

Name: _____ Class: _____

Excerpt from “Civil Disobedience”

By Henry David Thoreau
1849

*Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was an American author, poet, philosopher, abolitionist, and naturalist. He is best known for his book *Walden*, which reflects on the value of living simply and in accord with nature. Thoreau’s disgust with the institution of slavery was one of his primary motives in writing “Civil Disobedience.” As you read, take notes on what Thoreau believes individuals can do to create change.*

[1] It is not a man’s duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous, wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man’s shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too. See what gross inconsistency is tolerated. I have heard some of my townsmen say, “I should like to have them order me out to help put down an insurrection of the slaves, or to march to Mexico; — see if I would go”; and yet these very men have each, directly by their allegiance, and so indirectly, at least, by their money, furnished¹ a substitute. The soldier is applauded who refuses to serve in an unjust war by those who do not refuse to sustain the unjust government which makes the war; is applauded by those whose own act and authority he disregards and sets at naught;² as if the state were penitent³ to that degree that it differed one to scourge⁴ it while it sinned, but not to that degree that it left off sinning for a moment. Thus, under the name of Order and Civil Government, we are all made at last to pay homage to and support our own meanness. After the first blush of sin comes its indifference; and from immoral it becomes, as it were, unmoral, and not quite unnecessary to that life which we have made.



“Civil disobedience” by Martin Börjesson is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

The broadest and most prevalent error requires the most disinterested virtue to sustain it. The slight reproach to which the virtue of patriotism is commonly liable, the noble are most likely to incur. Those who, while they disapprove of the character and measures of a government, yield to it their allegiance and support are undoubtedly its most conscientious supporters, and so frequently the most serious obstacles to reform. Some are petitioning the State to dissolve the Union, to disregard the requisitions⁵ of the President. Why do they not dissolve it themselves — the union between themselves and the State — and refuse to pay their quota into its treasury? Do not they stand in the same relation to the State that the State does to the Union? And have not the same reasons prevented the State from resisting the Union which have prevented them from resisting the State?

-
1. **Furnish (verb):** to provide; to be a source of
 2. zero
 3. **Penitent (adjective):** feeling or expressing remorse for having done wrong
 4. to whip as punishment
 5. **Requisition (noun):** an official demand that some duty should be performed or something be put into operation

How can a man be satisfied to entertain an opinion merely, and enjoy it? Is there any enjoyment in it, if his opinion is that he is aggrieved? If you are cheated out of a single dollar by your neighbor, you do not rest satisfied with knowing that you are cheated, or with saying that you are cheated, or even with petitioning him to pay you your due; but you take effectual steps at once to obtain the full amount, and see that you are never cheated again. Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divides States and churches, it divides families; ay, it divides the individual, separating the diabolical in him from the divine.

Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress⁶ them at once? Men generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy is worse than the evil. It makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to be on the alert to point out its faults, and do better than it would have them? Why does it always crucify Christ, and excommunicate Copernicus⁷ and Luther,⁸ and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?

- [5] One would think, that a deliberate and practical denial of its authority was the only offence never contemplated by government; else, why has it not assigned its definite, its suitable and proportionate, penalty? If a man who has no property refuses but once to earn nine shillings⁹ for the State, he is put in prison for a period unlimited by any law that I know, and determined only by the discretion of those who placed him there; but if he should steal ninety times nine shillings from the State, he is soon permitted to go at large again.

If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance¹⁰ it will wear smooth — certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.

-
6. **Transgress (verb):** to infringe or go beyond the bounds of a moral principle or other established behavior
 7. Nicolaus Copernicus was a Renaissance-era mathematician and astronomer whose work generated only mild controversy during his lifetime.
 8. Martin Luther was a German professor of theology, priest, and monk whose rejection of several practices of the Catholic Church led to his development of the Ninety-five Theses and, subsequently, his excommunication by Pope Leo X.
 9. a former British monetary unit equal to one-twentieth of a pound
 10. perhaps

As for adopting the ways which the State has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man's life will be gone. I have other affairs to attend to. I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad. A man has not everything to do, but something; and because he cannot do everything, it is not necessary that he should do something wrong. It is not my business to be petitioning the Governor or the Legislature any more than it is theirs to petition me; and if they should not bear my petition, what should I do then? But in this case the State has provided no way: its very Constitution is the evil. This may seem to be harsh and stubborn and unconciliatory;¹¹ but it is to treat with the utmost kindness and consideration the only spirit that can appreciate or deserves it. So is all change for the better, like birth and death, which convulse the body.

