

# The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro

Speech given by Frederick Douglass at Rochester, New York, July 5, 1852

(...) Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here to-day? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? and am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us?

Would to God, both for your sakes and ours, that an affirmative answer could be truthfully returned to these questions! Then would my task be light, and my burden easy and delightful. (...) But such is not the state of the case. I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters<sup>1</sup> into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems<sup>2</sup>, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day?

Fellow-citizens, above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail<sup>3</sup> of millions! whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, to-day, rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reach them. If I do forget, if I do not faithfully remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day, "may my right hand forget her cunning, and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!"<sup>4</sup> To forget them, to pass lightly over their wrongs, and to chime in with the popular theme, would be treason most scandalous and shocking, and would make me a reproach before God and the world. My subject, then, fellow-citizens, is American slavery. I shall see this day and its popular characteristics from the slave's point of view. Standing there identified with the American bondman<sup>5</sup>, making his wrongs mine, I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July! Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting. America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the constitution and the Bible which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery-the great sin and shame of America! (...)

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<sup>1</sup> Chains

<sup>2</sup> A religious or patriotic song.

<sup>3</sup> Cries of pain or grief.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 137:6.

<sup>5</sup> A person who is considered the property of another person (here synonym of slave)

Is it not astonishing that, while we are ploughing, planting, and reaping, using all kinds of mechanical tools, erecting houses, constructing bridges, building ships, working in metals of brass, iron, copper, silver and gold; that, while we are reading, writing and ciphering, acting  
40 as clerks, merchants and secretaries, having among us lawyers, doctors, ministers, poets, authors, editors, orators and teachers; that, while we are engaged in all manner of enterprises common to other men, digging gold in California, capturing the whale in the Pacific, feeding sheep and cattle on the hill-side, living, moving, acting, thinking, planning, living in families as husbands, wives and children, and, above all, confessing and worshipping the Christian's  
45 God, and looking hopefully for life and immortality beyond the grave, we are called upon to prove that we are men!

Would you have me argue that man is entitled to liberty? that he is the rightful owner of his own body? You have already declared it. Must I argue the wrongfulness of slavery? (...) What, am I to argue that it is wrong to make men brutes, to rob them of their liberty, to work  
50 them without wages, to keep them ignorant of their relations to their fellow men, to beat them with sticks, to flay their flesh with the lash<sup>6</sup>, to load their limbs with irons, to hunt them with dogs, to sell them at auction, to sunder<sup>7</sup> their families, to knock out their teeth, to burn their flesh, to starve them into obedience and submission to their masters? Must I argue that a system thus marked with blood, and stained with pollution, is wrong? No! I will not. I have  
55 better employment for my time and strength than such arguments would imply.

What, then, remains to be argued? Is it that slavery is not divine; that God did not establish it; that our doctors of divinity are mistaken? There is blasphemy in the thought. That which is inhuman, cannot be divine! Who can reason on such a proposition? They that can, may; I cannot. The time for such argument is passed. (...)

60 What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham<sup>8</sup>; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow  
65 mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour. (...)

70 But a still more inhuman, disgraceful, and scandalous state of things remains to be presented. By an act of the American Congress, not yet two years old, slavery has been nationalized in its most horrible and revolting form. By that act, Mason and Dixon's line has been obliterated; New York has become as Virginia; and the power to hold, hunt, and sell men, women and children, as slaves, remains no longer a mere state institution, but is now an institution of the  
75 whole United States. The power is co-extensive with the star-spangled banner, and American Christianity. Where these go, may also go the merciless slave-hunter. Where these are, man is not sacred. He is a bird for the sportsman's gun. By that most foul and fiendish<sup>9</sup> of all human decrees, the liberty and person of every man are put in peril. Your broad republican domain is hunting ground for men. Not for thieves and robbers, enemies of society, merely, but for men

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<sup>6</sup> To whip

<sup>7</sup> To separate

<sup>8</sup> A pretense, a fraud.

<sup>9</sup> Devilish, evil.

