

# 1

## 'You owe me'

An entitlement is a provision made in accordance with a legal framework of a society. Typically, entitlements are based on concepts of principle ('rights') which are themselves based in concepts of social equality or enfranchisement.

In the 2000s, the meaning of the word has extended to encompass informal expectations of social relationships, social conventions and social norms which are considered unreasonable or unduly prescriptive upon others.<sup>1</sup>

Narcissism – an inflated view of the self – is everywhere. Public figures say it's what makes them stray from their wives. Parents teach it by dressing children in T-shirts that say 'Princess'. Teenagers and young adults hone it on Facebook, and celebrity newsmakers have elevated it to an art form. And it's what's making people depressed, lonely and buried under piles of debt.<sup>2</sup>

Why was I so shocked by my response in that hospital room? Why did I expect a better deal? This was something that I urgently needed to unpack.

For most of my life, I have been a runner. Now, this may sound bizarre to some, but running is, in fact, my favourite form of relaxation! For the past few years, living as I do on

the edge of the English Lake District, I've absolutely loved running in the mountains, and I can be at the bottom of a fell within fifteen minutes. As someone who is 71 at the time of writing, describing what I do as running may be a slight exaggeration – it might be more accurately termed shuffling!

But a few months ago, for a seven-month period, I wasn't even able to shuffle because of a painful foot injury. One day, in my frustration, I thought, 'I have been running for fifty years, but how often have I thanked God for the health and fitness to do so?' I realized there is so much that, shamefully, I take for granted in my life – things that friends and colleagues in less materially driven parts of the world with fewer amenities would see as huge blessings.

Come with me to a small church made of corrugated iron in southern Nepal, where I was preaching on the strategy of Satan and illustrating my talk from the book of Job. We're told how Job's family is destroyed: 'a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house' (Job 1:19). Ironically and dramatically, while I was speaking, a storm rolled in, with a violent wind and hailstones, which the local newspaper described as being the size of golf balls. The lights went out and I didn't know what was happening. What could I do without power? There was no light with which to see my notes nor a loudspeaker for my voice to be heard above the incredible din of the hailstones on the metal roof. By contrast, my Nepalese brothers and sisters were not fazed for a moment: candles appeared immediately and a hymn began drowning out the noise of the hailstones. Impressive. I determined that when I got back home, I would seek to be more grateful for so much to which I believed myself entitled.

‘You owe me’

Sadly, this good resolution did not last. Some time later, I was sitting at the wheel of my faithful but rather ancient Vauxhall Vectra. It had transported me and my family for more than a quarter of a million miles, almost without a hitch. Now it was really showing its age and, whenever I set out on a journey, I was no longer sure whether or not it would transport me to my intended destination. I was feeling grumpy: with all the miles I had to travel to fulfil my preaching schedule, I surely deserved better than this, didn't I? The thousands of times I had turned the ignition key and the engine had fired successfully – and I had safely reached numerous destinations – failed to cross my mind.

Entitlement thinking did not just rule in the hospital room – it was alive and kicking in my trusty Vauxhall Vectra too.

## **The age of entitlement**

Whether it's when I'm running in the Lake District, preaching overseas or driving to umpteen destinations, I realize how easily I slip into today's entitlement attitude and culture. Much has been written in magazine articles and blogs about 'millennial entitlement' and the expectations of Generation Z – I don't plan to add to that. The conditioning to 'think entitlement' begins early in life. Today, our children are continually fed the message that 'You can do whatever you want to do. You just need to believe in yourself and everything will be possible.'

It's great to encourage our children to achieve their full potential, but we know that most of them will not fulfil their dreams of being Premier League football stars or global pop sensations. If we fill our children's minds with unrealistic expectations, surely we are in danger of fomenting this

entitlement culture. Some social commentators are, unsurprisingly, defining our age as the 'age of entitlement'. Since the end of the Second World War, the standard of living in most Western nations has risen to levels of which our forefathers could never have dreamt. At the same time, the services offered by governments have increased to unprecedented levels. The taxes that we have been paying have not kept up with the cost of providing these services, to which we increasingly believe we are entitled.

