

The Essential Douglass

Selected Writings & Speeches

Edited, with an Introduction, by

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22. “Substance of a Lecture [on Secession and the Civil War],” a speech delivered at Zion Church in Rochester, New York on June 16, 1861 and published in *Douglass’ Monthly*, July 1861¹⁷

I am not surprised, my respected hearers, though I am most deeply gratified by the continued interest which you have manifested in these now somewhat protracted anti-slavery lectures. The subject of slavery is a most fruitful one, and it seems impossible to exhaust it. I seldom retire from this place without thinking of something left unsaid, which might have been said to profit.

More than thirty years of earnest discussion has augmented rather than diminished the interest which surrounds the subject. Tongues the most eloquent, and pens the most persuasive, the highest talent and genius of the country have been arduously employed in the attempt to unfold the matchless and measureless abominations comprehended in that one little word—slavery. Yet those who have succeeded best, own that they have fallen far short of the terrible reality. You, yourselves, have read much, thought much, and have felt much respecting the slave system, and yet you come up here and crowd this church every Sunday to hear the subject further discussed.

Vain as I may be, I have not the vanity to suppose that you come here because of any eloquence of mine, or any curiosity to hear a colored man speak—for I have been speaking among you more or less frequently nearly a score of years; and I recognize among my hearers today some of those kind friends who greeted me the first time I attempted to plead the cause of the slave in this city. No—the explanation of this continued, and I may say increasing interest, is not to be found in your humble speaker; nor can it be ascribed altogether to the temper of the times, and the mighty events now transpiring in the country. We shall find it in the deep significance, the solemn importance and unfathomable fullness of the subject itself. It sweeps the whole horizon of human rights, powers, duties, and responsibilities. The grand primal principles which form the basis of human society are here.

Those who love peace more than justice; those who prefer grim and hoary oppression to agitation and liberty, condemn the discussion of slavery because

17. This speech is called “The Decision of the Hour” in Foner’s *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, and it is called “American Apocalypse” in Blassingame’s *Frederick Douglass Papers*. With the Civil War now under way, Douglass articulated his views on the meaning of the war and what its objectives ought to be.

it is an exciting subject. They cry, away with it; we have had enough of it; it excites the people, excites the Church, excites Congress, excites the North, excites the South, and excites everybody. It is, in a word, an exciting subject. I admit it all. The subject is, indeed, an exciting one. Herein is one proof of its importance. Small pots boil quick; empty barrels make the most noise when rolled; but that which has the power to stir a nation's heart, and shake the foundations of church and state, is something more than empty clamor. Individual men of excitable temperament may be moved by trifles; they may give to an inch the importance of a mile—elevate a mote to the grandeur of a mountain—but the masses of men are not of this description. Only mighty forces, resting deep down among the foundations of nature and life, can lash the deep and tranquil sea of humanity into a storm, like that which the world is now witnessing.

The human mind is so constructed as that, when left free from the binding and hardening power of selfishness, it bows reverently to the mandates of truth and justice. It becomes loyal and devoted to an idea. Good men, once fully possessed of this loyalty, this devotion, have bravely sacrificed fortune, reputation, and life itself. All the progress toward perfection ever made by mankind, and all the blessings which are now enjoyed, are ascribable to some brave and good man, who, catching the illuminations of a heaven-born truth, has counted it a joy, precious and unspeakable, to toil, suffer, and often die for the glorious realization of that heaven-born truth. Hence the excitement. Cold water added to cold water, makes no disturbance. Error added to error causes no jar. Selfishness and selfishness walk together in peace, because they are agreed; but when fire is brought in direct contact with water, when flaming truth grapples with some loathsome error, when the clear and sweet current of benevolence sets against the foul and bitter stream of selfishness, when mercy and humanity confront iron-hearted cruelty, and ignorant brutality, there cannot fail to be agitation and excitement.

