

Chapter 21

Addressing the Attitude of Entitlement Thinking

One of the top stressors in ministry is dealing with stinking thinking, both our own and that of the clients! And the attitude of entitlement is one of the top offenses. The definition of the term entitlement has evolved in the past decade with the current political climate, but this chapter deals with what now is the third listed meaning in the dictionary: “A belief that one is deserving of or entitled to certain privileges.” You can find more meanings that are picturesque on the internet, such as someone who thinks something is owed to them by life in general. Wikipedia gives a modified version: “In a casual sense, the term refers to a notion that one (or oneself) is deserving of some particular reward or benefit.” However you define it, we in Rescue Ministry deal with it daily.

Take a good look at who is most likely to participate in entitlement thinking. There are at least four types of people:

- There are those who have always had more than their surrounding neighbors...the most beautiful, the most talented, the most athletic. So the habit was established early in life.
- Some were born into a conversation of entitlement. Those who were raised by someone who had developed entitlement thinking from false premises of social welfare, hearing frequently what is considered by some to be class warfare statements of the sin of inequity.
- Christians who have focused on what they get from God more than what they owe to their Maker and their Redeemer, because they have heard more grace and mercy talk than stewardship and worship talk.
- Christians who go into ministry, with the thought of how great they are and how much they are doing for the Lord with the expectation that their works will be repaid in grandiose ways.

Each group tends to criticize the others. You might find it comforting to know that entitlement thinking is all over the place – not just in your workplace. Some comfort, right? But I have even heard some Rescue Mission staff express their entitlement of not having to deal with clients ‘entitlement thinking! There is a better way!

What’s Wrong with Entitlement Thinking?

What is so wrong with entitlement thinking? For starters, Scripture promotes the concept of giving, not taking. Entitlement thinkers are basically takers, not givers. They are focused on “me,” not “others.” Some entitlement thinking promotes victim-thinking. The world owes me because I have been mistreated and somebody has to pay. This kind of thinking leads down a path of whining, blaming, complaining, angrily lashing out, accusing, and potentially acting out.

I set myself up to be unhappy when I entertain feelings of entitlement. If I get what I am after, then I may feel sheepish or, on the other extreme, move on toward more greed. If I do not get what I think I deserve, I am hurt, resentful, and even move toward thoughts of revenge. Any of this does not bring me

to the joy God has for me, and I certainly have no understanding of the truth that “Godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment” (1Timothy 6:6).

Why is This Happening?

There are varying thoughts on the origin of the strong dose of entitlement in our society today. Early childhood educators lauded the two-year-old demand for needs to be met, promoting this as the child's path to independence. Where did that get us? Or labeling an adolescent's cry to have the best stuff to keep up with their peers as “just a stage?” Really? When did the practice of “demand” become appropriate behavior? Take a look at where we have come as a society in the topic of “rights.” We hear much talk on every front about protecting our rights. Have you thought lately about God's view of our “rights?” This is always a fascinating discussion in the Mission classrooms when I make the statement, “I have come to understand I do not have ‘rights’ but I do have many privileges that come with responsibilities.” This is initially greeted with disbelief and looks of incredulous apprehension. Of course, checking out Scripture, we find no proof that we are guaranteed anything in this life other than God's gift of grace to the humble. And in that guarantee, there is no talk of “my right,” but there is an obvious opportunity for gratitude. I shudder to think of anyone looking at the gifts of salvation and eternal life as other than an overwhelming privilege for which Jesus paid dearly.

It is in this same context that we look at the often-touted expression, “It's not fair!” Fairness is not extolled in the Scripture. God is a God of justice and if I got what was fair, it would be an extremely dismal future. I plead for mercy, not fairness. Jesus used parables to attempt to help the disciples to understand that such topics as who would sit on His right hand or His left was not a worthy discussion. I am really glad God hasn't given me what I deserve.

Root Cause?

For our ministry purposes, it is far more important to discover the “root cause.” Only when you get to the root can you make a difference. Obviously, the root of all wrong is sin, but how does sin impact this kind of thinking? Idolatry is the worship of something other than God. How about “me” worship? What would that sound like? Scripture says not to compare ourselves. It is difficult to have entitlement thinking without comparisons of my lot with others. And what does the Scripture say about gluttony and selfish ambition?

There is a definite confusion between needs and wants and between rights and privileges. We would be hard pressed to align these with any one of the areas identified in 1 John 2:16, “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.”

What Can We Do?

So what can we do to address this? Before we take on the opportunity to make a difference in lives in this area, we have some personal work to do. Before I can deal with attitudes of entitlement from clients, I must first deal with it in my own mind and heart. Scripture shows us over and over that until we get our own mote removed, we cannot successfully help another in beam removal (Matthew 7:3-5).

Is there any precedent set in Scripture regarding entitlement thinking? Read Luke 17:7-10. I need to be very sure that I am doing ministry because the Boss has called me to do it. He, the loving Shepherd of

my soul, has offered me this opportunity to represent Him before those He brings across my path. So He has the right to have expectations of me. This parable represents the work ethic of a servant of Jesus Christ...expectations take a back seat to assigned responsibilities.

The work ethic of the servant of Jesus Christ includes a large dose of humility (v.10) based on the great blessing we have already received. Responding to our Lord with the deep understanding of our unworthiness places us in position to be the empowered servant and protects us from entitlement thinking. When I see my own failings, I may be more compassionate with others.

