BORN INTO PRIVILEGE by Andy Diestelkamp

Were you born into privilege? *Privilege* is “a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group.” Privilege is real and prevalent in all cultures and in numerous contexts.

None of us chose the circumstances into which we were born. Some are born into more privilege than are others, and many consider this to be unfair. Some cultures have formal castes (classes of people who inherit exclusive privileges). Most Americans find this formality repulsive, but we see in our own culture informal privilege has been, and still is, extended based on economic class and ethnicity. We should consider into what privilege *we* were born. The fact that we are Americans by birth gives us the privilege of U.S. citizenship.

Of course, privilege is not *only* based on one’s birth. Privilege may be acquired and is often granted based on merit. It may be earned. This is the kind of privilege that excites Americans. We see its value, promote it, and benefit from it. “If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” (2 Thes. 3:10). However, Jesus offers warnings in His parable of the rich fool (Lk. 12:16-21). This man had multiplied his wealth and felt entitled to eat, drink, and be merry. In his privileged position, he forgot that God was most important.

Also, consider the dialogue between Paul and the Roman commander who ordered Paul to be examined by scourging after the temple mob was incited by his preaching (Ac. 22:25-29). Americans, who are focused on their rights, see this text as Paul using his privilege as a Roman citizen to avoid unlawful punishment. Notice that while the commander was also a Roman citizen, his citizenship had been purchased at great expense, whereas Paul was *born* a Roman citizen. Paul subtly implied that his “born-into” privilege of Roman citizenship was weightier than the commander’s hard-earned citizenship.

Whether one’s privileges are obtained by birth or by achievement, most people will not tolerate being *denied* their privileges. People will fight, sue, kill, and be killed in defense of rights and privileges and imagine themselves noble in doing so. Yet, this nation daily denies life and liberty to the unborn and simultaneously declares as superior a woman’s “right to choose.” In other words, those who have had the privilege of birth deny the same privilege of birth to other persons. Similarly, for centuries many denied life and liberty to African slaves. Even after formal emancipation, privilege on the basis of skin color continued. Indeed, racial prejudice continues today in innumerable ways.

Positions of power and wealth and the privileges that accompany them are obviously prone to abuse, and this understandably gives *privilege* a bad name in the minds of those who have suffered at the hands of the privileged. Yet, despite clear and common abuses, the concept of privilege is *not* inherently unfair.

Recall one of Jesus’ rare encounters with a Gentile. A Roman centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant who was back at home (Matthew 8:5-13). When Jesus offered to go to the centurion’s home, the centurion humbly declined and acknowledged Jesus’ power to heal even at a great distance. The centurion understood authority and the privilege that comes with position from his own experience as a soldier, and he was able to transpose this into the spiritual realm. He believed that Jesus’ authority was so great that He could just speak a word and it would be done. Jesus, impressed by this man’s faith, used the occasion to rebuke and warn the Jews that they would be denied the privileges of kingdom citizenship if they did not repent and follow Him.

Most people reject Jesus in one way or another; but to those who faithfully receive Him, Jesus *gives* the privilege to become children of God (Jn. 1:10-13). This privilege is not extended to all but only to those who truly believe in Him. John described these believers as those who were born of God. Those who are born of God are born to privilege.

How then should we respond to the exercise of privilege in this present world? We are called to submit to it (Rom. 13:1-7). What might that look like? Jesus gives some examples in His Sermon on the Mount, including: turn the other cheek, give him your coat also, go an extra mile (Mt. 5:38-42). To many people it appears that Christ calls us to be doormats for the privileged to abuse, but this would be an un-Christ-like way to look at it. Jesus goes on to admonish us to love our enemies (vv. 43-45). This does not make us doormats but sons of God. What a privilege!

Jesus was no doormat. When Governor Pilate pulled the privilege of rank, Jesus used it as a teaching opportunity (Jn. 19:10,11). True privilege comes from God. If we abuse the privileges God gives us, vengeance *will* eventually come. Yet, Jesus is our example in willingly going to the cross as a sacrifice, instead of calling down legions of angels to punish abusers of privilege (1 Pt. 2:21-24).

If we find *ourselves* in a position of privilege, how should we handle it? Be sobered by the fact that Jesus has His harshest words for the rich and/or powerful who abuse their privileges, mistreat others, or otherwise behave selfishly (e.g. Lk. 6:24). John the Baptizer prepared the way for the Messiah, challenged the privileged, and called for repentance (Lk. 3:8-14). Paul reminded rich Christians that the privilege of wealth comes from God and is to be shared and used for the benefit of others (1 Tim. 6:17-19). Paul viewed all earthly privileges as rubbish when compared to the privilege of knowing Christ *and* His sufferings *and* attaining to the resurrection (Phil. 3:7-11). May we have the mind of Christ—being ready and willing to give up privilege to serve and save others (2:5-8).

Whether or not we are people of privilege by worldly standards, we are called to imitate Jesus. The privileges of this world are fleeting, and any privileges we enjoy are best used to God’s glory. The only privilege that ultimately matters is that which is extended by God to us through Jesus Christ. Indeed, unless you are *born again* into this privilege, you will be denied access to the tree of life (Rev. 22:12-14).