

# John Hope “We Are Struggling for Equality,” 1896 (Excerpts)

**Background:** In 1896, John Hope was a professor of classics and sciences at Roger Williams University in Nashville, Tennessee. He heard Booker T. Washington’s speech advising accommodation and was convinced that Washington’s counsel did not go far enough in standing up for equality. Hope made the speech below to a black debating society. He later became one of the founders of the Niagara Movement and the National Association for Advancement of Colored People. In 1906, Hope became the first black president of Atlanta Baptist College.

If we are not striving for equality, in heaven’s name for what are we living? I regard it as cowardly and dishonest for any of our colored men to tell white people that we are not struggling for equality. If money, education, and honesty will not bring to me as much privilege, as much equality as they bring to any American citizen, then they are to me a curse, and not a blessing. God forbid that we should get the implements with which to fashion our freedom, and then be too lazy or pusillanimous to fashion it. Let us not fool ourselves nor be fooled by others. If we cannot do what other free men do, then we are not free. Yes, my friends, I want equality. Nothing less. I want all that my God-given powers will enable me to get, then why not equality? Now, catch your breath, for I am going to use an adjective: I am going to say we demand social equality. In this republic we shall be less than free men, if we have a whit less than

that which thrift, education and honor afford other free men. If equality, political, economic and social, the boon of other men in this great country of ours, *of ours*, then equality, political, economic and social, is what we demand. Why build a wall to keep me out? I am no wild beast, nor am I an unclean thing.

Rise, Brothers! Come, let us possess this land. Never say, “Let well enough alone.” Cease to console yourselves with adages that numb the moral sense. Be discontented. Be dissatisfied. “Sweat and grunt” under present conditions. Be as restless as the tempestuous billows on the boundless sea. Let your discontent break mountain-high against the wall of prejudice, and swamp it to the very foundation. Then we shall not have to plead for justice nor on bended knee crave mercy; for we shall be men. Then and not until then will liberty in its highest sense be the boast of our Republic...

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are John Hope's main ideas in this speech?
2. What virtues and principles of constitutional government are addressed or implied in the document?
3. Explain his reasoning and compare these two statements:  
"If money, education, and honesty will not bring to me as much privilege, as much equality as they bring to any American citizen, then they are to me a curse, and not a blessing."  
"Now, catch your breath, for I am going to use an adjective: I am going to say we demand social equality. In this republic we shall be less than free men, if we have a whit less than that which thrift, education and honor afford other free men."
4. With what passages do you most agree? Disagree? What methods of achieving equality does Hope seem to advocate? Be prepared to explain your reactions to the document.
5. Compare and contrast the approaches of Booker T. Washington and John Hope.