To take away services from voters in democratic countries is perceived as an unpopular choice. So what happens? Governments borrow money from the taxpayers of tomorrow to cover the expenditure of today. Some governments are even having to borrow money not just to cover extra expenditure but also to pay the interest on money borrowed for that expenditure. Brave is the politician who raises his or her head above the parapet and says that the party should be over. Realistically, who is going to have the political courage to speak out?

This entitled way of thinking is also evident in the world of education and among Generation Z. Academics report that many students believe that they are entitled to receive good marks, whatever their attitude to work might be. Researchers at the University of California, Irvine, found that a third of students expected a B grade just for attending lectures and completing the required reading. Elaine Clift writes, 'A sense of entitlement pervades the academy; excellence be damned.'<sup>3</sup>

Was this sense of entitlement as pervasive among previous generations? I don't believe it was.

A powerful childhood memory is of my father coming home with his weekly wage packet. He would open the small

envelope, take out the cash and then always do the same two things. First, he took from the cupboard what was known as 'the Lord's tin': into this went the tithe – 10 per cent of the money always put aside first to support Christian work, such as church and missionary endeavours. However tight things were financially, this was untouchable. Second, there was the holiday tin, in which he saved money to fund our two weeks off at the coast, 23 miles away. Borrowing was not an option – it was a bit questionable and not quite acceptable. If you did not have what you needed, then you waited until you did. For some items, we waited a very long time; with the waiting, the excitement increased and, I think, also the gratitude when it finally arrived. I still remember when we got our first television and, although I can't quite remember it, I know that the arrival of our first car was a red-letter day for the family.

But today's entitled consumer asks, 'Why wait? Life is too short,' although life expectancy has increased considerably since my parents' day. Credit is mostly easily available; debt is no longer socially unacceptable – it's even expected. My generation is accused of spending the hard-earned inheritance received from our industrious, frugal parents, who saved carefully, and of carelessly spending money we should be leaving to our children. Yet I know that many of us are determining how to lend or give money to help our children on to the property ladder.

There would not be much of a future for this consumer age if the attitude of the apostle Paul were to take hold. He wrote to his friends at Philippi, 'I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation' (Philippians 4:12). This is a dangerous idea – for the consumer age to continue to

'You owe me'

thrive, we have to be continually convinced that we need more. Tony Walter argues that 'need' is the new religion.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, the shopping centre has replaced the church on Sunday as the popular place of choice. Consumerism promises to satisfy our needs in an unprecedented way, but it depends on satisfaction never quite being achieved.

Richard A. Easterlin asks, 'Will raising the incomes of all increase the happiness of all?' He continues:

The answer to this question can now be given with somewhat greater assurance than at the turn of the [twentieth] century . . . It is 'no.' The conclusion is that there has been no improvement in happiness in the United States over almost a half century in which real GDP per capita more than doubled.<sup>5</sup>

## **Love Jesus or use him?**

I have shown how easily I slip into entitlement thinking and I am certainly not the first follower of Christ to do so. The rich young ruler turned down the invitation to follow Jesus because he had 'great wealth' which he was unwilling to part with. "Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is very hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven"" (Matthew 19:23, NLT). Peter's response to this was: 'We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?' (verse 27). Jesus was very gracious in his response to this rather selfish question, probably because these disciples had given up so much. However, after assuring them of a huge eternal return on their investment, he warned against a selfish spirit: 'But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first' (verse 30).

## 'You owe me'

There is even a false teaching in the church today to support entitlement thinking; the advocates of what has become known as the prosperity gospel or Word of Faith movement assure us that we are entitled to health and wealth; they are part of the package of our salvation. Health and wealth are ours to receive by faith, for the atonement of Christ includes not just the removal of sin but also the removal of sickness and poverty. As Kenneth Copeland wrote in *The Laws of Prosperity*, 'Since God's covenant has been established and prosperity is a provision of the covenant, you need to realize that prosperity belongs to you now!'<sup>6</sup>

While we may not have been duped by this heresy, is it possible that this teaching may have influenced us in subtle ways? I often find that when things do not go well for us as Christians, we begin to be disappointed with God, doubting his love and even his ability to intervene. While you may not expect total health and prosperity all the time, do you think (as I did in that hospital ward) that, provided you are faithful to God, he is bound to be faithful to you and surely that means that things should basically go well for you?

