Taking Advantage or Sharing It: A New Mindset on Privilege  Ken Wilson 12.17.17

For Advent considering a modern topic (sociologists call privilege) from an ancient source, Paul’s letter to church in Philippi Most **privilege talk** is social-sciency, but it is a **concern at heart** of gospel. Paul’s word is “**advantage**” or “**gain**” from birth or status. One translation of Gk. is “**windfall**” (like inheritance is a windfall)

Review: Paul writing from prison, place of “lost privilege”—time to think and natural to ponder his advantage-loss in light of message of Jesus. He comes to regard his loss as something to embrace, quoting lyrics of a messianic hymn that he probably sang for inspiration in prison (his smart phone having been confiscated):

*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name...*

He’s urging a **new mindset** about advantages we’re born with. Not asserting/grasping them, but **willing to let them go**.

Last Sunday Emily compared Mary’s prophetic song as a newly pregnant young woman sounds like thundering prophet of justice and Paul’s testimony about giving up his privilege. In realm of God, **lowly assert** themselves while the **advantaged humble** themselves

**Opposite message today**: you lowly people don’t get uppity... leave power to us powerful people. Don’t worry, more advantaged we become, better off you will all be, just wait for the trickle down.

**Today emphasize** another aspect of Paul’s take on his own privilege... For Paul, adopting mindset of Jesus on privilege, is necessary to mend the social fabric, the aim of God’s realm in our world. Super relevant today.
Situation: Paul dealing with Christian teachers trying to impose rite of circumcision on Gentiles, something he opposes. Circumcision was a rite that imposed a set of religious obligations on Gentiles—keeping law Moses, observing kosher, etc. The Gentiles have not been given the grace to bear this burden. What is meant as a blessing for the Jewish people would be a burden for Gentiles. And Messiah is about lifting burdens, not imposing them.

These teachers are asserting their privileged status as circumcised, Law-observant members of the church as part of their project to impose the burden of circumcision and all it signifies on the Gentiles in Philippi. The teachers may well have been Gentile Christians who took on obligations of circumcision to enhance their prestige. They are flaunting their superior credentials like a mega church pastor boasting about size of his church.

Here’s relevant point for us: exercising/asserting/defending our privilege can impose a burden on others.

Paul adopts the opposite mindset about his privilege:

*If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish (excrement) in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

Notice 3 major sources of privilege: Gender privilege (circumcision was a male-only sport), racial privilege (an Israelite by birth). Language privilege (what English speakers have in U.S). “A Hebrew of Hebrews” meant he was fluent in ancient Hebrew, at a time when Aramaic not Hebrew was language o Jewish people.
These three in particular: gender, race, and language/nationality are huge sources of privilege in our society. There are advantages ("windfall") to being male, white, and fluent in English. Others forms of privilege, but these are three big ones, then and now.

Here’s the mindset shift: Paul is willing to count these valuable privileges as rubbish (excrement.) As Gentiles, all too easily agree that assessment for the wrong reason—don’t value circumcision, being Israelite from birth.

In Romans 9, Paul reminds his Gentile audience that in God’s eyes these are a really a big deal: I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart...for the sake of my own people my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

This isn’t anti-Jewish sentiment on Paul’s part, just as recognizing white privilege or gender privilege isn’t anti-white people or anti-men. Holding on to our privilege, not wanting to share it, opposing efforts to level the playing field, that’s the injustice.

Until we who are loaded with privilege adopt mindset of Jesus about it, we will resist not advance the work of the Spirit. No matter how strong our religious identity is or how devout we are.

I’ve had a long reckoning with my gender privilege.

Background: In 1950’s gender privilege was still unquestioned. My sister told me when she asked our dad about going to college he told her that it was more important for Kenny (only son) to go to college. Kenny would have to be the bread-winner. (Forget that later, my mom became the main breadwinner.)

I grew up hearing about Kenny being the last Wilson male to carry the Wilson name. (BTW if you start calling me Kenny I will consider that an abuse of my vulnerability!) Dad was only child, I was only son. I took that obligation so seriously, I sired a child at 18—a son! Now he was the last male to carry the Wilson name. And I talked like that—just
passing on what I received. Oblivious to the fact that if men/boys are special, what does that make women/girls?

