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English 101

Essay 4

3/30/05 King-Thoreau: Some Laws Were

Made for Breakin'

‘Some laws were made for breakin’; this was and is the spirit of what Martin Luther King Jr. was about and also with Henry Thoreau. Some of the things about these men were similar or the same and some were a lot different.

King got into a lot of trouble back in his day. He went to prison for a while breaking laws that were pro-segregation. King wrote while he was in prison a letter to all of his clergy friends. King thought himself to be like Paul back in Bible days. His heartfelt

letter helped to spark a revolution to drop segregation like a hot potato. King was concerned that his fellow church pastors were for segregation or did not want to get their hands dirty to change things. So, King explained why he was there. He was just on routine business and did not mean any harm to anybody, but by doing the work set before him, he was arrested.

King says in his letter that “In any nonviolent campaign, there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to see if

injustices exist, negotiation, self-purification, and direct action. We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham.” (para. 6) When it comes down to it, King and his staff had really no alternative or nothing would get done. His organized demonstrations got him and part of his staff locked up.

For the self-purification process, everyone involved in the coming demonstrations had to ask themselves “Are you able to take blows without retaliating?”

and “Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?” (para. 8) These demonstrations were aimed at hurting Birmingham’s economy enough to where negotiations were possible. King says in his letter “Lamentably, it is an historic fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily.” (para. 12) Shortly after this remark, King says that his clergy friends are ignorant and naïve by giving a ‘You might be a victim of segregation if’ speech. He was clearly disappointed by his friends’ attitude. Even

though his friends were local church pastors and such, their attitude was clearly not on the level.

King knew in his heart that this segregation issue wouldn't fix itself. He wanted to make known to everyone that time in this case would not "inevitably cure all ills." (para. 26) So, King did what he needed to do. The thought of 'Enough is enough! Some laws were made to be broken and this is one of them' came into his head. That is what happened.

Thoreau had the same thought, but his approach was much different. Thoreau was not an activist as King was, but unjust laws in his view were still made to be broken. King was very active because he made a direct effort, while Thoreau just didn't participate in an unjust action. King was for government support of his actions, even though it took a lot of work to get his point across. Thoreau was a near anarchist who did not want the government around much

and if it were around, to count him out of participation of it.

King used the Bible as a reference as well as Thoreau did; however they used it much differently. King used the Bible in the form of reckoning with being called an extremist. King used Amos and Jesus and Paul in his letter to confirm the charges of being an extremist and as a reflection on himself. In his letter, King says “Was not Jesus an extremist for love?” (para. 31) King quotes the Bible here.



Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. (para. 31)

King says also in his letter “Was not Amos an extremist for justice?” (para. 31) King quotes the Bible here as well.

Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream.

King says in his letter “Is not Paul an extremist? (para. 31) He quotes the Bible here too. ‘I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus’ (para. 31).

When Thoreau quoted the Bible, he used this scripture:

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap Jesus in his words.

They sent out their disciples and the Herodians. ‘Teacher’, they said, ‘we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in

accordance with the truth. You are not swayed by men because you do not pay attention to who they are.

Tell us then what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?' But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, 'you hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.' They brought him a denarius and he asked them, 'Whose portrait is this and whose inscription?' 'Caesar's', they

replied. Then he said to them, ‘give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’ When they heard this, they were amazed. So, they left him and went away.

(Thoreau para. 23)

Thoreau and King really used scriptures differently. King uses his references to explain his activism and why his cause is the right one. Thoreau on the other hand just wanted everyone to know that he wasn’t

paying an unjust tax using the scripture as his explanation why.

In conclusion, King proved that action gets the job done. His very active approach got him into a lot of hot water: the resistance, the tension, the jail time, and being martyred. His mission was accomplished. Thoreau wanted the same ends but he didn't go about the same means and being a pacifist, did not get his mission in life accomplished. No one joined him in his quest for justice. Thoreau did serve as

an inspiration to King and lots of others who wanted to be activists. This shows that everything good, it seems, takes hard work, endurance, and being an activist.