Men have their choice in this world. They can be angels, or they can be demons. In the apocalyptic vision, John describes a war in heaven.¹⁸ You have only to strip that vision of its gorgeous Oriental drapery, divest it of its shining and celestial ornaments, clothe it in the simple and familiar language of common sense, and you will have before you the eternal conflict between right and wrong, good and evil, liberty and slavery, truth and falsehood, the glorious light of love, and the appalling darkness of human selfishness and sin. The human heart is a seat of constant war. Michael and his angels are still contending against the infernal host of bad passions, and excitement will last while the fight continues, and the fight will continue till one or the other is subdued. Just what takes place in individual human hearts, often takes place between

18. Revelation 12:7 (all biblical references are from the King James version).

nations, and between individuals of the same nation. Such is the struggle now going on in the United States. The slaveholders had rather reign in hell than serve in heaven.

What a whirlwind, what a tempest of malignant passion greets us from that quarter! Behold how they storm with rage, and yet grow pale with terror! Their demonstrations of offended pride are only equaled by their consummate impudence and desperate lying. Let me read you a paragraph from a recent speech of Mr. Henry A. Wise,¹⁹ as a specimen of the lies with which the leaders of this slaveholding rebellion inflame the base passions of their ignorant followers. He lyingly [*sic*] says of the Northern people:

“Your political powers and rights, which were enthroned in the Capitol when you were united with them under the old constitutional bond of the Confederacy, have been annihilated. They have undertaken to annul laws within their own limits that would render your property unsafe within those limits. They have abolitionized [*sic*] your border, as the disgraced Northwest will show. They have invaded your moral strongholds, and the rights of your religion, and have undertaken to teach you what should be the moral duties of men. They have invaded the sanctity of your home and firesides, and endeavored to play master, father, and husband for you in your households.”

Such lies answer themselves at the North, but do their work at the South. The strong and enduring power which anti-slavery truth naturally exercises upon the minds of men, when earnestly presented, is explained, as I have already intimated, not by the cunning arts of rhetoric, for often the simplest and most broken utterances of the uneducated fugitive slave, will be far more touching and powerful than the finest flights of oratory. The explanation of the power of anti-slavery is to be found in the inner and spontaneous consciousness, which every man feels of the comprehensive and stupendous criminality of slavery. There are many wrongs and abuses in the world that shock and wound the sensibilities of men. They are felt to be narrow in their scope, and temporary in their duration, and to require little effort for their removal. But not so can men regard slavery. It compels us to recognize it, as an ever active, ever increasing, all comprehensive crime against human nature. It is not an earthquake swallowing up a town or city, and then leaving the solid earth undisturbed for centuries. It is not a Vesuvius which, belching forth its fire and lava at intervals, causes ruin in a limited territory; but slavery is felt to be a moral volcano, a burning lake, a hell on earth, the smoke and stench of whose torments ascend upward forever. Every breeze that sweeps over it comes to us tainted with its foul miasma, and weighed down with the sighs and groans of its victim. It is a compendium of all the wrongs which one man can inflict upon a helpless brother. It does not

19. Henry A. Wise (1806–1876) was an American politician and diplomat who served in the House of Representatives and as governor of Virginia.

cut off a right hand, nor pluck out a right eye, but strikes down at a single blow the god-like form of man. It does not merely restrict the rights, or lay heavy burdens upon its victims, grievous to be borne; but makes deliberate and constant war upon human nature itself, robs the slave of personality, cuts him off from the human family, and sinks him below even the brute. It leaves nothing standing to tell the world that here was a man and a brother.

