My greatest hope is in the new emerging church leaders who have caught the vision for true biblical oneness: multicultural churches. They operate in an almost postracial context, not seeing each other as black, white, or brown—just as brothers and sisters in Christ. This is wonderful news! I see this as a powerful move of God among His body of believers. The vision is for many others to partner together in planting similar churches. Large churches may choose to plant churches in the inner city and become intentional about their engagement together: going as a group to the inner-city church once a month, providing a percentage of their tithe to support the inner-city church.

The gospel is meant to reconcile people to God and then to each other across cultural, ethnic, and social barriers. And all of this is so the world will know we are Christians because of that oneness. That’s dynamic! I want to dedicate my remaining years promoting and encouraging these types of churches.

I am seeing churches catch the vision to adopt schools and prisons



and engage with them to educate and bring hope and direction to those who are suffering. We see the economics of this, but more importantly we see the hand and heart of God in this as we seek to redeem the life of each child and affirm their dignity as image bearers of our God.

When I returned to Mississippi and began the work that God called me to, there was no grand vision, Martin. I'm sure you felt the same as you went from city to city. From a boycott, to a march, to The Poor People's Campaign in Chicago, and to jail you were following the divine hand of God. Trusting His hand to lead you in ways that would bring Him honor and help our people. It was the same for us in Mendenhall, as we fell in with the people and sensed needs that demanded a response. With meager resources and no political clout, God multiplied every investment of time, heart, and energy. Little became much in His hands.

What began to emerge were three principles that would be foundational in the formation of ministry to hurting people. They are what I call the three Rs: relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution. These three components are essential in restoring dignity to the poor and needy. You embodied the first principle, relocation, when you moved to Chicago to launch the Poor People's Campaign. Living among the people allows us to live out the gospel by sharing in the suffering and pain of others. Their needs become our needs, and we have the opportunity to better the quality of their lives spiritually, physically, and emotionally as we better our own.

**IT BECAME A PLACE where white and black Christians worshiped side by side. It was one of the few congregations in the South where a black pastor and white pastor shared the same pulpit.**

The best picture of relocation is when Jesus took on the form of man and dwelt among us in order to give us a picture of righteousness and justice. His ultimate sacrifice of dying on the cross is the supreme example of bettering the lives of those we come to live among.

The second R, reconciliation, was based on Matthew 22:37–39 (KJV): *Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.* The heart of reconciliation is for people to be reconciled first to God and then to one another.

When we began preaching the Word in West Jackson to a few dozen people, our numbers multiplied quickly and Voice of Calvary Fellowship was formed. It became a place where white and black Christians worshiped side by side. It was one of the few congregations in the South where a black pastor and white pastor shared the same pulpit. I rejoice to see this happening more and more these days.

In an atmosphere where people have relocated to tend to the needs of others and where reconciliation has taken place, the third R, redistribution, is a natural response. It is easy to share one's wealth and resources with people you truly love and care for. There was an abundance of needs in Mendenhall and in West Jackson and God provided direction for how those needs were to be met. The People's Development, Inc. was a charity that purchased homes and sold them to the poor to help them become homeowners. Samaritan Inn was organized to provide shelter for those in distress. The first persons to stay in Samaritan Inn were white.

Nothing gave me greater joy than the opening of medical clinics so that our people could get quality health care. Prior to that time, blacks were forced to wait in segregated sections of white clinics until all of the white patients were treated. I couldn't help but think that if such a place had been available, my mother might not have died so soon.

## LETTERS TO A BIRMINGHAM JAIL

An association of community development organizations banded together, forming the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) and built on the three Rs of relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution. They have continued to minister to the poor in urban areas across the country. As they partner with churches to meet the enormous needs of those who are slipping through the cracks, there is reason to be encouraged.

Yes, Martin, there are rays of hope as people of faith are challenged to live out their faith in obedience to God's Word. There is hope that one day America will rise to the standard of "one nation under God", but until that happens we continue the fight for the economic and social justice that you lived for. There are many reasons why we cannot and must not be lulled to sleep by the success of a small minority. Justice denied for one is justice denied for all.

*We cannot wait for economic justice because God's Word demands it.* Throughout Scripture the Lord commands care for the poor. In the words of the apostle Paul, "you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God" (2 Corinthians 9:11 NASB). The ideal envisioned in Scripture is an equality accomplished by voluntary sharing: "For I mean not that other men be eased, and ye burdened: But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality: As it is written, He that had gathered much had nothing over; and he that had gathered little had no lack" (2 Corinthians 8:13-15 KJV). This is not speaking of forced redistribution. God entrusts wealth to the few so that they will share it with the many.

