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# Challenging Privilege through the Preaching and Teaching of Scripture

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The Convocation for Teaching Theologians gathered at Augustana College, July 29-31, 2019, under the conference theme: “Unearned Privilege as Cheap Grace.” In my opening remarks, I expressed some concerns about that conference title. While I understand the need to challenge the notion of “cheap grace,” I found the title problematic insofar as it equated *unearned* privilege with “cheap grace. To some, this might imply that *earned* privilege represents a better type of “grace,” whereas my understanding of grace—like the heart of Lutheran theology—rejects any notion of an “earned” status.

A more appropriate title might simply be, “*Privilege as a Form of Cheap Grace.*” That’s a compelling, contestable, and thoroughly Christian claim. Many of us believe that we have earned the privileges we possess. We believe that we and our families have “worked hard” for what we have. While I do not wish to deny that many people have indeed “worked hard” for what they have achieved, this does not change the fact that many people have also been afforded opportunities *to work hard* that other people, born in different places and into different circumstances, have not been afforded. The opportunity to “work hard” is often a privilege.

Furthermore, “hard work” does not lead to the same results for all people. Opportunities to parlay “hard work” into some sort of personal/social gain is not a “privilege” afforded to all people. For many people, “hard work” is what is required for daily survival. These people are rarely afforded the privilege of “earning” personal/social gain from their “hard work.”

The belief that people simply earn the opportunities, advantages, and privileges they experience often leads to false distinctions between “earned” and “unearned” privilege. The truth of the matter is that “privilege” most often (if not always) is unearned.

## Exposing, defining, and using privilege

As a preacher and biblical scholar, I base my preaching on close readings and contextual interpretations of biblical texts. Such readings and interpretations often focus on exposing privilege through the proclamation of “good news to the poor” (Luke 4:16). This is how I understand Jesus’ ministry, and it is how I understand my vocation of proclamation and interpretation.

To illustrate how I expose privilege in my preaching, I have

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selected a passage from the Gospel of Matthew. Before looking at that particular passage, however, I’d like to start with a definition of privilege.

Most definitions of privilege read something like, “a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group.” I find such definitions incomplete. I define privilege as “a special *advantage* granted or available to a particular person or group of people *that results in an inequitable disadvantage being experienced by other people.*”

The latter definition emphasizes that there are always two aspects of privilege— a special *advantage* and an inequitable *disadvantage*. While most definitions of privilege focus solely on advantage, it is important to address how aspects of both advantage and disadvantage are manifested. When working with definitions that ignore disadvantage, many people end up wrongly identifying

measures that are designed to reduce and eliminate “inequitable disadvantage” as granting “special advantage” (or “privilege”) to people who are and historically have been disadvantaged.

For example, some people try to argue that measures designed to correct racial disparities give “privilege” to people disadvantaged by racial disparities. The problem with this argument is that corrective measures designed to reduce and/or eliminate disadvantages experienced by black and brown people rarely result in *an inequitable disadvantage* being experienced by white people. In America, special advantages long extended to white people have resulted in inequitable disadvantages being experienced by black and brown people. Correcting these inequitable disadvantages should not be understood as giving “privilege” to black and brown people because none of the corrective measures result in inequitable disadvantages being experienced by white people.

Similarly, special advantages long extended to men have resulted in inequitable disadvantages being experienced by women. None of the current corrective measures, however, (including the Equal Rights Amendment passed by Congress in 1972 but yet to be ratified<sup>1</sup>) result in inequitable disadvantages being experienced by men.

Corrective measures that seek to reduce and/or eliminate disadvantages experienced by marginalized people rarely award “privileges” that result in the experience of *inequitable disadvantages* by non-marginalized people. Instead, corrective measures seek to eliminate the experience of inequitable disadvantages by any particular *group* of people.

Part of the difficulty of talking about privilege is that many people often think about privilege solely on an individual basis. Many of us often fail to recognize privilege because we often tend to think of people only as *individuals* rather than also as members of groups that possess privilege in relation to other groups.

Just because an individual black person might have more net worth and power than an individual white person, that does not negate the fact that white people as a group are afforded privileges and operate with economic and institutional advantages that result in inequitable disadvantages being experienced by black and brown people. Likewise, just because an individual woman might possess more wealth and institutional power than an individual man, that does not negate the fact that men as a group are afforded privileges and operate with economic and institutional advantages that result in inequitable disadvantages being experienced by women.