In the eye of the law of slavery, the slave is only property. He cannot be a father, a husband, a brother, or a citizen, in any just sense of these words. To be a father, a husband, a brother, and a citizen, implies the personal possession of rights, powers, duties, and responsibilities, all of which are denied the slave. Slavery being the utter and entire destruction of all human relations, in opposing it, we are naturally enough bound to consideration of a wide range of topics, involving questions of the greatest importance to all men. But for the universal character of the anti-slavery question, it would have been impossible to have held the public mind suspended upon this discussion during the space of thirty years. The best informed men have candidly confessed that anti-slavery meetings have been the very best schools of the nation during the last quarter of a century. The nation has been taught here, as nowhere else, laws, morals and Christianity. Untrammelled by prescription, unrestrained by popular usage, unfettered by moudly [*sic*] creeds, despising all the scorn of vulgar prejudice, our anti-slavery speakers and writers have dared to call in question every doctrine and device of man, which could strengthen the hands of tyrants, and bind down the bodies and souls of men. The manhood of the slave has been the test of all our laws, customs, morals, civilization, governments, and our religions. With a single eye here, the whole anti-slavery body has been full of light. With the golden rule, they have measured American Christianity, and found it hollow—its votaries doing precisely unto others which they would shoot, stab, burn and devour others for doing unto themselves. To all who press the Bible into the service of slavery, we have said, if you would not be the slave, you cannot be the master.

The fact is, slavery is at the bottom of all mischief among us, and will be until we shall put an end to it. We have seen three attempts within less than thirty years to break up the American government in this the first century of its existence, and slavery has been the moving cause in each instance. The attempt was made in 1832, again in 1850, and again in 1860. Some of us were surprised and astonished that the slaveholders should rebel against the American government, simply because they could not rule the government to the full extent of their wishes. Little cause had we for such surprise and astonishment. We ought to have known slaveholders better.

What is a slaveholder but a rebel and a traitor? That is, and must be in the nature of his vocation, his true character. Treason and rebellion are the warp and woof of the relation of master and slave. A man cannot be a slaveholder

without being a traitor to humanity and a rebel against the law and government of the ever-living God. He is a usurper, a spoiler. His patriotism means plunder, and his principles are those of a highway robber. Out of such miserable stuff you can make nothing but conspirators and rebels.

So far as the American government is entitled to the loyal support and obedience of American citizens, so far that government is, in the main, in harmony with the highest good and the just convictions of the people. Justice, goodness, conscience are divine. Conformity to these, on the part of human governments, make them binding and authoritative. These attributes, wherever exhibited, whether in the government of states, in the government of families, or wherever else exhibited, command the reverence and loyal regard of honest men and women. But slaveholders, by the very act of slaveholding, have thrown off all the trammels of conscience and right. They are open, brazen, self-declared rebels and traitors to all that makes loyalty a virtue, and fidelity a duty. The greater includes the lesser crime. In the one high handed act of rebellion against truth, justice and humanity, comprehended in making one man the slave of another, we have the ascertained sum of treason and rebellion which now rages and desolates the whole slaveholding territory in the United States.

This is no new idea in these lectures. I have presented it before, and shall probably repeat it again. I wish at any rate to underscore it now, for I deem it important that we should thoroughly understand the foe with which we have to deal. Let it, then, be written down in every man's mind, as no longer a matter of dispute, that a thief and a robber cannot be safely trusted; that a slaveholder cannot be a good citizen of a free republic; and that the relation of master and slave is, in the nature of it, treason and rebellion. It has long been obvious to common sense—it is now known to common experience—that a slaveholder who is a slaveholder at heart is a natural born traitor and rebel. He is a rebel against manhood, womanhood and brotherhood. The essence of his crime is nothing less than the complete destruction of all that dignifies and ennobles human character.

I don't know how it seems to you, in reading the authoritative utterances of our government, and the officers of our army, respecting slavery; but it really seems to me that they are woefully mistaken if they think this country can ever have peace while slavery is allowed to live. Every little while you learn that slaves have been sent back to their loyal masters. We hear that while other property is freely confiscated, this peculiar property is only held to the end of the war, and the inference seems to be that these slaves, by and by, are to enter into the basis of negotiations between the government and the slaveholding rebels. I am anxious to look charitably upon everything looking to the suppression of rebellion and treason. I want to see the monster destroyed; but I think that while our government uses its soldiers to catch and hold slaves, and offers

to put down slave insurrections, and subject them to the control and authority of their rebel masters will make precious little headway in putting down the rebels, or in establishing the peace of the country hereafter.

