

## 54 QUOTATIONS



Frederick Douglass

(1818-1895)

Frederick Douglass escaped from slavery to become a leader of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Abolitionist movement, demonstrating the intellectual capacity of black people by lecturing and publishing influential bestselling autobiographies, the first his classic *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). He learned from white children in his neighborhood while a slave in Baltimore and taught himself to read and write. At age 16 he was beaten regularly by his slave master, a poor white farmer, until finally he turned on the man in an altercation and was never beaten by him again. He escaped in 1838, joined the white Abolitionists in Boston and in 1841 was invited to speak at an anti-slavery convention in Nantucket. He made such a stirring impression he was soon in great demand and began lecturing throughout the country with startling eloquence and power. In Indiana in 1843 he got chased and beaten by an angry mob that broke his hand. He went on to lecture to overflow crowds in Britain and Ireland, held many offices in this country and was nominated for Vice President of the United States as the running mate of the radical feminist Victoria Woodhull. His first wife was black, his second was a white radical feminist 20 years younger than himself. The impact of Frederick Douglass in American history is comparable to that of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

ORDER OF TOPICS: slaves, America, Christianity, freedom, education, dignity, integrity, we are in this together, rebellion, free speech, lecturing, agitation, progress, coalition with women's rights movement, self-reliance, Republican Party, Abraham Lincoln, integration, Civil War call to arms:

### SLAVES

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant.

Brothers and sisters were by blood; but slavery had made us strangers.

Slaves are generally expected to sing as well as to work.

Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy.

To make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one.

I didn't know I was a slave until I found out I couldn't do the things I wanted.

I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed.

Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have the exact measure of the injustice and wrong which will be imposed on them.

#### AMERICA

What is the slave to the 4<sup>th</sup> of July?

To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony.

What is to be thought of a nation boasting of its liberty, boasting of its humanity, boasting of its Christianity, boasting of its love of justice and purity, and yet having within its borders three millions of persons denied by law the right of marriage?

The destiny of the colored American...is the destiny of America.

#### CHRISTIANITY

The slave auctioneer's bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other.

I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ; I therefore hate the...slave-holding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.

I prayed for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs.

#### FREEDOM

I had as well be killed running as die standing.

I felt as one might feel upon escape from a den of hungry lions.

I could, as a free man, look across the bay toward the Eastern shore where I was born a slave.

#### EDUCATION

Knowledge makes a man unfit to be a slave.

Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.

A little learning, indeed, may be a dangerous thing, but the want of learning is a calamity to any people.

It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.

#### DIGNITY

The soul that is within me no man can degrade.

A gentleman will not insult me, and no man not a gentleman can insult me.

## INTEGRITY

I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than to be false, and to incur my own abhorrence.

## WE ARE IN THIS TOGETHER

A man's character always takes its hue, more or less, from the form and color of things about him.

No man can put a chain about the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck.

The white man's happiness cannot be purchased by the black man's misery.

## REBELLION

The thing worse than rebellion is the thing that causes rebellion.

When men sow the wind it is rational to expect that they will reap the whirlwind.

The insurrection of Nathaniel Turner had been quelled, but the alarm and terror had not subsided.

Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.

Thoughts and sentiments were exchanged between us, which might well be called incendiary, by oppressors and tyrants; and perhaps the time has not even now come, when it is safe to unfold all the flying suggestions which arise in the minds of intelligent slaves.... The slaveholder, kind or cruel, is a slaveholder still—the every hour violator of the just and inalienable rights of man; and he is, therefore, every hour silently whetting the knife of vengeance for his own throat. He never lisps a syllable in commendation of the fathers of this republic, nor denounces any attempted oppression of himself, without inviting the knife to his own throat, and asserting the rights of rebellion for his own slaves.

## FREE SPEECH

To suppress free speech is a double wrong. It violates the rights of the hearer as well as those of the speaker.

## LECTURING

Fugitive slaves were rare then, and as a fugitive slave lecturer, I had the advantage of being the first one out.

I was generally introduced as a "*chattel*"—a "*thing*"—a piece of southern "*property*"—the chairman assuring the audience that *it* could speak.

At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed.

It is not light that we need, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder.

If any one is to blame for disturbing the quiet of the slaves and slave-masters...

*I am the man.*

## AGITATION

Power concedes nothing without a demand.

Man's greatness consists in his ability to do and the proper application of his powers to things needed to be done.

Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground.

#### PROGRESS

Without a struggle, there can be no progress.

I have observed this in my experience of slavery,—that whenever my condition was improved, instead of its increasing my contentment, it only increased my desire to be free.

#### COALITION WITH WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

I would unite with anybody to do right and with nobody to do wrong.

#### SELF-RELIANCE

And if the negro cannot stand on his own legs, let him fall also. All I ask is, give him a chance to stand on his own legs!

People might not get all they work for in this world, but they must certainly work for all they get.

#### REPUBLICAN PARTY

I recognize the Republican party as the sheet anchor of the colored man's political hopes and the ark of his safety.

I am a Republican, a black, dyed in the wool Republican, and I never intend to belong to any other party than the party of freedom and progress.

#### ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Mr. Lincoln was not only a great President, but a *great man*—too great to be small in anything. In his company I was never in any way reminded of my humble origin, or of my unpopular color.

#### INTEGRATION

Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters US, let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power under the earth which can deny that he has earned the right of citizenship in the United States.

#### CIVIL WAR CALL TO ARMS

...Massachusetts now welcomes you to arms as her soldiers. She has but a small colored population from which to recruit. She has full leave of the General Government to send one regiment to the war, and she has undertaken to do it. Go quickly and help fill up this first colored regiment from the North. I am authorized to assure you that you will receive the same wages, the same rations, the same equipments, the same protection, the same treatment and the same bounty secured to white soldiers. You will be led by able and skillful officers—men who will take especial pride in your efficiency and success. They will be quick to accord to you all the honor you shall merit by your valor—and see that your rights and feelings are respected by other soldiers...

The day dawns—the morning star is bright upon the horizon! The iron gate of our prison stands half open. One gallant rush from the North will fling it wide open, while four millions of our brothers and sisters, shall march out into Liberty! The chance is now given you to end in a day the bondage of centuries, and to rise in one bound from social degradation to the plane of common equality with all other varieties of

men. Remember Denmark Vesey of Charleston. Remember Nathaniel Turner of South Hampton, remember Shields Green, and Cope and who followed noble John Brown, and fell as glorious martyrs for the cause of the slave...

This is our golden opportunity—let us accept it—and forever wipe out the dark reproaches unsparingly hurled against us by our enemies. Win for ourselves the gratitude of our Country—and the best blessings of our posterity through all time. The nucleus of the first regiment is now in camp at Readville, a short distance from Boston. I will undertake to forward to Boston all persons adjudged fit to be mustered into the regiment, who shall apply to me at any time within the next two weeks. [2 March 1863]