While it is important to recognize people as individuals, it is equally important to recognize how group affiliation can significantly advantage or disadvantage individuals. Privilege is a relational concept—that is, it is manifested within the context of relationships. Because privilege is relational, it is always possible to find ourselves in relations where we possess more privilege than someone else (even though we may also at times find ourselves in relations where we possess less privilege).

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1. For history and progress of ratification among individual states, see the ERA website: [www.equalrightsamendment.org/era-ratification-map](http://www.equalrightsamendment.org/era-ratification-map)

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Furthermore, because privilege is relational, privilege is always used in one of two ways: (1) to *preserve* advantage for some people by promoting and maintaining disadvantage for others, or (2) to *challenge* advantage for some people by seeking to reduce and eliminate disadvantage for others.

The question, therefore, is how do we use our privilege in those times when we possess more privilege than others? Do we use our privilege to *preserve* advantage by maintaining disadvantage or do we use our privilege to *challenge* advantage by reducing disadvantage? *These are the only two options.* If we are not challenging advantage, we are by default preserving advantage. There is no neutral ground when it comes to privilege. When we deny that privilege exists or we choose to simply feel guilty and throw up our hands out of frustration, despair, and a sense of hopelessness, we are in fact preserving advantage and maintaining disadvantage.

As a man living in a patriarchal society, my biology affords me privilege. Denying the reality of male privilege or becoming defensive or frustrated instead of challenging male privilege only contributes to preserving male advantage and maintaining female disadvantage. Similarly, denying the reality of white privilege or becoming defensive and frustrated instead of challenging white privilege only contributes to preserving white advantage and maintaining black and brown disadvantage.

When preaching and making scriptural arguments we have to be aware if we are *preserving* advantage or if we are *challenging* advantage. When *preserving* advantage, we also have to be aware of *how* and *for whom* we are preserving advantage as well as *how* and *for whom* we are promoting and maintaining disadvantage.

### Grappling with privilege in a biblical text

Having provided this context for my understanding of privilege, I here consider a New Testament passage where the issue of privilege is central to both the proclamation and the interpretation of the text.

In chapter 15 of the Gospel of Matthew, the author gives an account of Jesus encountering and interacting with a Canaanite woman. Privilege associated with Jesus’ biological and ethnic identity is on clear display in this passage. The passage also reveals the two components associated with privilege—advantage and disadvantage. Matthew 15:21-28 reads:

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But Jesus did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Unfortunately, because of the inability or refusal of many Christians to recognize and acknowledge Jesus as operating within a space of biological and ethnic privilege, Christians often interpret and proclaim this text in ways that preserve advantage for some people and promote and maintain disadvantage for other people.

The author's identification of the woman in this story as a "Canaanite" emphasizes the role of privilege in this text. There is a long history in the Bible of divinely sanctioned violence by Israelites against Canaanites. In the biblical story of YHWH, the god of Israel, giving the "Promised Land" to the Israelites, YHWH is depicted as giving instructions to the Israelites to enter into the homeland of other people, to take their land, and to utterly destroy and kill every living being in the land. The people to be killed are identified as Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites, and Canaanites (Deut 20:10-18). The story reveals the way "foreign" others were thought of by Israelites. It also illustrates how throughout human history people have used "God" to legitimate hatred and violence against other people by claiming such violence to be God's will.

Fast-forward approximately 1200 years to the time of Jesus. The author of Matthew invokes the memory of this violent historical past between Jews and Canaanites by identifying this woman as a Canaanite. The author's identification of the woman as "Canaanite" is significant because in the version of the story found in Mark (which is widely considered to be older than Matthew), the woman is identified as "Syrophenician." The author's change of the woman's identity from Syrophenician to Canaanite appears to be deliberate.

By the time of Jesus, people in this region were no longer called "Canaanites." It would be like Americans today calling someone from New York a "New Amsterdamian." While New York used to be New Amsterdam, it ceased being New Amsterdam hundreds of years ago. The author's decision to identify the woman as a "Canaanite" not only emphasized her ethnic *otherness*, it also challenged the author's audience to reflect on a long history of ethnic hatred.

