

Excerpt from Essay on the Duty of Civil Disobedience by Henry David Thoreau, July or 24 or 25, 1846

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.

Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subject afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, power-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart.

There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet effect do nothing to put an end to them; who sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say they know not what to do, and do nothing. What is the price of an honest man and patriot today? They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect. They will wait, well disposed, for others to remedy the evil, that they may no longer have it to regret. There are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man.

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 transgress them at once?

If injustice is part . . . of government, . . . then, I say, break the law. If one thousand, if one hundred, -ay, if one honest man, in this State of Massachusetts, . . . [was] locked up in the county jail therefore [for not owning slaves], it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever. But we love better to talk about it.

The authority of government . . . is still an impure one: to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed. It can have no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it. There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly.

Vocabulary

- Cultivate: Encourage
- Power-monkeys: Power addicts
- Dale: Valley
- Palpitation: A rapid pulsation; especially: an abnormally rapid or irregular beating of the heart (such as that caused by panic, arrhythmia, or strenuous physical exercise)
- Earnest: Give approval
- Virtue:
 - a: Conformity to a standard of right: Morality
 - b: A particular moral excellence
- Endeavor: To strive to achieve or reach
- Transgress: To go beyond limits set or prescribed by: Violate
- Sanction: Approval
- Enlighten:
 - a: To furnish knowledge to: Instruct
 - b: To give spiritual insight to

Student Questions

Below are quotes from Thoreau's Essay on the Duty of Civil Disobedience. Put each quote in your own words and explain why you support or do not support it.

1. "I think that we should be men first, and subject afterward." Put Thoreau's quote in your own words. Explain why you support or do not support it.
2. "If injustice is part . . . of government, . . . then, I say, break the law." Do you agree or disagree with Thoreau and why? If you agree, what would you do to "break the law?"
3. If one thousand, if one hundred, -ay, if one honest man, in this State of Massachusetts, . . . [was] locked up in the county jail therefore [for not owning slaves], it would be the abolition of slavery in America. Would you be willing to go to jail to stand up for your beliefs? Why or why not? What belief is so important to you that you would be willing to go to jail to defend it?