There is still an effort to conciliate the border states. Our government does not know slavery. Our rulers do not yet know slaveholders. We are likely to find them out after a while. We are just now in a pretty good school. The revolution through which we are passing is an excellent instructor. We are likely to find out what is meant by Southern chivalry and Southern honor. When you have watched a while longer the course of Southern men, whether in the cotton states or in the slave-breeding states you will have become convinced that they are all of the same species, and that the border states are as bad as any. JOHN BELL, the Union man, is as much a traitor as FRANK PICKENS of South Carolina. We shall learn by and by that such men as [JOHN] LECHTER of Virginia, [CLAIBORNE] JACKSON of Missouri, [BERIAH] MAGOFFIN of Kentucky, were traitors and rebels in the egg, only waiting to be hatched by the heat of surrounding treason.²⁰ The ties that bind slaveholders together are stronger than all other ties, and in every state where they hold the reins of government, they will take sides openly or secretly with the slaveholding rebels. Conciliation is out of the question. They know no law, and will respect no law but the law of force. The safety of the government can be attained only in one way, and that is, by rendering the slaveholders powerless.

Slavery, like all other gross and powerful forms of wrong which appeal directly to human pride and selfishness, when once admitted into the framework of society, has the ability and tendency to beget a character in the whole network of society surrounding it, favorable to its continuance. The very law of its existence is growth and dominion. Natural and harmonious relations easily repose in their own rectitude, while all such as are false and unnatural are conscious of their own weakness, and must seek strength from without. Hence the explanation of the uneasy, restless, eager anxiety of slaveholders. Our history shows that from the formation of this government, until the attempt now making to break it up, this class of men has been constantly pushing schemes for the safety and supremacy of the slave system. They have had marvelous success. They have completely destroyed freedom in the slave states, and were doing their best to accomplish the same in the free states. He is a very imperfect reasoner who attributes the steady rise and ascendancy of slavery to anything else than the nature of slavery itself. Truth may be careless and forgetful, but a lie cannot afford to be either. Truth may repose upon its inherent strength,

20. Douglass identifies a number of politicians who proclaimed loyalty to the Union while at the same time arguing for the perpetuation of slavery (John Bell, John Lechter, Claiborne Jackson, and Beriah Magoffin) and argues that they are not to be trusted any more than the secessionist Frank Pickens (1805–1869), who was then governor of South Carolina.

but a falsehood rests for support upon external props. Slavery is the most stupendous of all lies, and depends for existence upon a favorable adjustment of all its surroundings. Freedom of speech, of the press, of education, of labor, of locomotion, and indeed all kinds of freedom, are felt to be a standing menace to slavery. Hence, the friends of slavery are bound by the necessity of their system to do just what the history of the country shows they have done—that is, to seek to subvert all liberty, and to pervert all the safeguards of human rights. They could not do otherwise. It was the controlling law of their situation.

Now, if these views be sound, and are borne out by the whole history of American slavery, then for the statesman of this hour to permit any settlement of the present war between slavery and freedom, which will leave untouched and undestroyed the relation of master and slave, would not only be a great crime, but a great mistake, the bitter fruits of which would poison the life blood of unborn generations. No grander opportunity was ever given to any nation to signalize, either its justice and humanity, or its intelligence and statesmanship, than is now given to the loyal American people. We are brought to a point in our national career where two roads meet and diverge. It is the critical moment for us. The destiny of the mightiest republic in the modern world hangs upon the decision of that hour. If our government shall have the wisdom to see, and the nerve to act, we are safe. If it fails, we perish, and go to our own place with those nations of antiquity long blotted from the maps of the world. I have only one voice, and this neither loud nor strong. I speak to but few, and have little influence; but whatever I am or may be, I may, at such a time as this, in the name of justice, liberty and humanity, and in that of the permanent security and welfare of the whole nation, urge all men, and especially the government, to the abolition of slavery. Not a slave should be left a slave in the returning footprints of the American army gone to put down this slaveholding rebellion. Sound policy, not less than humanity, demands the instant liberation of every slave in the rebel states.