

## Lesson 9: Civil Disobedience







### ☐ Getting Started

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was influenced by a 19th-century American philosopher named Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau was born almost 100 years before King was. Thoreau lived during the time of slavery, and he was disgusted by it. He was also vehemently anti-war and was morally opposed to American expansion into the West and South. For these reasons, and because he was broadly opposed to violence of any kind, he passionately objected to the Mexican-American War, which began when he was 29 years old.

Thoreau is credited with coining the term "civil disobedience;" it is the title of one of his two most famous works. In the essay "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau calls on all Americans to engage in a nonviolent revolution with the aim of overthrowing the government. He implores all public employees to quit their jobs and all citizens to stop voting and paying taxes. When someone, in an open and public way, refuses to comply with a law that they believe is unjust, that person is participating in the form of political protest called **civil disobedience**.

Though King did not advocate all of Thoreau's tactics, he was moved and inspired by the notion of passionate resistance without the use of violence. For this reason, King used the term "civil disobedience" to describe the nonviolent resistance of the 1960s movement in Birmingham.

### Stuff You Need

-  "MLK and "Civil Disobedience" (Page 1)"
-  "MLK and "Civil Disobedience" (Page 2)"
-  "Opposing Quotes (Page 1)"
-  "Opposing Quotes (Page 2)"
-  ""Civil Disobedience" Excerpts - Page 1"
-  ""Civil Disobedience" Excerpts - Page 2"
- ✓ highlighter\* (Activity 1 - optional)

### Ideas to Think About

- Who gets to decide what is "law" in this country?
- When injustice is supported or enforced by laws, should you abide by those laws?

### Things to Know

- Henry David Thoreau was an author and social commentator who lived during the time of slavery and American westward expansion, both of which he hated.
- Henry David Thoreau wrote a political essay called "Civil Disobedience" describing the potential for a nonviolent overthrow of the American government.
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did not agree with all of Henry David Thoreau's views, but King was inspired by Thoreau's commitment to seek societal change through nonviolent protest.
- When people, in an open and public way, refuse to comply with a law that they believe is unjust, they are participating in a form of political protest called **civil disobedience**.

## Activities

### ☐ **Activity 1: MLK and Civil Disobedience**

Many parallels can be found between the ideas in "Civil Disobedience" and the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Use the "MLK and Civil Disobedience" activity pages to analyze the similarities in the text from Thoreau's writing and King's speeches. You may want to use a highlighter to mark the phrases on both sides that discuss similar ideas.

### ☐ **Activity 2: Opposing Quotes**

Thoreau and King agreed on several important points: the injustice of race-based social inequity, the immorality and cowardice of following laws one knows to be unjust, and the equally important moral imperative of nonviolence in one's own pursuits. However, they had very different perspectives on several critical points: the importance of voting, the values of the Constitution, and the need for an inclusive, democratic American government.

Find the "Opposing Quotes" activity page. Read the quotes from each of the men on these three topics: views on America, the role of government, and voting. Decide which of the two men you agree with more, and explain the ways that your views and his align. You don't need to agree with everything the man you choose says; choose the one who you are more closely aligned with.

### ☐ **Wrapping Up**

In this lesson, you explored important ideas and some opinions about them from

two famous figures in American history. You identified areas of agreement and disagreement in the assertions of philosophers and political activists using original texts. For homework, you will read excerpts from Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" essay.



### **Homework**

Read the passages found on the "'Civil Disobedience' Excerpts" activity pages and answer the question about each one.

# MLK and “Civil Disobedience”

**Directions:** Analyze excerpts from the writing of Thoreau and King. In the box in the middle, reflect on the areas of agreement between the two men.

## Passages Set A

Thoreau	Overlapping Ideas	King
<p>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?</p> <p>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. 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</p> <p>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...</p>		<p>A just law is a man made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. ... Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an "I it" relationship for an "I thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things.</p>



## Passages Set B

Thoreau	Overlapping Ideas	King
<p>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... 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.</p> <p>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 proper place today, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less desponding spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles.</p>		<p>In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy.</p> <p>One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.</p>


## Passages Set C

Thoreau	Overlapping Ideas	King
<p>Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who 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. We are accustomed to say, that the mass of men are unprepared; but improvement is slow, because the few are not materially wiser or better than the many. ... 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...</p>		<p>I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; ...</p> <p>I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress.</p> <p>We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.</p>


# Opposing Quotes

**Directions:** Read the quotes from each man about the three topics. Decide which of the two men you agree with more, and explain the ways that your views and his align.


