King laments in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” that he rarely has an opportunity to answer criticism, but since he has nothing but time in jail, he takes the opportunity given to pen a response to his critics. King, a man from Atlanta, traveled to Birmingham to help the residents there with peaceful demonstrations against segregation and was criticized for it. His critics felt that King had no reason to come stir things up in Alabama. In his letter, King uses ethos, analogy, and parallelism to show those that are critical of his demonstrations that the demonstrations are necessary to combat the injustices the people of Birmingham face, and that he has a duty to help people no matter where they, or he, is from.

In order to make those critical of him even listen, King must first establish his credibility through the use of ethos. One of the main criticisms levied against him is that he has no right to com to Birmingham, but he mentions that he is the “president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference” (par. 2). The point he is making is that he is not president merely of the Atlanta Christians, but president for all southern states, which of course includes Alabama. He therefore has a responsibility to help all of the Christian faith within the southern states. He points out that he was additionally invited to Birmingham by members of his organization that reside in Alabama (par. 2). This clearly shows King has every right and reason to come help those of the organization he is the leader of. He further cements this idea through a comparison between himself and the Apostle Paul in the very next paragraph.

King uses a combination of ethos and analogy in his next paragraph, likening himself to the Apostle Paul to further justify to his critics that he has a duty to go wherever people have need of him. King refers to himself as being like the prophets and Paul who left their homes to spread to message of Jesus throughout the Roman world (par. 3). Thus King feels it is his Christian duty to go out and spread his message, the message of justice, tolerance, and equality (the very same messages Jesus preached), to all within his power to go to. He reiterates that Birmingham called to him, which he compares to the “Macedonian call for aid” that Paul responded to (par. 3). Both men felt it their duty to go to those that asked for help. King, having cemented his credentials, moves on to addressing the need for the demonstrations themselves.

King effectively uses parallelism to help him show that the demonstrations are necessary to fighting the oppression the people of Birmingham are experiencing. He very clearly states that his critics must help him deal with these issues, since “whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly” (par. 4). This use of parallelism succinctly makes his point that all are affected by the oppression of black Americans in some way. He makes the point that instead of looking merely at the effect of injustice, the demonstrations, his critics must deal with the “underlying causes” (par. 5). If the injustice stops, if the oppression stops, if the causes of the demonstrations stop, then King implies that the demonstrations will likewise stop. As King puts it, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (par. 5).

King sets about to justify his presence in Alabama and the necessity of the demonstrations his critics find disruptive. He effectively establishes his credibility and makes his points using various rhetorical devices to bring him to his core message that he has a duty, a responsibility, and a right to fight injustice wherever injustice is. The righteousness of his actions is demonstrated by the fact nobody remembers the names of his nameless critics, while everyone knows the words and deeds of Martin Luther King Jr.