

Discussion Guide



Directions: Discuss the following questions with your partner(s).

1. Historically, why had enslaved people been prevented from learning to read?
2. What important event took place when Douglass was eight years old?
3. What were some of the more inventive ways Douglass worked to become a better reader? Would some of these options have been available to him if he had been less resourceful, or less humble? Explain.
4. Douglass failed in his 1836 attempt to escape. Slaves were not permitted to leave their masters without permission, and fugitive slaves could be (and in some places were legally required to be) returned to their masters. In other words, Douglass's attempt to escape was against the law. But was it virtuous? Explain.
5. Douglass said, "If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle." How does this quotation help you understand the virtue of responsibility?
6. He went on to say, "The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress. ...Men may not get all they pay for in this world; but they must certainly pay for all they get. If we ever get free from the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others."

The Thirteenth Amendment, Section 1 states: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

Did Douglass's ideas about responsibility become irrelevant with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment? Or are they still true today? Explain.

7. George Bernard Shaw said, "Liberty means responsibility. That is why most men dread it." Why does liberty require responsibility? Why does Shaw say most men dread it? Do you agree with him?
8. Slavery was a terrible injustice that ended in the U.S. after people worked for over a century. What is the responsibility of citizens in a constitutional republic to protect others' rights?
9. Given your responses to the previous two questions, what is the relationship between civic virtue among citizens and the effective running of a republic?
10. For what are you responsible? For what will you be responsible in five years?
11. How do—and will—you act responsibly in your daily life?