## America

Thoreau	King
<p>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...</p> <p>This American government — what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will.</p> <p>...I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually.</p>	<p>I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.</p> <p>I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."</p> <p>...This will be the day, this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning: "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring!" (from The March on Washington Address, 28 August 1963)</p>
Your Views	
	

## The Role of Government

Thoreau	King
<p>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"...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</p>	<p>In this juncture of our nation's history, there is an urgent need for dedicated and courageous leadership. If we are to solve the problems ahead and make racial justice a reality, this leadership must be fourfold.</p> <p>First, there is need for strong, aggressive leadership from the federal government... (from Address at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, 17 May 1957, Washington, DC)</p>
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin: 0 auto; width: 80%;">Your Views</div>	
	

## Voting

Thoreau	King
<p>All voting is a sort of gaming, like checkers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right and wrong, with moral questions; and betting naturally accompanies it. The character of the voters is not staked. I cast my vote, perchance, as I think right; but I am not vitally concerned that that right should prevail. I am willing to leave it to the majority. Its obligation, therefore, never exceeds that of expediency. 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. When the majority shall at length vote for the abolition of slavery, it will be because they are indifferent to slavery, or because there is but little slavery left to be abolished by their vote. They will then be the only slaves. Only his vote can hasten the abolition of slavery who asserts his own freedom by his vote.</p>	<p>But even more, all types of conniving methods are still being used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters. The denial of this sacred right is a tragic betrayal of the highest mandates of our democratic tradition</p> <p>Give us the ballot, and we will no longer have to worry the federal government about our basic rights. Give us the ballot, and we will transform the salient misdeeds of bloodthirsty mobs into the calculated good deeds of orderly citizens.</p> <p>...</p> <p>Give us the ballot (Yeah), and we will place judges on the benches of the South who will do justly and love mercy (Yeah), and we will place at the head of the southern states governors who will, who have felt not only the tang of the human, but the glow of the Divine... (from Address at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, 17 May 1957, Washington, DC)</p>
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin: 0 auto; width: 80%;">Your Views</div>	
	

## "Civil Disobedience" Excerpts

**Directions:** Read the passages from "Civil Disobedience" and, in the space provided, answer the questions beneath each passage. Each of your answers should include a phrase quoted from the passage, as well as some of your own words.

### Passage 1

*Here Thoreau talks about a "standing army." A standing army is a permanent military force, unlike the National Guard, which is called to duty only when deemed absolutely necessary.*

"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, 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."

Question 1: Why does Thoreau lack confidence in government?

### Passage 2

*Here Thoreau discusses the fact that people were more upset and more ready to go to war over what they considered to be an unfair tax than they were about the horrors of slavery.*

"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. But almost all say that such is not the case now. But such was the case, they think, in the Revolution Of '75. If one were to tell me that this was a bad government because it taxed certain foreign commodities brought to its ports, it is most probable that I should not make an ado about it, for I can do without them. All machines have their friction; and possibly this does enough good to counterbalance the evil. At any rate, it is a great evil to make a stir about it. But when the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us not have such a machine any longer. 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."

Question 2: How does Thoreau think people should respond to unfair taxes on imports?





## Passage 3

*We don't often find stories of slaves fighting for their freedom, but this passage provides evidence that they did.*

"See what gross inconsistency is tolerated. I have heard some of my townsmen say, "I should like to have them order me out to help put down an insurrection of the slaves, or to march to Mexico;"- see if I would go", and yet these very men have each, directly by their allegiance, and so indirectly, at least, by their money, furnished a substitute. The soldier is applauded who refuses to serve in an unjust war by those who do not refuse to sustain the unjust government which makes the war; is applauded by those whose own act and authority he disregards and sets at naught; as if the state were penitent to that degree that it differed one to scourge it while it sinned, but not to that degree that it left off sinning for a moment. Thus, under the name of Order and Civil Government, we are all made at last to pay homage to and support our own meanness."

Question 3: How do we know slaves did, at the time, try to fight for their own freedom?

## Passage 4

*Thoreau makes the assertion that America is not a democracy.*

"A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up that state's segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout Alabama all sorts of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters, and there are some counties in which, even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro is registered. Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured?"

