

FILLED TO BE EMPTIED

*The Path to Liberation
for Privileged People*

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Introduction

A PRIVILEGE PANDEMIC

In February 2020, I woke up in my hotel room in Geneva, Switzerland. I was coming to the end of a ten-day book tour across England and Switzerland and preparing for my last day of wandering through the ancient cobblestone streets, retracing the footsteps of John Calvin. As I turned on the television in my room, a breaking news alert came across the screen on the Swiss news channel. The subtitles read, “The First Case of Coronavirus Reported outside Geneva,” and the camera immediately showed an interview with the husband and wife who had been the first known Swiss to contract the virus. “It’s easier than a common cold!” the man with the virus scoffed. “I don’t know why people are making such a big deal about this!” I laughed at the man’s flippant attitude toward being ill and found myself at ease about the potential of this new virus that had been creating a buzz for the past few weeks. “Maybe it’s not so bad after all,” I thought.

Two weeks after I returned home to San Diego, I began to feel a bit under the weather. I posted to Facebook asking for advice from fellow San Diegans on how to fend off what I thought were bad allergies from the Santa Ana winds that often blow through our part of the world. A few days later, I had a high fever, body aches, and significant chest congestion. I called the doctor and was told that no

testing was available, but that it was likely not the coronavirus. I should still, however, self-quarantine in bed until I felt better. So I did.

Two weeks after that, I had fully recovered and gone on with my life. At the beginning of the stay-at-home order, I was concerned that I might not be able to survive financially. I had hard conversations with our church's bookkeeper about potentially needing to lay off staff, skip pay periods, or take a cut to my already meager salary. But after a few weeks, it looked like things would be fine; I was spending less, saving more, and had secured some writing projects that would give me extra money to save up for an emergency. So I continued living a fairly comfortable, albeit lonely, existence.

Eventually, I had an opportunity to take an antibody test to see if my body had, in fact, fought off COVID-19 when I was sick in March. The finger-prick test showed that I did have the antibodies, which likely meant that I had contracted the virus and fully recovered. Fortunately, none of my roommates caught the virus, nor any of the church staff with whom I had interacted early on in my sickness. I felt grateful to have survived what had now become a global pandemic ravaging countries around the world, and I hoped that I would now have some immunity, though there was not enough data to know that for sure.

Soon after, however, reports began to emerge that the virus was disproportionately affecting communities of color across the United States. Nearly every neighborhood of New York City that was primarily populated by communities of color had a significantly higher percentage of hospitalizations and deaths than in white areas of the city. The reason for this disparity was simple: communities of color overwhelmingly have a lower average income and therefore

fewer resources, plus many people in these communities were essential workers during the crisis, working in grocery stores, hospitals, restaurants, or pharmacies, where they could not maintain social distance. These communities were filled with folks who were risking their own health and well-being for the good of the broader population and were suffering the consequences.

As these trends continued and the data consistently confirmed these findings, I began to reflect on my own experience with COVID-19. Even though I had come to take the virus very seriously—advising my staff to stay home, practicing social distancing, and so on—the truth is that I too had a bit of a flippant attitude like that Swiss couple. I had not only survived the virus relatively unscathed, but I was actually doing pretty well during quarantine, getting healthier, being more productive, and enjoying more space to breathe and relax. I realized that for so many others even in my own neighborhood, which was primarily low income and 86 percent people of color, this pandemic was truly devastating.

How could it be that within the confines of my townhouse all was going so well for me, when right outside my door were thousands of neighbors whose lives had been completely upended by this pandemic? How could my church, which was neither large nor wealthy, be weathering the storm fairly well when the Spanish-speaking storefront church a block away, with twice as many members, was likely not going to survive this pandemic? How could we *still* have governmental systems and structures that favored people based on social class and ethnicity in the United States in 2020? This wasn't the first time I had wrestled with these questions, but in the middle of the pandemic, they hit me like a ton of bricks.

The thing is, these were not genuine questions. I knew the answer. Over the past decade I had much experience learning about the ways I participate in and benefit from the very thing behind the immense disparities in infection rates in communities of color. I had also experienced, in some small ways, just how ruthless and unfair this thing was when it finally was used against me when I came out as queer in 2016. This mysterious thing has risen to the top of our collective conversations, and talking about it makes many folks who benefit from it very nervous. The word for it is *privilege*.

