

SELF-EVIDENT
The Truths That Built a Nation
STUDY GUIDE FOUR
“Created Equal”

The Phrase

“ . . . that all men are created equal . . . ”

Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

Key Terms

Equality of worth. The equal value and standing of every person before God and the law, regardless of ability, rank, or wealth.

Equality of outcome. The idea that everyone should end up with the same results or possessions, distinct from, and not claimed by, the Declaration.

Natural rights. Rights that belong to people by their created nature, not granted by government, and not dependent on human agreement.

What It Means

No phrase in the Declaration is more famous or more misunderstood than this one. The Founders did not claim that all men are equal in height, strength, intelligence, talent, or wealth. A moment’s observation shows that people differ in all of these ways. What the Founders claimed is something deeper and more important: that all men are equal in worth and standing before God, and therefore equal in their fundamental rights.

This is equality of dignity, not equality of ability, and it is not the same as equality of outcome. The Founders were not promising that every life would turn out the same. They were declaring that every life begins with the same essential worth and the same basic rights, no matter how different people are in their gifts or circumstances.

That distinction matters enormously. Equality of worth says the king and the farmer stand on level ground before the law and before God. It does not say the king and the farmer must end up with the same possessions or the same abilities. The Founders were leveling the ground of dignity, not the outcomes of life.

Where It Came From

The root of human equality is the same root we found in the last guide: every person is created in the image of God. If all human beings share that image equally, then all human beings share a fundamental dignity equally, whatever their rank or station. This is why the Biblical tradition could speak of a common humanity long before political declarations did.

Scripture states it plainly. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). And the book of Proverbs says, “The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the Maker of them all” (Proverbs 22:2). Equality of worth flows from a shared Maker.

It is worth being honest that the founding generation did not fully live up to this truth. The nation that declared all men created equal still held human beings in slavery, a profound contradiction that later Americans, many of them appealing to this very sentence, would fight to resolve. The principle was true even where the practice failed. The words of the Declaration became the standard by which the nation would later be judged and called to reform.

In Their Own Words

“Just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty, in matters spiritual and temporal, is a thing that all men are clearly entitled to by the eternal and immutable laws of God and nature.”

— Samuel Adams, The Rights of the Colonists, 1772

Why It Matters Today

The modern world often confuses the equality the Founders meant with an equality they never claimed. When people demand that everyone finish the same, achieve the same, or possess the same, they have traded equality of dignity for equality of outcome, and the two are very different things. The first honors human worth; the second usually requires trampling human freedom to enforce.

The Founders' equality is both humbler and stronger. It says no human being is worth more than another in the eyes of God or the law, while leaving people free to become what their gifts and effort allow. That is the equality worth defending: not sameness of result, but sameness of worth, and the equal protection of the rights that flow from it.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between equality of worth, equality of ability, and equality of outcome? Why does it matter which one we mean?
2. The Founders grounded equality in every person being made in God's image. Why is that a firmer foundation than grounding it in human agreement or government decree?
3. Read Galatians 3:28. How does a shared Maker create real equality among very different people?
4. The founding generation declared this truth while failing to fully live it. How can a principle still be true and binding even when people fall short of it?
5. Where do you see equality of worth and equality of outcome being confused today, and what happens when they are?

Going Deeper

Notice the chain tightening. We are created, so we can be created equal, and because we are created equal in worth, we each carry the same rights. The next phrase names where those rights come from, and it is the hinge the whole Declaration turns on: we are endowed by our Creator.

Next in the series: “Endowed by Their Creator”, the source of our rights and why that source puts them beyond the reach of any government.