As in the story of Joshua and the Israelites entering into the

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land of Canaan 1200 years earlier, Jesus and his male followers are now entering into another people's land, the non-Jewish territory of Tyre and Sidon. Once in the region, Jesus and his male entourage are approached by a woman. Her character is doubly marginalized because she is a "Canaanite" and a woman.

After Jesus initially ignores the woman and the disciples urge him to "send her away" (even though she is an actual resident of the region and they are the ones who are visiting), Jesus tells the woman, "I was sent *only* to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus informs her that he was not sent to help her, her daughter, or her people. Here we see what it looks like for a group of people (not simply an individual) to experience an "inequitable disadvantage." After the woman continues to beg for his help, Jesus replies with a vulgar response that reveals his understanding of his ethnic privilege. He tells the woman, "it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

I don't know how any reader—especially an African American and/or female reader—can read this story and not be troubled. As an African-American man who has and continues to experience the pain and humiliation of racism, this particular passage of scripture has always been problematic for me. I am also uncomfortable, therefore, with anyone who tries to defend and/or make theological excuses or legitimations for Jesus' behavior.

At the same time, while I find Jesus' comparison of this woman, her daughter, and their people to dogs extremely disturbing, I believe part of the message of this text is actually found amid this disturbance. It is believed by most biblical scholars that Matthew was written for a predominantly Jewish audience during a time when Gentiles were beginning to join the community of "Jesus-followers." This is why throughout Matthew the author alludes to the inclusion and faithfulness of Gentiles.<sup>2</sup> A story about the faithfulness of a *Canaanite* woman (15:28) would have not only highlighted the non-Jewish identity of these new members of the Jesus-following community, but it would have also caused the original audience of Matthew to reflect upon long and deep-seated prejudices harbored against ethnic (and religious) others.

Matthew's text thereby highlights the realities of ethnic and

2. See Matt 4:12-17; 8:5-12; 12:15-21. Matthew also includes Gentile women in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:3, 5, 6) It is also Gentiles who travel from the east following a star to find the one born "King of the Jews" (Matt 2:1-2).

biological privilege in order to *challenge* such privilege. While the author clearly was not writing from a modern critical theory or more generally “liberal” perspective, the author does reveal how common it is for people with privilege to use their privilege to preserve longstanding advantages for themselves and their group while promoting and maintaining longstanding disadvantages for other people and groups. The choice to change the woman’s identity from “Syrophenician” to “Canaanite” highlights this challenge.

### Challenging Christian privilege

Matthew’s version of the story reveals an attitude of ethnic and patriarchal privilege that the story itself also problematizes and challenges. The story reveals how easily people can be influenced by the prevailing sexist, racist, and ethnocentric views of their time and their culture. Even Jesus is influenced by such views. Jesus initially uses his privilege to preserve advantage for himself and his people while promoting and maintaining disadvantage for this woman and her people. I realize this is a difficult interpretation for many Christians because it calls into question the image of Jesus held by most Christians, and it challenges the very notion and practice of *Christian* privilege.

Christian privilege is the privileging of Christianity above every other religious tradition, thereby creating a special *advantage* for Christians resulting in an inequitable *disadvantage* for people of other religious traditions. If we are to strive for liberating proclamations and interpretations of scripture, we have to be willing to grapple with how Christianity often promotes Christian privilege.

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In Matthew’s version of this story, a Canaanite woman—a marginalized ethnic “other”—challenged the ethnic privileging of the author’s time. She advocated for herself, her daughter, and her people, even though it meant confronting and challenging more than a thousand years of prejudice. There is much more that could be said about the specifics of her challenge as well as Jesus’ response. I will conclude here simply by asserting that while Jesus still has a long way to go in this text, the challenge posed to Jesus by this “Canaanite” woman forces him to at least reflect upon his own cultural privilege and consider how he uses that privilege.

As preachers, ministers, teachers, and lay Christian leaders, we likewise need to reflect upon our cultural privilege and how we use that privilege, especially when interpreting and proclaiming biblical texts. In particular, we need to consider whether we are interpreting and proclaiming texts in ways that *preserve* advantage by promoting and maintaining disadvantage or in ways that *challenge* advantage by seeking to reduce and eliminate disadvantage.