

SELF-EVIDENT

The Truths That Built a Nation

STUDY GUIDE SIX

“Certain Unalienable Rights”

The Phrase

“... endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights ...”

Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

Key Terms

Unalienable. Unable to be transferred away, either by being taken from you or by being given up; bound to your very nature.

Alienate. In the older legal sense, to transfer, sell, or surrender something to another; an unalienable right cannot be alienated.

In trust. Held on behalf of another. In this view, our rights are held in trust from God and are therefore not ours to throw away.

What It Means

The Founders chose their words with care, and unalienable is one of the most deliberate words in the entire Declaration. To alienate something, in the older legal sense, is to transfer it away, to sell it, surrender it, or give it up. An unalienable right, then, is one that cannot be transferred away, either by someone taking it from you or by you handing it over. It stays with you because it is part of what you are.

This is a stronger claim than it first appears. The Founders were not only saying that no one can rightfully seize your basic rights. They were saying that you cannot even give them away yourself. You cannot sell yourself into being less than human. The rights are bound to your nature as a created being, and your nature is not yours to surrender.

The word certain is doing quiet work too. The Founders did not claim an endless list of rights. They claimed certain rights, specific and real, the ones that flow directly from being created by God. This keeps the Declaration grounded. It is not inventing rights out of thin air; it is naming the ones written into human nature itself.

Where It Came From

The conviction behind unalienable rights is that some things belong to human beings so deeply that they are not ours to trade away, because they were given by God and not by us. If God is the giver, then the gift is held in trust, and a trust cannot simply be sold off at will. Our life, our liberty, and our conscience are not merely possessions; they are responsibilities before the One who gave them.

This idea has Biblical roots in the truth that we belong first to God. “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.” (1

Corinthians 6:19-20). Because our lives are ultimately God's, we do not have the authority to throw away what He has entrusted to us, and no one else has the authority to seize it either.

The thinkers who shaped the Founders drew the same conclusion by reason. Because these rights come from our created nature rather than from any agreement, no agreement can erase them. A man cannot sign away his humanity, and no government can vote it out of existence. The rights are fixed because the nature they flow from is fixed.

In Their Own Words

“Every natural right not expressly given up, or, from the nature of a social compact, necessarily ceded, remains.”

— Samuel Adams, The Rights of the Colonists, 1772

Why It Matters Today

We often speak loosely today, calling all sorts of things rights, as though a right were simply anything we want badly enough. But the Founders meant something precise. Unalienable rights are not preferences or entitlements handed out by the government. They are the fixed possessions of every human being, grounded in creation and beyond the power of anyone to remove.

This matters because rights that can be given by the government can be taken by the government. If we forget the older, stronger meaning of unalienable, we will slowly accept the idea that our freedoms exist at the pleasure of those in power. The Founders left us a better inheritance: rights that no ruler granted, no ruler can revoke, and we ourselves cannot surrender, because they belong to what we are.

Discussion Questions

1. What does unalienable actually mean, and why is it significant that a right cannot even be given away by the person who holds it?
2. The Founders claimed certain rights, not unlimited rights. Why does grounding rights in human nature keep us from simply inventing new ones whenever we wish?
3. Read 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. How does belonging to God shape the idea that our lives are held in trust rather than owned outright?
4. What is the difference between an unalienable right and something we simply want or feel entitled to?
5. If people forget that rights are unalienable, how might they gradually come to accept that their freedoms exist only at the pleasure of those in power?

Going Deeper

With this phrase, the foundation is complete. We hold these truths, they are self-evident, we are created, created equal, endowed by our Creator, with rights that cannot be taken or surrendered. Now the Declaration does something remarkable: it names three of those rights specifically. The next three guides take them one at a time, beginning with the first and most basic of all.

Next in the series: “Life”, the first named right and the foundation on which every other right depends.