**“Civil Disobedience” Excerpt Henry David Thoreau**

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. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. 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,[(1)](http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil1.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22notes) 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….

***1.*** *U.S.-Mexican War (1846-1848), abolitionists considered it an effort to extend slavery into former Mexican territory*

**What is Thoreau’s ideal government?**

**Thoreau says a government is “liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it.” What does this mean?**

But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? — in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator?

**What is wrong with a government of a majority according to Thoreau?**

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.

**What Transcendental idea does this represent?**

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

**What is happening when men follow the law?**

**“Civil Disobedience” Excerpt Henry David Thoreau**

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. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. 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,[(1)](http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil1.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22notes) 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….

***1.*** *U.S.-Mexican War (1846-1848), abolitionists considered it an effort to extend slavery into former Mexican territory*

**What is Thoreau’s ideal government?**

**Thoreau says a government is “liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it.” What does this mean?**

But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? — in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator?

**What is wrong with a government of a majority according to Thoreau?**

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.

**What Transcendental idea does this represent?**

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

**What is happening when men follow the law?**

[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? 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 Copernicus [(6)](http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil2.html#notes) and Luther,(7) and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?

***6.*** *Nicolas Copernicas (1473-1543) Polish founder of modern astronomy; was excommunicated by Catholic Church*

***7.*** *Martin Luther (1483-1546) German monk and Protestant Reformation leader*

**What is Thoreau advocating for in this paragraph?**

**What does he say happens when good men try and rebel this evil? Who does he use as examples? Why?**

**Why is he using rhetorical questions throughout the paragraph?**

**What is his tone? What evidence supports your answer?**

[6]    If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go; perchance 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….

**What does he metaphorically compare government to? What is his provide as his solution?**

 [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? 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 Copernicus [(6)](http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil2.html#notes) and Luther,(7) and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?

***6.*** *Nicolas Copernicas (1473-1543) Polish founder of modern astronomy; was excommunicated by Catholic Church*

***7.*** *Martin Luther (1483-1546) German monk and Protestant Reformation leader*

**What is Thoreau advocating for in this paragraph?**

**What does he say happens when good men try and rebel this evil? Who does he use as examples? Why?**

**Why is he using rhetorical questions throughout the paragraph?**

**What is his tone? What evidence supports your answer?**

[6]    If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go; perchance 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….

**What does he metaphorically compare government to? What is his provide as his solution?**