

SELF-EVIDENT

The Truths That Built a Nation

STUDY GUIDE ELEVEN

“The Right of Self-Government”

The Phrase

“. . . Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed . . .”

Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

Key Terms

Consent of the governed. The principle that just governmental authority comes from the agreement of the people who are governed.

Self-government. The right and responsibility of a free people to rule themselves and to hold their leaders accountable.

Just powers. The rightful, limited authority of government, held in trust to secure the people’s God-given rights.

What It Means

Here, the Declaration itself carries us into the next right, for the sentence that follows our foundational one names it directly. Governments, it says, are instituted among men to secure these rights, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. This is the right of self-government: the right of a free people to rule themselves, and to establish and hold accountable the authorities that govern them.

This right ties all the others together. If our rights come from God and government exists to protect them, then government is the servant of the people, not their master. Its authority is not its own; it is derived, granted by the consent of those it governs and answerable to them. A government that turns against the very rights it was created to protect has broken the trust on which its authority rests.

This is the great reversal the Declaration announces to the world. For most of human history, rulers claimed authority from above and treated the people as subjects. The Founders declared the opposite: that just authority flows upward, from a free people who consent to be governed, under God, for the protection of rights that came from God in the first place. The people are not the servants of the government; the government is the servant of the people.

Where It Came From

The idea that legitimate authority rests on consent, and that rulers are accountable, has roots in both Scripture and the long tradition the Founders inherited. Scripture teaches that governing authorities are established by God and are meant to serve the good of the people, acting as ministers of justice (Romans 13:1-4). Authority is a trust from God, exercised for the good of those under it, not a license for rulers to do as they please.

The Biblical tradition also carries a long memory of rulers being called to account when they betrayed that trust, from the prophets who confronted kings to the covenant traditions that bound rulers and people alike under God's law. Authority was never absolute; it was always accountable to a higher law.

The thinkers the Founders read, John Locke chief among them, argued that government arises from the consent of the governed and exists to protect natural rights. When a government systematically violates those rights, it forfeits its legitimacy. The Founders drew these streams together and made them the basis for the American experiment in ordered liberty and self-rule.

In Their Own Words

"Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? . . . I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."

— Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XVIII

Why It Matters Today

The right of self-government places a weighty responsibility on ordinary citizens. If authority derives from the consent of the governed, then the governed must be worthy of that trust. Self-government requires a self-governing people: citizens informed enough to understand their rights, virtuous enough to exercise them responsibly, and engaged enough to hold their leaders accountable. A people who will not govern themselves will end up governed by others.

This is where the truths of the Declaration reach all the way down to us. The rights it names are not self-maintaining. They endure only where citizens understand them, cherish them, and take up the duty of self-government in earnest. The forgotten voter, the disengaged citizen, the one who no longer knows what he possesses, is exactly the vulnerability a free republic cannot afford. To keep what the Founders won, each generation must take up the work of self-government again.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean that government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed? How does that reverse the way authority worked through most of history?
2. If government exists to protect rights that come from God, what follows when a government turns against those very rights?
3. Read Romans 13:1-4. How does Scripture describe the purpose and limits of governing authority?
4. Why does self-government require a self-governing people? What qualities must citizens have for the system to work?
5. How does the responsibility of self-government reach all the way down to ordinary citizens today, including in something as simple as being an informed voter?

Going Deeper

We have now traced the Declaration's foundation and the rights that flow from it, all the way from holding a truth to governing ourselves under God. One question remains, and it is the most personal of all. If these truths are real, they make a claim on us. The final guide asks what these truths require of the citizen who has come to understand them.

The series concludes with an optional capstone: “From Truth to Action”, what these self-evident truths require of us today.

OurSacredHonor.us | Sphere of Impact | Be the Hero of Your Story