Question 4: According to Thoreau, when people are denied the right to vote, they shouldn't be expected to respect the law. Why?

## **Parent Overview**

## Lesson 9: Civil Disobedience

### Getting Started

#### ? Big Ideas

- Who gets to decide what is "law" in this country?
- When injustice is supported or enforced by laws, should you abide by those laws?



#### Facts and Definitions

- Henry David Thoreau was an author and social commentator who lived during the time of slavery and American westward expansion, both of which he hated.
- Henry David Thoreau wrote a political essay called "Civil Disobedience" describing the potential for a nonviolent overthrow of the American government.
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did not agree with all of Henry David Thoreau's views, but King was inspired by Thoreau's commitment to seek societal change through nonviolent protest.
- When people, in an open and public way, refuse to comply with a law that they believe is unjust, they are participating in a form of political protest called **civil disobedience**.



#### Skills

- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research. (LA)
- Develop the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic. (LA)
- Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing. (LA)
- Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose. (LA)
- Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington's Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech, King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"), including how they address related themes and concepts.

### Introducing the Lesson

In this lesson, students will learn about the contribution to the tradition of nonviolent resistance made by one of the earliest American philosophers, Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau lived during the time of slavery and American westward expansion, both of which he strongly opposed. He believed in opposing the government, but did not favor violence as a means to an end.

Thoreau described nonviolent tactics for resisting the government in an essay called "Civil Disobedience." "Civil Disobedience" remains one of the most widely read pieces of social philosophy in the modern era. Martin Luther King, Jr. read it, and in this lesson, students will analyze the similarities and differences between the views of the two men.

### Outline of Activities and Answer Keys

#### Activity 1: MLK and Civil Disobedience

Students can use a highlighter to mark the phrases on both sides that discuss similar ideas. Students will then explain the overlapping ideas they identified. They may notice that Thoreau and King both discuss the following overlapping ideas (although answers may vary):

#### Passages Set A:

What makes a law just?

What makes a law unjust?

How laws affect people's dignity and quality of life

### **Passages Set B:**

The conditions when it is acceptable to break the law

A just man should accept prison under an unjust government rather than go against his conscience

### **Passages Set C:**

People care more about order than justice, about commerce (money) than people

Law and order should establish justice

Silence of good people contributes to injustice by allowing it to exist

### **Activity 2: Opposing Quotes**

Students read two sets of assertions on three topics: America, the role of government, and voting. One set was from Henry David Thoreau and the other set was from Martin Luther King, Jr. The quotes present different, and even opposing, views. Students are asked to analyze each set, decide who they agree with more, and explain why in the space provided. Answers will vary.

## **Wrapping Up**

### **Questions to Discuss**

- In Activity 2, you chose one of the two men you agreed with more. Are there ideas from the man you did not choose that you also respect or find value in? (Answers will vary.)
- If Henry David Thoreau had lived in the 1960s, do you think his views would have been different? If so, how? (Answers will vary.)
- Does Henry David Thoreau advocate for the eventual overthrow of the American government? What evidence from the text supports your answer? (Answers may vary but should acknowledge the fact that Thoreau used phrases including "then the revolution is accomplished.")

### **Things to Review**

Review the fact that although Martin Luther King Jr. did not agree with all of Henry David Thoreau's views, King was inspired by Thoreau's nonviolent ideas and tactics to resist unjust laws.

Review the definition of civil disobedience — when someone, in an open and public way, refuses to comply with a law that they believe is unjust, that person is participating in the form of political protest called civil disobedience.

## **Homework**

Students will read excerpts from "Civil Disobedience" and answer some questions. Answers may vary somewhat, but should be similar to these:

1. Why does Thoreau lack confidence in government? (Thoreau believes that government is unlikely to act on the will of the people; that government is, "equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it.")
2. How does Thoreau think people should respond to unfair taxes on imports? (If Thoreau thought the government was unfairly taxing imports, he probably would, "not make an ado about it," he would simply not buy them.)
3. How do we know slaves did, at the time, try to fight for their own freedom? (Thoreau talks about people in society who say they would refuse to "help put down an insurrection of the slaves.")
4. According to Thoreau, when people are denied the right to vote, they shouldn't be expected to respect the law. Why? (When people are denied the right to vote they have "no part in enacting or devising the law.")