Kant’s primary interest in “What is Enlightenment?” is to provide a characterization of what enlightenment is, what the causes are that can prevent it, and how to achieve it (both in terms of what an individual can do and what political conditions are conducive).

**Historical Background:**
- The eighteenth century saw the rise of Prussia within Europe, a series of major wars (including the Seven Years War, perhaps the first World War), and the emergence of “Enlightened Absolutism” with Frederick the Great.

**Intellectual Background:**
- Kant is an Enlightenment thinker. He belongs, however, to a second generation of Enlightenment thinkers; he is much more reflective on what reason is, and what it can and cannot accomplish.

**Kant’s Main Position:**
- Kant offers an answer to the question “What is Enlightenment?”. He stresses that one should think for oneself, independently of others. The reasons for not doing so are cowardice and laziness. So all one needs is courage and freedom.
- Kant makes an important distinction between the private and public use of reason, arguing that the latter is essential to promoting the Enlightenment. This distinction is a bit counter-intuitive, so it is important to get it right.
- The essay also has a religious and political agenda. He thinks that religious dogmas are the most dangerous, and need to be combatted (precisely by people thinking for themselves). In various ways and by various means, he is also attempting to influence Frederick the Great politically.
- Kant’s views on Enlightenment fit in with his views on ethics, which are discussed in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, which we’ll be reading for Friday and the following week.

**Reading Questions:**
1. “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage.” What example would illustrate particularly well what Kant has in mind?

2. “A public can only achieve enlightenment slowly. A revolution may well put an end to autocratic despotism and to rapacious or power-seeking oppression, but it will never produce a true reform in ways of thinking. Instead, new prejudices, like the ones they replaced, will serve as a leash to control the great unthinking mass.” Why does Kant think that enlightenment can be achieved only slowly? Does Kant make this claim because he is fundamentally conservative (since he is against revolution)? If so, how would that further his agenda? If not, why not?

3. “For enlightenment of this kind, all that is needed is freedom…. The officer says: Don’t argue, get on parade! The tax-official: Don’t argue, pay! The clergyman: Don’t argue, believe! (Only one ruler in the world says: Argue as much as you like and about whatever you like, but obey!) All this means restrictions on freedom everywhere.” Is Kant contradicting himself? (On the one
hand, he seems to be in favor of freedom. On the other, he seems to be insisting on the restriction of freedom.) Can this apparent contradiction be avoided? If so, how? If not, why would I assign this reading? In thinking about this, it might be useful to keep in mind a sentence toward the end of the essay: “A high degree of civil freedom seems advantageous to a people’s intellectual freedom, yet it also sets up insuperable barriers to it. Conversely, a lesser degree of civil freedom gives intellectual freedom enough room to expand to its fullest extent.”

4. “I have portrayed matters of religion as the focal point of enlightenment.” Is this really (or entirely) true? Why does Kant seem to want to focus on religion?

5. Why does Kant think that man is more than a machine? What distinguishes man from a machine? And why is that important?