I do not hesitate to say, that those who call themselves Abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government of Massachusetts, and not wait till they constitute a majority of one, before they suffer the right to prevail through them. I think that it is enough if they have God on their side, without waiting for that other one. Moreover, any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already.

"Civil Disobedience" by Henry David Thoreau (1849) is in the public domain.

11. not intended or likely to placate or pacify

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statements best summarize the TWO main claims of the text?
 - A. Although some laws are unjust, it is the duty of citizens to follow all laws created by the state.
 - B. Citizens must challenge and attempt to change the wrongs of the state; it is not enough to work within the system.
 - C. Everyone who funds a government through taxes shares equal responsibility for the mistakes of that government.
 - D. Patriotism is a fine quality but it can sometimes blind people to the flaws of their country's government.
 - E. Individuals have a responsibility to disobey laws that are inherently unjust and in conflict with their morals.
 - F. It is generally best to focus on building up a following for a given movement before launching protests or demonstrations.

2. PART B: Which TWO phrases from the text best support the answers to Part A?
 - A. "...and yet these very men have each, directly by their allegiance, and so indirectly, at least, by their money, furnished a substitute." (paragraph 1)
 - B. "The slight reproach to which the virtue of patriotism is commonly liable, the noble are most likely to incur." (paragraph 2)
 - C. "Men generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them." (paragraph 4)
 - D. "...but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law." (paragraph 6)
 - E. "Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine... As for adopting the ways which the State has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways." (paragraphs 6-7)
 - F. "I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad." (paragraph 7)

3. How does paragraph 6 contribute to the development of the main ideas of the passage?
 - A. It supports the idea that we must not participate in injustice.
 - B. It shows that true control of the government rests with the people.
 - C. It advocates for patience with the missteps and follies of elected officials.
 - D. It supports the idea people are hypocritical and unwilling stand up for their beliefs.

4. PART A: Which statement best describes Thoreau's views on petitioning the government to effect change?
 - A. Individuals must petition the government if they want their voices to be heard.
 - B. Patriotism requires citizens to follow all laws, even if unjust.
 - C. Petitioning the government is useless because it does not always result in action.
 - D. Individuals should wait until the majority of people agree on an idea before petitioning the government.

5. PART B: Which quote best supports the answer in Part A?
- A. "Those who, while they disapprove of the character and measures of a government, yield to it their allegiance and support are undoubtedly its most conscientious supporters... (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "Men generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them." (Paragraph 4)
 - C. "As for adopting the ways which the State has provided for remedying this evil, I know not of such ways." (Paragraph 7)
 - D. "It is not my business to be petitioning the Governor or the Legislature any more than it is theirs to petition me; and if they should not bear my petition, what should I do then?" (Paragraph 7)

6. How does Thoreau's use of rhetorical questions contribute to the persuasiveness and message in "Excerpt from 'Civil Disobedience?'"

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. In "Excerpt from 'Civil Disobedience'" Thoreau states that "If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too" (Paragraph 1). To what extent do you agree with this? What examples can you draw on from your own experience and the world around you where people are ensuring that they are not "sitting upon another man's shoulders?"
2. In "Excerpt from 'Civil Disobedience'" Thoreau argues that citizens should do the right thing by challenging the unjust laws that exist. What does it mean to be a good citizen? Is it the same thing as being a good person? Draw on the article, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in forming your answer.
3. How can a "majority of one" create change? Draw on the article, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in forming your answer.
4. In the context of the text, what is fair? Draw on the article, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in forming your answer.