This book is an exploration of the idea of privilege through the lens of the example set by a radical rabbi from Nazareth named Jesus. The goal of this book is to help those of us who identify as Jesus followers to begin a conversation about our own privilege and how we might utilize it as a tool to lead us into a more faithful obedience to the way of Jesus by working for the common good of our neighbors.

This call to repurpose privilege and power is nothing new—in fact, it’s one of the earliest Christian practices. While the dialogue around privilege has only recently gained a new hearing in our culture, it was one of the major ways that the earliest followers of Jesus understood their role as disciples. One of the earliest Christian hymns, which the apostle Paul quotes in Philippians 2:5–11, describes how Jesus emptied himself of divine privilege. Exploring this hymn, verse by verse, will help us understand how Christ’s example helps us to name, own, and repurpose our privilege and power for the good of others.

Conversations around the topic of privilege are often avoided because they can become deeply personal and are often eye-opening in ways that make us uncomfortable. But in this moment of human history, it is imperative for

Christians not to run from these conversations but rather lean into them all the more. The Spirit of God is stirring up a reformation within our day, exposing systems of oppression that have long been hidden, and calling us all to new ways of seeing and being in the world. This book is intended to help guide us through a process of understanding the current conversation around privilege and then empowering us to do something about it as individuals and as communities of faith. It's written by someone who has himself continually wrestled with these concepts over the past five years, and still has so much to learn and to reckon with in his own journey. I am not an expert on these issues, but I don't believe any of us need to be. Instead, we need to begin the conversations and do the work, which is precisely what this book is intended to do. So I hope that you will join with me on this journey of self-reflection, spiritual practice, and contemplative action that helps bring about a more just and equal world for absolutely everyone.

Chapter 1

THE PROBLEM OF PRIVILEGE

What are we talking about when we talk about privilege? We often hear this word thrown around in conversations related to racism and sexism in particular, but oftentimes many of us do not have a clue what exactly a person means when they use the term. Many of the people who are often described as privileged do not consciously feel the benefits that they are accused of possessing. In a different time, to be described as being privileged was a good thing, wasn't it? It's clear that for so many of us the conversation around privilege is anything but clear. And yet this conversation isn't going to end anytime soon—nor should it. So it is imperative for all people—especially those with privilege—to do the work to understand exactly what this word means for us and why using privilege properly is so vital, as I will claim, to living out the way of Jesus in our world today.

I was raised in a lower-middle- to lower-class community outside of Baltimore, Maryland, yet within one of the wealthiest counties in the country at the time. The disparities of wealth, status, and class were apparent to me every time I went to school. Many of my peers were decked out in name-brand clothing; they always had money to afford lunch at school, or even more enviably, money to have a car and be able to leave school and buy lunch at a nearby fast-food restaurant. Many of my peers could afford

special trips, supplies, and opportunities that were offered by our incredible public school system. Many of my peers would go home to large houses every day and would take long family vacations to Mexico or Hawaii in the summer. My experience, on the other hand, was very different, and I was consciously aware of this difference.

I lived in an old mobile home in a large trailer park tucked away, out of sight, from the beautiful homes that surrounded us. My mother worked hard, at times working a part-time job at a retail store in addition to her full-time job at a doctor's office just to get by. My father worked sometimes, but his addiction to alcohol quickly began to prevent him from being very effective at making any substantial amount of money to support our family. My parents would struggle week by week to keep the bills paid and our family fed, and then to fund whatever other needs might arise. Because of this environment, there wasn't a huge emphasis on studying hard or excelling in school—my parents had much more pressing things to focus on, like our basic survival. So I was generally a straight C student throughout most of my education, and in middle and high school was doing very poorly in the areas of reading, writing, and math, which severely limited my ability to get into any reputable college. I also never really learned to drive beyond my initial learner's permit because I knew we could never afford a car for me, or even the driving-school classes that were required by law.

So when someone first spoke to me about my privilege, it was difficult for me to understand what they were talking about. Yes, it is true that I am a white man. But most of my peers growing up were *not* white—in fact, all my best friends throughout childhood were people of color—and all of them were significantly more well-off than my family

was. How could my whiteness be such a source of privilege when it doesn't seem to have benefited my family all that much in my upbringing?