That privilege was imposing a burden!

When you grow up on an unequal playing field it’s not enough to realize it’s not an equal playing field. As a man, you learn/assume habits that impose the burden of inequality on women. Yes, there are gross examples of discrimination: wide-spread sexual harassment in workplace being latest, but subtle stuff is there...and it calls for accessing a new mindset.

I advanced in my chosen profession in a period when women were literally banned from the position I occupied. Good for me, I changed that policy in the church I pastured in the early 1990’s

But it’s an ongoing process for me to reckon with the habits that unfair advantage developed in me. Habits that impose the burden of inequality on women in subtle and pervasive ways.

Example: assuming expertise! Compared to female colleagues, easy to assume people want to hear my thought on any topic in my field. I normalized to gender-based deference to men as the experts

So last week I’m in a clergy group and the conversation turns to the LGBTQ community and all the different tensions there are in that community. Tensions between gay men and lesbians, black members of LGBTQ community and white members, etc.

Paul is directing these questions to Susan—for good reason. Susan is a member of the LGBTQ community and a clergy person, on the forefront of these issues for decades. Plus she was a faculty at UM teaching on these topics. But while Paul is asking Susan questions, I find myself eager to answer. I notice this about myself and pause to wonder, “Why is that?”
And I realize in my old male-straight dominated denomination, I was the “gay guy” surrounded by more ignorant-than-me straight guys pontificating on the “gay issue.” I was the enlightened one by comparison (but the bar was low!) So I habituated to speaking up and weighting in. Good for me! I had developed a certain expertise because I was working this issue theologically...

In this case, it’s BS! Susan is the expert not me. I should keep my answers to myself and listen to Susan’s answers and ask her questions—not hope Paul will ask me questions!

If I hadn’t checked myself in the moment, I would have been cross talking Susan, butting in with my answers when she had the expertise, when I should have been asking her questions.

It’s work to change your mindset on privilege. But that’s what Paul is urging: “Have this mindset which is yours in Messiah Jesus.” It’s not your own natural mindset—It’s the mindset of Christ in you, so you have to do the work to discern the difference between your own habitual thoughts, and the thoughts of Christ in you. When you’re double-minded, pick the better mind!

Maybe it took Paul losing some of his privilege in prison to notice how he used his privilege, and singing that hymn helped him realize: Oh! I can let this go...and letting it go is the way for me to follow Jesus...that’s my path to greatness. It’s my way to move with the Spirit, healing the torn social fabric of our world.

If I’m asserting-defending my privilege (or feeling prickly if its ever mentioned or pointed out) that’s not the path to greatness for me. That may bring short-term rewards but long term, I’m making myself smaller, less significant. Part of the problem not solution.

Paul drives mindshift-point home: *Brothers/sisters join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to example you have in us. For many live as enemies of cross of Christ; I have often told you of them and now I tell you even with tears* (3:17-18)

Imitate me as I imitate the Messiah! It’s not a call to imitate him in general. To be a mini-Paul or a Paul-groupie. Imitate Paul, imitating the Messiah in his mindset about privilege.
That’s what it takes to lift the burdens the unjust playing field places on people loved by God. Messiah is all about lifting burdens, not imposing them.

Then he adds, sharply: “And observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ…”

His warning: “Don’t pay attention to, don’t be influenced by leaders who are not doing the work, who are not changing their mindset like I’m changing my mindset.”

We have a lot of leaders in the church today who are all about **defending** privilege, **lending** support to forces of white supremacy and male backlash to gender equality. In major sectors of church revelations about sexual harassment are characterized as part of the “war on men” which is as bogus as the “war on Christmas.”

**But you know that.** Let’s not waste our energy observing those leaders, let’s not pay them any more mind than we have to.

**Let’s observe our leader, the Messiah Jesus, let’s listen to the voice of the Spirit in our own hearts, the Spirit of Jesus and his different mindset.** Let’s follow that voice….

**Back to that line in chapter two:** *Have this mindset which is yours in Messiah Jesus*...there’s a new mind in our mind, a new heart in our heart. Let’s tune in to the new mind in our mind, that new heart in our heart. And let that Spirit move us....