

READING

“What the Black Man Wants”

During the Reconstruction era, Frederick Douglass demanded government action to secure land, voting rights, and civil equality for Black Americans. The following passage is excerpted from a speech given by Douglass to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in April 1865.

We may be asked, I say, why we want it [the right to vote]. I will tell you why we want it. We want it because it is our right, first of all. No class of men can, without insulting their own nature, be content with any deprivation of their rights. We want it again, as a means for educating our race. Men are so constituted that they derive their conviction of their own possibilities largely from the estimate formed of them by others. If nothing is expected of a people, that people will find it difficult to contradict that expectation. By depriving us of suffrage, you affirm our incapacity to form an intelligent judgment respecting public men and public measures; you declare before the world that we are unfit to exercise the elective franchise, and by this means lead us to undervalue ourselves, to put a low estimate upon ourselves, and to feel that we have no possibilities like other men ...

What I ask for the Negro is not benevolence, not pity, not sympathy, but simply justice. [Applause.] The American people have always been anxious to know what they shall do with us ... everybody has asked the question, and they learned to ask it early of the abolitionists, “What shall we do with the Negro?” I have had but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us! ... All I ask is, give him a chance to stand on his own legs! Let him alone! If you see him on his way to school, let him alone, don’t disturb him! If you see him going to the dinner-table at a hotel, let him go! If you see him going to the ballot-box, let him alone, don’t disturb him! ...¹

¹ Frederick Douglass, “[What the Black Man Wants](#)” (speech before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, April 1865), (accessed April 25, 2013).