This is often the first way many respond when they first have their privilege called out, and at some level, it is valid. It's true that possessing a particular identity *alone* is not enough to guarantee that someone's life will necessarily be better off than others. Being white, or male, or straight, doesn't mean that you and your family will not face hardships, struggle, and even discrimination. Yet often in the dialogue around privilege, this truth is not given a fair hearing. Many sociologists say that this is one of the reasons why the world witnessed such disruptive political upheavals from 2016 through 2020. Much of the political dialogue had rightfully shifted to justice and equity for those who had traditionally been marginalized—people of color, women, LGBTQ+ individuals—but in that necessary shift, many politicians all but ignored the real, significant struggles of those who were not in those marginalized categories, which led to a political upheaval rooted in their sense of real desperation.

From this perspective, one might ask if the conversation around privilege is even appropriate at all. From the foundation of my upbringing, it'd be hard to make a case that my whiteness or my maleness benefited me in any meaningful way, right? If privilege means that possessing certain basic identities *always* confers a series of benefits, then I think we could say that claims of privilege are patently false. But what if the idea of privilege is getting at something more nuanced and complex?

The truth is that my upbringing was very difficult, and my parents still struggle to this day to rise above the socioeconomic reality we experienced as I was growing up.

My upbringing did cost me some significant opportunities and experiences that many of my peers had. Yet here in your hand you hold my sixth published book. At the time of this writing, I am a semester away from receiving my second master's degree. I am living in Southern California and my current income has placed me securely in the middle-class category; my starting salary at my job is about the same as my mother's salary after nearly twenty years in her job. Clearly, my upbringing didn't affect my attainment of "success" very much. I am doing fairly well, I'd say, despite all of the cards I was dealt growing up.

Some of my "success" may be attributed to my personality or personal fortitude (though I assure you, I am no beacon of psychological strength!), but the truth is that it seems quite obvious that there must have been *something* else at work to help me rise this far above the circumstances of my birth. Something seems to have been working in my favor to assist me in overcoming the multitude of hurdles that I faced. At least part of my own personal success can rightly be attributed to the concept of privilege.

DEFINING PRIVILEGE

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines "privilege" as "a right or immunity granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage, or favor."¹ In other words, it's some form of advantage given to a particular group of people that is not extended to others. In school, I remember being rewarded for good behavior by being allowed to choose from a series of "privileges," such as sitting at the teacher's desk for the day or not having to do a homework assignment. The teacher would always remind us as we redeemed our privilege that our reward

was not our *right* and if we started slacking while enjoying it, it could and would be revoked. This picture helps us to understand privilege at its most basic: it's something we don't necessarily deserve but is extended to us as a favor. It's not a permanent reality, but when it is being enjoyed, it does come with a very real sense of advantage over others who do not enjoy the same benefit.

The definition of social privilege differs slightly. Scholar Justin D. García defines this kind of privilege as “certain social advantages, benefits, or degrees of prestige and respect that an individual has by virtue of belonging to certain social identity groups.”² In this sense, one could approximately equate social privilege to being a member of a country club. If you have membership, you get access to the pools, the spa, the fine dining, and the golf green. But if you do not have membership, you will be promptly stopped at the gate and denied entry. Your lack of membership excludes you from this wide array of special amenities (i.e., benefits). The difference on the social side is that most of the time, these “memberships” are granted by nature of birth, are often unconscious to the ones who hold them, and therefore aren't acknowledged as privileges. They are not easily lost, and they are almost impossible to extend to others who are not born members of this privileged club.

To carry the metaphor a bit further, if you grow up in the confines of the country club, you may never realize that there is a world outside of the gates that is *significantly* different from the world you experience. If you are conditioned to believe that you *deserve* to go to college, to pursue a career of your dreams, to make a living wage, or to have even more rudimentary realities such as the right to vote or the right to *live freely*, then it is entirely possible that you may never realize that others cannot take these possibilities

for granted, let alone have a reasonable hope of actually attaining them. In fact, it is one of the express jobs of those who operate the country club to block out the crasser realities of the world outside its walls specifically so those within the club do not have their conscience disturbed by the great disparities that exist just beyond the walls.

The truth is, if you live in North America, Great Britain, or much of Europe, you live in a society that was created by and intended for white, heterosexual, Christian men, and most of these societies were built with a very conscious belief that such people are *superior* to other kinds of humans, which allowed the colonizing founders of the modern Western world to marginalize, oppress, enslave, and kill all of the people who didn't look, love, and believe as they did. In America, for instance, the most revered foundational documents that established the nation codified the superiority of white, heterosexual, Christian men, and the inferiority of nonwhites, women, non-Christians, and by inference nonheterosexuals. Today, many of us have been taught to shrug off the words in the Declaration of Independence that refer to the indigenous peoples of the Americas as "Indian Savages" as simply antiquated language, as if those two words did not represent the prevailing mindset that has endured throughout the history of the United States and has continually allowed us to treat indigenous people as less human than white people.

