

from "Civil Disobedience"

H. D. Thoreau

Thoreau wrote this essay from jail. Between slavery and the Mexican-American war (where the US and Mexico fought over the territory of Texas, leading the US to ultimately invade Mexico), Thoreau became so frustrated with the government that he stopped paying his taxes, so that his money could not be used to support causes he viewed as oppressive and even tyrannical.

Thoreau still paid his LOCAL taxes, ones that furnished roads and schools, just not FEDERAL taxes.

Read these excerpts, then summarize each paragraph's message (1-10) in a sentence.

1.) I heartily accept the motto, "**That government is best which governs least**"; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe--"**That government is best which governs not at all**"; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. ... 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.**

2.) **I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government** ... 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 subjects afterward. **It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right.** The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right... How does it become a man to behave toward the 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.**

3.) All men recognize the **right of revolution**; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable ... When a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and (our country is occupying Mexico), I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize.

4.) 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; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing ... **Even voting for the right is doing nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail.** A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority. **There is but little virtue in the action of masses of men...**

5.) 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? ...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: that we say is our mission. Reform keeps many scores of newspapers in its service, but not one man.

6.) **Under a government which imprisons 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, and their voices no longer afflict the ear of the State, that they would not be as an enemy within its walls, 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.**

7.) **A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight.** If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. **This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible.**

8.) **...I have paid no poll tax for six years. I was put into a jail once on this account,** for one night; and, as I stood considering the walls of solid stone, two or three feet thick, the door of wood and iron, a foot thick, and the iron grating which strained the light, 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, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar. **I felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax...**As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body; just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have a spite, will abuse his dog.

9.) **I have never declined paying the highway tax, because I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject; and as for supporting schools,** I am doing my part to educate my fellow countrymen now. It is for no particular item in the tax bill that I refuse to pay it. I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually. I do not care to trace the course of my dollar, if I could, till it buys a man a musket to shoot one with--the dollar is innocent--but I am concerned to trace the effects of my allegiance. **In fact, I quietly declare war with the State,** after my fashion, though I will still make use and get what advantages of her I can, as is usual in such cases.

(10.) **Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man? 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 last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which I have also imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.

-In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. advocated civil disobedience.

-He was jailed after a nonviolent protest against segregation in Alabama.

-When a group of (white) ministers urged Dr. King to avoid protesting on the streets and instead fight segregation in the courts, he responded with this open letter. Letter from Birmingham City Jail, was an open letter written on April 16, 1963 by Martin Luther King, Jr., an American civil rights leader. King wrote the letter from the city jail in Birmingham, Alabama, after a peaceful protest against segregation. The letter is a response to a statement made by eight white Alabama clergymen on April 12, 1963 titled "A Call For Unity" which agreed that social injustices were taking place but expressed the belief that the battle against racial segregation should be fought solely in the courts and not taken onto the streets. King responded that, without forceful, direct actions such as his, true civil rights could never be achieved. As he put it, "This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.'" He asserted not only that civil disobedience is justified in the face of unjust laws, but also that "one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws."