

SELF-EVIDENT
The Truths That Built a Nation

STUDY GUIDE TEN
“The Right of Property”

The Phrase

A right that flows from the Declaration’s foundation

Derived from the truths of the Declaration of Independence

Key Terms

Property. The fruit of a person’s labor; what one justly makes, earns, and holds. In its widest sense, all that a person has a right to, including their rights themselves.

Stewardship. The responsible use of what one owns as a trustee under God, accountable to use it well for God, family, and neighbor.

Labor. The work of one’s hands and mind; an extension of one’s life, and the source of rightful ownership.

What It Means

Among the rights that grow from the Declaration’s foundation, the right of property stands close to the center. Property here means more than land or money. It means the fruit of a person’s labor, the things a person rightly makes, earns, and holds as the result of his own work and stewardship. The right of property is the right to keep and direct what you have justly acquired.

This right flows directly from the rights of life and liberty. Your labor is an extension of your life; the hours you spend working are hours of your life poured out. What that labor produces is therefore rightly yours, an extension of your very self. To take the fruit of a man’s honest labor without cause is to take a piece of his life. The right of property is really the right of life and liberty worked out in the material world.

It is worth noting that the earlier drafts and traditions the Founders drew on sometimes spoke of life, liberty, and property together. Jefferson’s pursuit of happiness is broader than property, but it certainly includes it, for a man can hardly pursue a flourishing life if the fruit of his labor can be seized at will. Secure property is one of the conditions under which real human flourishing becomes possible.

Where It Came From

The right of property has strong Biblical grounding. The commandments themselves protect property: “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15) assumes that people rightly own things that others must not take. Scripture also honors honest labor and its fruit, teaching that the worker deserves his wages and that a person should enjoy the good of his own work.

The philosopher John Locke, so influential on the Founders, argued that property arises when a person mixes his labor with the world, and that protecting property is one of the chief reasons government exists at all. Locke tied property directly to life and liberty, seeing all three as natural rights that government must guard rather than grant.

The founding generation absorbed this understanding deeply. They saw secure property as essential to liberty because a people who cannot keep the fruit of their labor are not truly free; they are dependents at the mercy of whoever controls their livelihood. Property and freedom, in their minds, rose and fell together.

In Their Own Words

“As a man is said to have a right to his property, he may be equally said to have a property in his rights.”

— James Madison, essay on Property, National Gazette, 1792

Why It Matters Today

The right of property is easy to take for granted until it is threatened. But history shows that where the fruit of labor is not secure, freedom withers. When people cannot count on keeping what they honestly earn, they lose both the incentive to work and the independence that free citizens require. Secure property is not greed; it is one of the practical foundations of a free and responsible people.

At the same time, the Biblical view of property is never merely selfish. What we own, we hold as stewards under God, responsible to use it well and generously. The right of property and the duty of stewardship go together. We have a real right to the fruit of our labor, and we have a real responsibility to use it in service of God, family, and neighbor. Freedom and responsibility, once again, are inseparable.

Discussion Questions

1. In what sense is your labor an extension of your life, and how does that make the fruit of your labor rightly your own?
2. How does the right of property flow from the rights of life and liberty already named in the Declaration?
3. Read Exodus 20:15. What does the command against stealing assume about the right of property?
4. Why did the Founders see secure property as essential to freedom? What happens to a people who cannot keep what they honestly earn?
5. How do the right of property and the duty of stewardship work together in a Biblical understanding of ownership?

Going Deeper

The right of conscience guards the inner person, and the right of property guards the fruit of our labor. But there remains a further right, one that ties the others together and gives a free people the means to protect them all. It is the right to govern themselves.

Next in the series: “The Right of Self-Government”, the right of a free people to rule themselves by consent, and the bridge to the rest of the Declaration.