*We cannot wait for economic justice because the creeds of America promise it.* The greatest statement of justice in the history of the world is ours: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and were endowed by their creator with certain inalienable

rights, chief of those being the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” No other nation in the world has such powerful principles as its foundation! And this is why I love this country so much. We have but to live out these truths so that they apply equally to every citizen of this great nation. Every moment that we delay in appropriating these principles allows the collective conscience of our nation to be dulled.

*We cannot wait for economic justice because the gap between the rich and the poor is growing.* I had a conversation recently with a very well-to-do gentleman. His question to me was, “Where are the poor, John?” I cringed when he asked that question, because it highlighted a sad reality. In your day, Martin, the cry was for us to “wait for a more convenient season.” Nowadays the response is much like the words spoken by this gentleman. The poor are of no consequence since they are responsible for their lack. They are out of sight and out of mind—many locked away in prisons, others languishing in a substandard existence.

All the while the rich are getting richer. I won’t bore you with statistics, but they are alarming. And they bear out the fact that the bottom layer of the pyramid is getting wider and wider as more Americans struggle to survive. I have no doubt, Martin, that if you were here today, these are the people that you would be championing and fighting for.

*We cannot wait for economic justice because minds are wasting.* I was so proud of you, Martin. You were brilliant, educated, and eloquent—you represented us so well. You were a picture of how an educated black man could speak the truth to power and be heard. I dropped out of school between the third and fifth grade. So I got my education as I lived. The hand of the Almighty God on my life kept me from suffering the fate of so many others who were just like me—the uneducated poor.

In your day, Martin, you saw the marches and boycotts as a way for the Negro to release his pent-up resentments and latent frustrations. If his repressed emotions were not released in nonviolent ways, they would seek expression through violence. I regret most of all that this is

happening in our urban centers across this nation today.

What is most needed is not a handout but quality education that leads to quality employment and economic stability. A friend of mine once told me that the best welfare system is a good job. He was right. The access to good jobs is limited to those who qualify by virtue of their education or their connections to those in positions of influence. The United Negro College Fund's slogan is "a mind is a terrible thing to waste." This is a powerful truth. Quality education opens the door for the poor to achieve and to secure their part of the American dream.

And finally, *we cannot wait for economic justice because time is running out*. It's been fifty years, Martin, since your letter was written. That's a good deal of time to have made many more significant advances in the cause that you gave your life for. And there is a time of accounting coming. The One who is the ultimate owner of everything—the Creator God—has entrusted the management of His world to us as stewards. We've been charged to subdue the earth, develop its potential, and to provide for one another out of its bounty. And just like the master in Matthew 25, He is coming back to settle the accounts. When He returns His standards may make some of us uncomfortable: *But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me"* (Matthew 25:31–36 NASB).

So time is running out for those who have opportunity to do justice. But it's also running out for those who are in desperate need.

There are generations of people who have lived and died in poverty in this nation. That should not be. Not in the richest nation of the world. I pray that we will do good while it is yet day.

And yes, Martin, please forgive my being so personal on this last point. Time is running out for me. God has been good to me. I've lived a good life. The psalmist perhaps said it best in Psalm 90 (KJV): *Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations . . . For all our days are passed away in thy wrath; we spend our years as a tale that is told. The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow . . . So, teach us to number our days, that we might apply our hearts unto wisdom.*

I'm eighty-three years old now. I can begin to see the setting of the sun and there is a sense of urgency to pass along to coming generations the principles and teachings that have kept me all these years. If I had to boil it down to the simplest of truths, it would be this one thing: Jesus—Jesus alone. He is the pearl of great price. *Without Him* nothing else matters; *with Him* you need nothing else.

All my life I had a longing, For a drink from some clear spring,  
 That I hoped would quench the burning, Of the thirst I felt within.  
 Feeding on the husks around me, Till my strength was almost gone,  
 Longed my soul for something better, Only still to hunger on.  
 Poor I was and sought for riches, Something that would satisfy,  
 But the dust I gathered round me, Only mocked my soul's sad cry.  
 Well of water ever springing, Bread of life so rich and free,  
 Untold wealth that never faileth, My Redeemer is to me.

Hallelujah! I have found Him  
 Whom my soul so long has craved!  
 Jesus satisfies my longings,  
 Through His blood I now am saved.<sup>1</sup>

## LETTERS TO A BIRMINGHAM JAIL

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Martin, I'm satisfied with my Savior and with His leading. I'm satisfied that a life spent serving Him is a life worth living. And, yes, I'm satisfied that serving our fellow man with the glorious gospel is the only thing that really matters in life. I'm satisfied . . . and I'll see you in the morning, my friend.