**Gratitude and Privilege**

Based on [Luke 17:11-19](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Lk17.11-19)

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When I was in High School, there were a lot of guys who started to get very muscular, while I remained pretty small. So I wanted to lift weights and beef up. My dad told me that it is good to exercise, but not to get my hopes up. I just wasn’t built to be a big muscular man. And that proved true. I found that many boys my age were able to lift more and define their with what seemed to me to be little effort. And though I worked out twice as much and twice as hard, the progress I made still had me fall far short of most. I thought it was unfair, but eventually I had to accept what I could not change, and realize that if I were going to lift weights or anything else, I best compete against myself for growth rather than constantly compare myself with others.

There is a lot of talk about privilege and inequality today. Privilege means an advantage you have that most other people don’t. Maybe it’s something you're born with, like a muscular frame, or something you earned like wealth. In either case, you have an advantage over others because of it. That’s privilege, and that’s a big political topic today, especially when talking about matters of collective identity, such as race and gender, or of wealth. It is maintained that some races have an advantage over others in society and it is unfair.

Once upon a time, it was assumed that the natural endowments and circumstances you were born with were not fair or unfair; that was just the hand you were dealt. There was no injustice assumed from the fact that some people had advantages. Some people have better looks, talents, skills, family life etc. It's just the way things are. And knowing that not a single sparrow falls to the ground without God’s involvement, we know also that God was involved in arranging for everyone’s privilege or lack of privilege. We belong to him, and our natural endowments are his gifts to bestow according to his measure. And he has the right to, as the parable says, Do what he wants with what belongs to him. We don’t expect perfection from this world. Heaven is our home, and only when we attain that weight of glory, will there be no inequalities of advantage or privilege.

But in the 21st century God has long been on trial. God is no longer thought to be our judge. The script of religion has flipped. Mankind has become the judge. Man has decided that God is guilty of unfairly privileging some people more than others. Therefore, governments and laws must even out these advantages so no one has any privilege over anyone else. And if the government refuses to “address” these inequalities, then people need to act. People need to shake up the system, either through peaceful protests, riots, rebellions or maybe even a revolution.

For those of you who have been attentive to current events, this is the doctrine often preached today, and it's called critical theory. This perspective is directly responsible for stoking the covetousness that had lately blinded looters and rioters into thinking that it is justified to destroy property that doesn’t belong to them. The seventh commandment says do not steal...that means that you need to respect others property. The 9th and 10th commandments say do not covet...that means do not be jealous of what someone else has, or think it is unfair...but be grateful for what you do have. But these are, of course, rules given by a God whom they have already found guilty of unequal treatment.

Aside from its godless assumptions, there is one other problem with critical. Most successful people are forged in the crucible of adversity. Privilege can be a disadvantage. David didn’t complain that Goliath was privileged to be nine feet tall and have the muscle to beat him down. Goliath was naturally endowed with more strength, yet David persevered against all odds. (Of course there are no “odds” when God is involved, what he has prepared will happen will happen.) But what successful person ever became that way by complaining about how other people have it better? There is always someone who has it better.

So privilege can be a disadvantage, even as christ reminds us that it is the poor who are blessed and the rich will have a tough time entering heaven. Who hasn’t heard stories of rich children who never learn ingenuity or steadfastness or simple mercy...because they’ve never had to contend with real unfairness and overcome. They never learn gratitude.

The story of the ten lepers is about these two things--mercy and gratitude, and these with respect to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The lens of privilege is a helpful way to look at it. Nine Jews - privileged people of God; One Samaritan - underprivileged. He was the outcast, reckoned by the Jews to be outside of God’s grace for the unfaithfulness his ancestors, the wicked kings of Israel who followed in the ways of Jeroboam. Jesus heals them all, has mercy on them all, but only the Samaritan responded with gratitude to God.

The lesson here is that it’s harder for a privileged person to show gratitude for God. But the underprivileged knows how much he has to be grateful for, when he receives mercy. So too the Jew, who was always reckoned to be one of God’s privileged people, cannot experience the depth of gratitude of one who once was lost, but now is found. So too, we once took going to church for granted, until we were deprived for a while due to COVID. What joy and gratitude I have heard from God’s people expressed when they were able to return to his house as the congregation of saints.

So do we really want to make it societies goal to teach people that everyone deserves to have no unfair adversities in life? God gives us our circumstances and he will tempt no one more than they can bear. And more than that, there is a fundamental flaw in demanding that God act fairly. If justice were all that mattered, if we were to really expect God to give everyone what they deserve, all of us would inherit eternal death and hell. Of ourselves, we have done nothing worthy of salvation, but the wages of our sin is death. Is it really fair and equitable that Jesus who never did anything wrong, suffer the death and hell we deserve? But he did. The lamb of God did not covet our privilege, but he alone went uncomplaining forth to a cross he didn’t deserve. How much more should we go uncomplaining forth on our way to the eternal glory he has prepared for us privileged by baptism to be his own.