The privileging of certain people was intentionally built into the bedrock of our society. The architects of our society knew what they were doing, and it was justified by deeply held beliefs, many rooted in Christianity, that fueled their hope to create a world where they lived as demi-gods over the land. Which brings us back to my upbringing. The primary reason that I was able to rise above the

circumstances of my upbringing is because the society was set up to give me, as a white man, every opportunity to succeed. Study after study has shown that my poor grades likely posed less of a threat to my ability to get into college than they would have for a person of color. When I walk into a room for an interview at a school or a job, most of the people in that room have been subconsciously conditioned to believe that I am more capable and deserving, despite my flaws, than a person of color or a woman. Even though I grew up relatively poor, my skin color and my accent enable me to easily pass as wealthy, which gains me access and acceptance into social circles of those who truly are wealthy and powerful. I also get the chance to be bolder in my pursuit of things that I want because I live in a society where that's what white men are *supposed* to do, whereas women and people of color are not permitted to act in similar ways.

These are not small benefits. They are also not easily recognizable to those of us who are white men, but I guarantee that any person of color or non-male-identified person who reads the paragraph above would nod in agreement and be able to point out *many more* areas where society privileges my whiteness and my maleness that I have not even thought to mention. Remember, it's hard to see the reality of one's benefits if you've never taken time to wander beyond the marble walls of the country club.

IMPLICIT BIAS

Hopefully the examples above have helped to clarify what exactly is meant when we talk about privilege in the social context. The natural next question for those who possess such privilege is "Now what do I do?" No one chose to be

born with any of the core identities that we possess, nor is it fundamentally wrong to have privilege. At the most basic level, privilege is morally neutral. Receiving an unearned benefit or advantage is usually viewed as a good thing, and no matter what identities one possesses, it would seem foolish to reject such a blessing. One should certainly not feel bad for receiving such a gift. Where privilege crosses firmly into immorality is when the advantage comes at an unfair cost to others, to put it mildly. And when it comes to the privilege of white, heterosexual, Christian men, the cost to everyone else has been astronomical.

To use myself as an example once again, if my college admittance had been based solely on merit, my straight C average in high school would surely have limited my ability to get into *most* of the private colleges and universities that I applied to. Numerous studies have shown that if a Black student (or anyone with a “Black-sounding” name) had submitted the exact same transcripts with their application, they would have been *far* less likely to be admitted to a school than I would be.³ I don’t think that most college admissions teams are consciously seeking to be racist in their decisions (though some certainly are), but in a society where whiteness has been set as the ideal in nearly every aspect of the culture, the subconscious assumption is that white people must be smarter or more capable of academic improvement than people of color.

This unconscious discriminatory attitude is known as *implicit bias* or *implicit social cognition* and is well documented by social scientists and psychologists. The Kirwan Institute at Ohio State University defines implicit bias as “the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Activated involuntarily, without awareness or intentional

control.”⁴ When it is defined this way, it becomes easy to see that implicit bias exists in every person, in every culture, in every era. It emerges from our cultural conditioning, which includes the media we consume, the religion we practice, the family we come from, the neighborhood we grow up in, the politicians who represent us, the laws we’re held accountable to—just about every aspect of our daily lives. These biases are all pervasive and automatic, and they don’t often reflect what we consciously believe or the ideals we confess to be true for us.

Because implicit bias exists unconsciously within us, if we are to ever address and change them, we must be careful to identify exactly *what* the dominant biases in our culture are, become aware of them in our own actions and thinking, and then actively work against them. This is precisely why conversations around racism have recently shifted from being about resisting racism to being *antiracist*,⁵ suggesting that to actually kill the disease of racism in our culture, we must not simply believe that racism is wrong, but we must actively work to oppose racist thinking and action in our own consciousness and in society at large.

If we don’t understand the power of implicit bias, then we may never realize just how pervasive and dangerous our exploitation of social privilege is. I remember lecturing to a primarily white audience at the University of Calgary in Canada on the power of implicit bias. During the talk, I made a statement along the lines of “all of us are racist, and we must work to root out racism within us.” Immediately, a white man spoke up and said, “I am not a racist, and I refuse to accept that all of us are racist.” His reactionary response is understandable if we don’t consider the reality of implicit bias. That man probably did work quite hard to not be racist in his speech, in his actions, and

in his decision making, as all morally responsible people should. But *not being racist* in our actions is not the same as *not having racist biases and impulses* in our subconscious minds. Surely it is unlikely that any white person who has been raised in a society with historic race inequities like the United States and Canada will not have the residue of racism covering their subconscious mind. But unless we take time for honest self-reflection and open conversation with those who experience the world differently than we do, we may very likely not realize the extent to which we are infected with implicit biases.