Have you ever heard, or even said or thought, any of the following statements and questions?

- 'I've worked hard, improved my chances by getting an education, often at very inconvenient times. I can't understand why God doesn't provide me with a better-paid job.'
- 'I am so tired of being single, so frustrated. I have kept myself sexually pure, at least in deed, and I have been praying about this for years. Why doesn't God come through for me?'

‘You owe me’

- ‘Children are a blessing from God, so why am I struggling with infertility? After all, I only want to be a godly parent. How can that be wrong?’

Even if we’re not struggling with specific issues such as these, don’t we expect, at the very least, such blessings as reasonable health, financial provision, the ability to hold down a job, a basically happy marriage, a loving family and a caring church? Isn’t there a danger that we think we love Jesus when we’re actually *using* him, expecting him to turn up when we are sick or in need in some serious way? He is ‘the big fix’. We expect an experience with him that will take away our pain and suffering. But if we are not careful, this begins to resemble the drug addict looking for a high or the drinker looking for that alcoholic haze to achieve at least a brief respite from pain. After all, we know Jesus, and when we know someone well, surely it entitles us to certain privileges? After all, when someone applies late for a place at a conference, the late application may not matter, if the organizer is a good friend. The friendship has its privileges and the individual expects the organizer to make an exception – just this once.

Nevertheless, that isn’t how life works. Let’s look at the story of Jacob and his descendants.

God spoke to Israel in a vision at night and said, ‘Jacob, Jacob!’

‘Here I am,’ he replied.

‘I am God, the God of your father,’ he said. ‘Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a



‘You owe me’

great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you,  
and I will surely bring you back again.’

(Genesis 46:2–4)

So off Jacob and his family went in obedience to God. What was the result of their obedience? Four hundred years of suffering and slavery. God kept his promise completely. (Yes, you read that correctly.) He made them into a great nation, through all their suffering in Egypt, and he eventually brought them back to Canaan. But the purpose of God was not fulfilled without trial and suffering on the part of these people. In the New Testament Jesus said, ‘In this world you will have trouble’ (John 16:33). We are not entitled to an easy ride. God has made no such promises to us. He has promised us just what he promised to Jacob: I will be with you; I will fulfill all my purposes and promises and, eventually, in my time, I will deliver you.

*‘It is high time to stop thinking entitlement  
and to start thinking gift, privilege and grace.’*

It is high time to stop thinking entitlement and to start thinking gift, privilege and grace. Thanksgiving and praise will then begin to flow from our lives. Imagine for a moment that you were able to get everything you wanted in life. Would you ever thirst after Christ? Those unfulfilled desires remind us of where our ultimate satisfaction lies. As Augustine famously said, ‘Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.’<sup>7</sup>

## Reflection

Read Psalm 73.

- 1 Does the honesty of Asaph stand out as he bluntly expresses his true feelings to God? There are no empty platitudes here. Not only are his words well chosen but there is also an expression of the reality of his heart.
  - (a) Do you ever pray like this?
  - (b) Do you believe that God is offended or pleased by such prayers?
- 2 Asaph begins by honouring God: surely he is good, especially to his chosen people and those who are seeking to be pure in heart.
  - (a) But what does he see (verses 3–12)?
  - (b) What is his initial response to what he sees (verses 2 and 13)?
  - (c) Did Asaph believe that the people of God were entitled to something far different from what he sees?
- 3 How did Asaph eventually come to terms with the situation (verses 16–20)? Being in the sanctuary – the presence of God changed Asaph’s whole perspective. He was able to take a long look rather than be overwhelmed by what he saw immediately around him.