

Civil Disobedience

excerpts

By Henry David Thoreau

1849

Note: The 20-page essay, *Civil Disobedience*, is often published in the same book following the 250-page *Walden*, an interesting juxtaposition of an appreciation of nature with an appreciation of social justice. Many have heard of this essay, but most cannot recall that Henry Thoreau spent his night in jail for refusing to pay taxes in protest of slavery and the Mexican War.

The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.

The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way.

But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.

Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?

Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislation? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right.

It is truly enough said that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience.

A very few- as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men- serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part;

How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also.

In other words, when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is the fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army.

This people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people.

Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are ... more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity, and are not prepared to do justice to the slave and to Mexico, cost what it may.

There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them;

They will wait, well disposed, for others to remedy the evil, that they may no longer have it to regret.

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; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it,

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.

Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary,

Why does [the government] 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 Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?

If a man who has no property refuses but once to earn nine shillings for the State, he is put in prison for a period 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 of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison - the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide with honor.

If any think that their influence would be lost there, they do not know by how much truth is stronger than error, nor how much more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice who has experienced a little in his own person. Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence.

Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded?

But the rich man is always sold to the institution which makes him rich. Absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue; for money comes between a man and his objects,

The best thing a man can do for his culture when he is rich is to endeavor to carry out those schemes which he entertained when he was poor.

Christ answered "Render therefore to Caesar that which is Caesar's, and to God those things which are God's" - leaving them no wiser than before as to which was which; for they did not wish to know.

Confucius said: "If a state is governed by the principles of reason, poverty and misery are subjects of shame; if a state is not governed by the principles of reason, riches and honors are the subjects of shame."

I have paid no poll-tax for six years. I was put into a jail once on this account, for one night; I could not help being struck with the foolishness of that institution which treated me as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up. I did not for a moment feel confined, As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body;

I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man.

I do not care to trace the course of my [tax] dollar, if I could, till it buys a man or a musket to shoot one with-

take a fact out of its merely political relations, and behold it as it lies absolutely to be disposed of by the intellect-

The authority of government, to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed.

There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly.

I please myself with imagining a State at least which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor;

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