**“Civil Disobedience” by Henry David Thoreau: A summary**

The best government is one with severely limited powers. It should use its powers only to carry out moral and ethical activities on behalf of the citizens. Unfortunately, factions of powerful self-interest groups sometimes manipulate the government into carrying out actions that offend the conscience of upright citizens.

A case in point is the Mexican War. It is an unjust war that seeks to annex Mexican land and then establish slavery on it. In this matter and in many others, vast numbers of citizens regrettably have forfeited their consciences to the government, blindly doing the government’s bidding even when their conscience tells them that what they are doing is wrong. I cannot do what they do. I cannot accede to the policies of a government that legitimizes slavery and then invades another country in order to expand this evil institution.

Here in Massachusetts, there are merchants and farmers who go along with government policy because they are more interested in making money than in doing justice to fellow human beings. And what of those who oppose slavery and the war? Too many of them sit back and allow others to carry out this task for them. By failing to act to initiate reform—by continuing to yield to unjust government polices—these people become obstacles to reform. Their inaction helps to perpetuate the unjust policies.

The state, of course, has procedures in place to enable citizens to bring about reform. But those ways take too long. Besides, in the present case, it is the Constitution—the very law itself—which is evil.

I believe that those who support abolition of slavery should immediately withdraw their support of the Massachusetts government rather than wait and go through channels. If they have God on their side, they have reason enough to act at once without official approval.

If even only one honest man would stand on principle and be willing to go to jail for his action, we could abolish slavery in America. For it does not matter how small the beginning of resistance is. If it is done well once, it is done for all time. Of course, we would rather talk about reform than carry out reform.

Actually, a prison is the only place today where an honorable man in a slave state can live with honor. His disobedience—his refusal to go along with the state—will speak eloquently and loudly for reform. As for servants of the state—tax gatherers and other officers—they should resign their offices. If citizens are willing to go to jail and if civil servants quit their jobs, then the revolution has taken place. Reform will come.

Several years ago, the state ordered me to pay a sum to support a clergyman whose church I did not attend. I refused to contribute. In a written statement that I gave to the town clerk, I told government officials the following:

*Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any society which I have not joined.*

Since that time, the state has never again asked me to support that church. However, the state did jail me for one night because I have refused to pay the poll tax for six years. But even though I was behind a thick wall, not one of my townsmen was as free as I was.

In carrying out penalties such as the one imposed upon me, the state uses force, not reason, to deal with citizens. I answer only to the force of a higher power.

My cellmate was a man accused of burning down a barn, but he claimed he was innocent. From what he told me, it appeared he was drunk when he went into the barn to bed down. When he smoked his pipe, the barn caught fire.

A lot of men wrote verses while biding their time in the jail. Many of them tried to escape but were caught. To get revenge, the prisoners sang their verses.

After I blew out the lamp and went to bed, I stayed up for a while listening to the town clock strike and the sounds of the village coming in through the open windows. In the morning, I had a breakfast of brown bread and a pint of chocolate on a tin tray passed through an opening in the door. Later, I was released after someone paid my tax. The first thing I did was to finish an errand I had started the previous day—I was going to the shoemaker’s to have a shoe repaired—but could not complete because of my arrest. After putting on my mended shoe, I went out with a local group to pick huckleberries on top of a high hill two miles off. In this pastoral setting, the state was nowhere to be seen.

One tax that I always pay is the highway tax, for I want to be a good neighbor.

I do not wish to give you the idea that I am looking to quarrel with other citizens or with the country. In fact, I would like to abide by the laws of the country. But I cannot abide by them when they are unjust laws and when the leaders who make them override the rights of upright individuals guided by their consciences.

*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.*

.

**Choose 1 question to answer in at least 2 paragraphs. Elaborate with your opinions and supporting details.**

1. Do you believe unjust or immoral government policies are in force today in your country? (These policies could be related to taxes, abortion, gun control, religious practices, gender inequality, or any other issue. If you answer yes to the question, identify the policy or policies you oppose.)
2. Would you be willing to risk going to jail to oppose a policy (or policies)?
3. Other than breaking the law (by refusing to pay a tax, for example, or by participating in a demonstration that blocks traffic) what can you do to eliminate or replace an unjust or immoral government policy?