Our privilege is one of the primary blinders to our implicit bias. If we don't have to think about how others' biases might impact our well-being in our day-to-day lives, it is likely that we possess some level of privilege. And if we do possess privilege, it is likely that we are unaware of the way that we naturally and subconsciously assign value to others who are like us and have an aversion to those who are different. Which is why all of us who seek to be agents of justice in society, and especially those of us who espouse the values of Jesus Christ, must commit ourselves to engage in conscious reflection on our privilege and bias, and then work not just to suppress it within ourselves and society, but also to actively train our minds to think and react differently and work to ensure the systems and structures of society do the same.

THAT THE BLIND MAY SEE

But how can Christianity help us with our privilege and bias? How can we as followers of Christ begin to work to understand and address these realities? One of the central

goals of Jesus in the Gospel accounts is to help “the blind receive their sight” (Matt. 11:5, NIV). Throughout the Gospel accounts, we see many stories of Jesus literally healing those who are physically blind, but it seems upon closer reading that his central concern was not primarily physical but spiritual blindness. In fact, when Jesus is speaking about salvation to a Jewish leader named Nicodemus, he says, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” (John 3:3 NIV). The idea Jesus is communicating is that humans have a *vision* problem. We cannot *see* what is true and real, we cannot perceive the reality of God’s kingdom emerging around us in the present moment. Similarly, if we cannot perceive what God’s desires are for the world, then we will not know just how far off the mark we are from those desires.

The way of Jesus is meant to help us gradually begin to receive our sight, and the more we see, the more we are called to repentance, which literally means “to change direction,” to begin walking on a new path toward a different reality. This seeing comes to us only by allowing the Spirit of God to work within us to convict and compel us to follow the way of Jesus. We’re told time and time again that this path is not an easy one and that it will cost us greatly.

Those of us who call ourselves Christians have an obligation to heed the call of the gospel to work with God to bring renewal and redemption to the world. At the very heart of our faith stands the example of Jesus, which we are called to follow in this profound command of the apostle Paul: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves” (Phil. 2:3 NIV). Selfishness, vanity, and pride are antithetical to what it means to follow Jesus, and yet social privilege and bias exist for the purpose of seeking our own benefit, help

privileged individuals to appear as the ideal, and are rooted in an obscene (if subconscious) sense of pride in one's identities as superior to others. If we take the call of Jesus seriously, then it is imperative that we begin the hard work of self-assessment to discover our own implicit biases and areas in which we have been granted unearned privilege in ways that negatively impact those who are not like us.

This self-examination and reckoning with our own exploitation of privilege and our implicit bias isn't only for the good of others, however. The subversive promise of Jesus is that when we are willing to give up our pursuit of our own benefit for the sake of others, that is when we truly receive the fulfillment that we're all longing for. Working to be antiracist, antisexist, antihomophobic, antitransphobic, antixenophobic not only benefits the communities that have been historically harmed by our pursuit of such advantage, but it benefits the privileged as well.

When we begin to create a society where true equity is our chief aim, where our care for our neighbor drives us to selfless action on their behalf, when we seek to give more than we seek to store up for ourselves, that way of being will reap blessings in our soul and in our daily living. A more just and equitable society emerges, where we all are cared for and have access to the resources we need to thrive. We will even tap into the greatest blessing of all—that deep sense of knowing that we are being used as channels of God's light and healing in the world, which at once fulfills our deepest longing and spurs us on to more service, more work, and more solidarity with marginalized communities. What could be more Christlike than that?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of your identity bestow unearned privilege on you? What does the privilege you have look like in your day-to-day life?
2. Why do you think conversations about privilege can make us so uncomfortable?
3. What people in your sphere of influence are potentially disadvantaged because of your privilege?
4. When was the first time you had a conversation about privilege? What was that experience like for you?
5. How do you respond to the author's statement that "all of us are racist, and we must work to root out racism within us"? Can you identify areas of implicit bias within yourself?
6. How does your faith inform the way you think about privilege? What steps might God be asking you to take to potentially pave the way for true reform and renewal?