

The entitlement trap

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I can't stand the word "entitlement." I use it sometimes, when people annoy me with their belief that the world owes them something or that their needs are more important than those of others. But when I do this, I'm guilty of the same thing they are: dismissing the importance of someone else's desires and asserting the

importance of my own. I get caught in an entitlement trap.

Looking at the story of the prodigal son in church, I found myself focusing on the theme of entitlement. The story is one of those passages that reveals something different each time I encounter it. What struck me this time was how each brother thinks the world owes him something.

The younger brother's sense of entitlement is obvious: he demands his inheritance so he can live as he pleases. But the older brother displays a similar sense of entitlement in his condemnation and rejection of his brother. He believes that his hard work and good behavior entitle him to the economic benefits and stability of his father's love. Each brother is deeply flawed, yet the father graciously extends mercy to both.

I find myself caught up in debates about entitlement a lot these days. The concept defines conversations about health-care reform: poor people are accused of acting as if they are entitled if they champion universal health care. Others respond that only those who have worked hard enough to get privileged jobs are entitled to the luxury of good health coverage. The conversation gets so wrapped up in who is acting more entitled that we quickly lose sight of grace.

While there's a time and place for discussing rights and basic justice, at other times I think what's most helpful is the reminder that we all suffer from the inward focus that fosters feelings of entitlement. Despite being broken and flawed and undeserving, we all think the world owes us something. This keeps us from extending grace to our fellow broken brothers and sisters.

My take-away lesson from this encounter with the prodigal son is a hard one. I often have a hard time being merciful to those who say that extending grace to the poor and the oppressed is unwarranted. I want to call people out on their sense of entitlement, to force the older brother to be more forgiving. I find it difficult to act like the father instead, offering grace even to the people I think are acting like jerks.

Yet God demands we join in the outpouring of grace to all--that we get over ourselves and celebrate together despite our differences. God annoyingly thinks everyone is entitled--and unless I want to play the prodigal (either the younger or the older), I need to accept the way of the father.