Do you need help with having patience and compassion for the ugliness of this attitude? Have you considered that entitlement thinking may be a coping mechanism for dealing with shame? God has much better ways to deal with shame than the blame game. A whole chapter is devoted to helping clients with shame issues. If attempting to lay guilt trips on you is the client's cover for the personal shame of his or her past wrongdoing, then is your response more appropriately compassion instead of irritation?

If I feel victimized, it is easy to move toward feeling justified to speak or act in ugliness. Victims are focused on self-protection, using up energy that could be focused on progress and positive change. Taking personal responsibility for actions and the future is a scary thing for those who have experienced success deficiency. Entitlement thinking is a quick fix.

Using entitlement talking points is another way of attempting manipulation. When you know a client is using their manipulation skill with you, again for the sake of the client's growth, you look for ways to refute. An example would be: "Perhaps you really believe what you are saying to me. But I know to agree with your request I would be selling you short of your potential. (pause) I want you to achieve on your own without the need of manipulation."

Why Bother?

Why should we care? Why spend the energy to help a person move beyond this attitude? Hopefully, your motivation is not to make your own life easier, although we know ministry would be more pleasurable if we did not have to endure or confront this. But the client who does not move beyond entitlement is headed for more misery.

Entitlement thinking is pervasive. If I don't deal with it in one area of my life, I will experience it cropping into other areas. We all know this way of thinking is intrinsically connected with expectations, and expectations often are not grounded in reality. High expectations of people serving me, people helping me, including government, church, family, and even God, leads me to the habit of entitlement thinking that is easily transferred from one area to another. So a huge challenge comes in how we react or respond to this attitude in our clients.

If I can help my clients to move away from entitlement thinking, they will then be more capable of assertiveness in standing up for themselves as responsible persons. Getting the product I paid for, or receiving the agreed payment for services, are part of living in a country where the rule of law is basic. Only when I am free of entitlement thinking can I best negotiate business contracts. Only when I am no longer mastered by the attitude of entitlement can I communicate in an effective, assertive way.

Responding to entitlement comments in a loving and firm way can sometimes promote better thought processes. When we receive such comments, rather than ignoring them because there seems to be no reason to try to intervene, maybe I could consider appealing to what little truth they have since they have developed some good survival skills. One such comment could be, "I want you to assume for a minute that no one is able financially to provide you what you believe you are owed. What would happen to you? ...and then what? ...It seems to me that your waiting around for aid to come from others may be slowing you down from getting your stable end-goal?"

Dr. Matt Starcevich, founder of the Center for Coaching and Mentoring, labels entitlement as "the antithesis of continuous improvement." An entitlement belief system kills motivation to better oneself. Entitlement changes the person's ability to be a team player on the job and affects job performance and ultimately job retention. Is this not important for our clients? Progress means focusing on God's blessings that are being received in the present rather than resenting the past or fearing the future.

Action Plan

So, what can we do to impact change in this area? Since truth sets people free, we look again at how we can teach the truth. A major antidote for an attitude of entitlement is the attitude of gratitude. The practice of thanksgiving promotes the attitude of gratitude. Do your clients understand that their experience as homeless people could be a great opportunity in life's pursuit of happiness? (See Chapter 4 for more on this). Are we helping our clients to realize the privilege of receiving God's provisions? How we deal with life experiences makes us either bitter or better. The difference is in developing the attitude of gratitude.

A study of the promises of God as well as a study of Christian stewardship has possibilities for overcoming entitlement thinking. When I understand my role as a steward rather than the owner, I am no longer majoring on rights but appreciating privileges and focusing on responsibilities.

Modeling is once again very important. Listen to yourself. Do you speak words of entitlement or words of gratitude? Taking anyone or anything for granted keeps me from fully appreciating that person or thing. Check it out. You "earn" your paycheck. That remuneration is a combination of a number of people giving of their finances. If you have gone without a paycheck, you tend to get over taking it for granted.

One of the ways you can help another person is to try to figure out where they are coming from and begin the conversation there. What is their frame of reference? The Apostle Paul did this in Athens. He was much more effective after he spoke from their vantage point rather than his own.

We help our clients by giving them opportunities to achieve small successes and then helping them remember those successes in a framework of value (e.g. Commending a chore well done and mentioning how that impacts the community).

One more word about dealing with your own expectations in ministry...If you struggle with thoughts of "why me?" or "Is this what I get for all my hours of serving this person?", then may I suggest you return to Scripture and rediscover who gets the credit for anything accomplished on your watch. Check out Scriptures like 2 Corinthians 3:4-5; Romans 11:18; and Ephesians 3:7-8 to bring you back to truth. When

I know God is the One who gets credit and I am the one who is blessed to be called into service of the Sovereign God, then I don't choose instant payback. Because a client makes a statement like "you owe it to me," does not make the statement true. You are blessed to know the truth and sometimes you get to share it with the one who is uninformed. I remember a time when I replied to a client, "Well, actually I do owe you something. Scripture says because of what I have received from God, I am to love you (Romans 13:8). What you are objecting to is the most loving thing I can do for you right now."

Helping clients develop a new attitude is a huge job. Don't do this on your own. Engage co-workers in developing a plan to address this. Together, find verbal responses that lovingly give clients training in developing alternative thought patterns.

Addressing this attitude, like many other challenges we face in Rescue, is part of a process of offering truth to replace the storehouse of lies. Progress in this area goes hand in hand with many other teaching moments as we model accountability, freedom, responsibility, stewardship, etc.