80 guilty of no crime. Your law-makers have commanded all good citizens to engage in this  
hellish sport. Your President, your Secretary of State, your lords, nobles, and ecclesiastics  
enforce, as a duty you owe to your free and glorious country, and to your God, that you do  
this accursed thing. Not fewer than forty Americans have, within the past two years, been  
85 hunted down and, without a moment's warning, hurried away in chains, and consigned to  
slavery and excruciating torture. Some of these have had wives and children, dependent on  
them for bread; but of this, no account was made. The right of the hunter to his prey stands  
superior to the right of marriage, and to all rights in this republic, the rights of God included!  
For black men there is neither law nor justice, humanity nor religion. The Fugitive Slave Law  
90 makes mercy to them a crime; and bribes the judge who tries them. An American judge gets  
ten dollars for every victim he consigns to slavery, and five, when he fails to do so. The oath  
of any two villains is sufficient, under this hell-black enactment, to send the most pious and  
exemplary black man into the remorseless jaws of slavery! His own testimony is nothing. He  
can bring no witnesses for himself. The minister of American justice is bound by the law to  
hear but one side; and that side is the side of the oppressor. Let this damning fact be  
95 perpetually told. Let it be thundered around the world that in tyrant-killing, king-hating,  
people-loving, democratic, Christian America the seats of justice are filled with judges who  
hold their offices under an open and palpable bribe, and are bound, in deciding the case of a  
man's liberty, to hear only his accusers! (...) I take this law to be one of the grossest  
infringements of Christian Liberty, and, if the churches and ministers of our country were not  
100 stupidly blind, or most wickedly indifferent, they, too, would so regard it.

(...)The fact that the church of our country (with fractional exceptions) does not esteem "the  
Fugitive Slave Law" as a declaration of war against religious liberty, implies that that church  
regards religion simply as a form of worship, an empty ceremony, and not a vital principle,  
105 requiring active benevolence, justice, love, and good will towards man. It esteems sacrifice  
above mercy; psalm-singing above right doing; solemn meetings above practical  
righteousness. A worship that can be conducted by persons who refuse to give shelter to the  
houseless, to give bread to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and who enjoin obedience to a  
law forbidding these acts of mercy is a curse, not a blessing to mankind. The Bible addresses  
110 all such persons as "scribes, pharisees, hypocrites, who pay tithe of mint, anise, and cummin,  
and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith."

But the church of this country is not only indifferent to the wrongs of the slave, it actually  
takes sides with the oppressors. It has made itself the bulwark<sup>10</sup> of American slavery, and the  
115 shield of American slave-hunters. Many of its most eloquent Divines, who stand as the very  
lights of the church, have shamelessly given the sanction of religion and the Bible to the  
whole slave system. They have taught that man may, properly, be a slave; that the relation of  
master and slave is ordained of God; that to send back an escaped bondman to his master is  
clearly the duty of all the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ; and this horrible blasphemy is  
120 palmed off upon the world for Christianity. (...)

The American church is guilty, when viewed in connection with what it is doing to uphold  
slavery; but it is superlatively guilty when viewed in its connection with its ability to abolish  
slavery. (...) Let the religious press, the pulpit, the Sunday School, the conference meeting,  
125 the great ecclesiastical, missionary, Bible and tract associations of the land array their  
immense powers against slavery, and slave-holding; and the whole system of crime and blood  
would be scattered to the winds, and that they do not do this involves them in the most awful  
responsibility of which the mind can conceive. (...)

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<sup>10</sup> Cover, guard.

130 My spirit wearies of such blasphemy; and how such men can be supported, as the "standing  
types and representatives of Jesus Christ," is a mystery which I leave others to penetrate. In  
speaking of the American church, however, let it be distinctly understood that I mean the  
great mass of the religious organizations of our land. There are exceptions, and I thank God  
that there are. Noble men may be found, scattered all over these Northern States, of whom  
135 Henry Ward Beecher, of Brooklyn; Samuel J. May, of Syracuse; and my esteemed friend  
(Rev. R. R. Raymond) on the platform, are shining examples; and let me say further, that,  
upon these men lies the duty to inspire our ranks with high religious faith and zeal, and to  
cheer us on in the great mission of the slave's redemption from his chains.

140 (...) Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day  
presented, of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. There are forces in  
operation which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery.

"The arm of the Lord is not shortened," and the doom of slavery is certain. I, therefore, leave  
145 off where I began, with hope. While drawing encouragement from "the Declaration of  
Independence," the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my  
spirit is also cheered by the obvious tendencies of the age. (...) In the fervent aspirations of  
William Lloyd Garrison, I say, and let every heart join in saying it:

150 *God speed the year of jubilee*  
*The wide world o'er!*  
*When from their galling chains set free,*  
*Th' oppress'd shall vilely bend the knee,*

155 *And wear the yoke of tyranny*  
*Like brutes no more.*  
*That year will come, and freedom's reign.*  
*To man his plundered rights again*  
*Restore.*

160 *God speed the day when human blood*  
*Shall cease to flow!*  
*In every clime be understood,*  
*The claims of human brotherhood,*  
165 *And each return for evil, good,*  
*Not blow for blow;*

*That day will come all feuds to end,*  
*And change into a faithful friend*  
170 *Each foe.*