



BY JENNA DEWITT

THE entitlement TRAP

CHURCHES CAN'T HELP BUT
NOTICE THERE'S JUST
SOMETHING DIFFERENT ABOUT
THOSE OF US BORN FROM
1980-2000, THE MILLENNIALS.

Perhaps it is that we are "digital natives," indigenous to the age of the Internet, unable to imagine a time before cell phones, personal computers and instantaneous worldwide communications. In fact, almost all of our social interactions involve a form of technology, even when meeting face to face. According to the media constantly surrounding us, we are the products of helicopter parents, high divorce rates, reality TV, a devastated economy and a hopeless job market. We've learned not to trust author-

ity from countless highly publicized scandals in church and government. We've also lived under the threat of terrorism, not only broadcast from half a world away but here in our cities, from Oklahoma to New York, along with the specter of shootings in our schools, movie theaters and malls. We are the participation trophy generation, with empty praise to feed our insatiable approval addiction.

One overriding message about the Millennial generation – one we hear loudly, clearly and constantly – is that we are spoiled brats, self-focused and entitled, living in the delusion that we are "special." While selfish narcissism is a typical characteristic of middle class Western youth, "entitlement" is unique. But it is also the natural by-product of growing up surrounded by a world that confused healthy self-confidence for manufactured self-esteem. It is a result of our culture of instant everything – from fame to gratification.

At its most basic dictionary defini-

tion, "entitlement" means to receive an honor, name, title or right. It is a passive description, something that must be given or handed down from authority. The premise behind the negative connotation of Millennial entitlement is that we are taking on honor or rights we haven't earned or received. There is a pervasive belief that we deserve what we desire. Wanting equals deserving.

But entitlement doesn't happen in a vacuum. We were raised in a world where the prevailing message was "get what you want, when you want it." That includes food, entertainment, communication, information on any subject and, thanks to 24-hour superstores, any item you could possibly require. This is our subconscious mother tongue because we have been immersed in this belief since infancy.

When parents teach their children that they are above the rules – occasionally by their words, but more



often by example – it is no wonder that their children in turn adopt the prideful roots that blossom into full-grown entitlement. Examples I have seen of this include lying to authorities (such as calling in “sick” for a perfectly well child who doesn’t feel like going to school), cutting in line (because our business is more important and urgent than anyone else’s) and running up debt (why should we have to wait for what we want?). These and many more may seem like harmless “life hacks” (shortcuts) to parents, but they set dangerous precedents for little eyes watching them.

Now, numerous studies have been conducted and articles have been published labeling Millennials as “entitled.” Researchers and writers declare this “truth” and simply leave it at that without looking into the causes and effects. This is dangerous because Millennial entitlement is a message about my entire generation’s identity. It is a label that is absorbed and, in too many cases, accepted.

WE MUST EXAMINE WHAT THE LABEL OF ENTITLEMENT SAYS ABOUT WHO WE ARE.

I believe the (very real) problem of entitlement reveals something much deeper and more concerning than a bad attitude (consistent with most labels that end in finger-pointing and shame).

For example, tell a teen that he or she

is spoiled, self-consumed and apathetic, and you will either get:

1. a teen resigned to that identity and powerless to live any other way, which furthers the stereotype.

or

2. a teen who fights this label with perfectionism and performance. Soon exhausted by trying to prove the label wrong, they hear only that they are not “enough” and acquire a warped life purpose – earning love, value and acceptance.

I believe the second is both a cause and a result of what shame researcher Dr. Brené Brown calls a “scarcity culture.” Millennials are never enough. We never have enough. We are never good enough. We never work hard enough, relax enough, give enough, save enough... We are never thin enough or strong enough or “cool” enough. We never have enough experience or education or accolades. Because we are never “enough,” we never find acceptance, love, connection or self-confidence: the very qualities that destroy shame and create a healthy, humble, others-focused identity.

Obviously, entitlement needs to be called out and not coddled. **Proverbs 28:19-20** says hard work is the only ticket to honest, lasting success. Experience births a platform and a duty to raise up the next generation. These things come with time and dedication and little recognition.

Selfishly believing that we are “special exceptions” that are superior to others can prevent Millennials

from living out Jesus’ commission to make disciples. The world will never see the servant leadership of Jesus in our lives if we put ourselves first. Until we humble ourselves like a little child, He says, we won’t see His Kingdom (**Matthew 18:3**). If we are consumed by getting all that we “deserve” we can neither love God nor those who desperately need us to be the hands and feet of Christ to them, missing the two commandments the whole Bible hangs upon (**Matthew 22:37-40**).

But the constant shaming and name-calling of our generation for being entitled, self-focused and spoiled brats doesn’t get us there. Instead, that shame leads to striving, a concept similar to what we in the church might call legalism or “working for our salvation,” except in this case it is working for our identity. When we hear “entitled,” we hear “you aren’t _____ enough.” Inadequacy. Weakness. Failure. As Brown writes “The combination of fear of disappointment, entitlement and performance pressure is a recipe for hopelessness and self-doubt.”

In this hopelessness and self-doubt, we are in an endless battle to rid ourselves of this entitlement label, while only furthering it as shame causes our thoughts to turn inward. Instead of humbly serving for the sake of the Gospel, we must prove we are not entitled by relentlessly striving to please the world that raised us to be that way.

Shame does motivate, but at too great a cost to our spiritual health and our ministries. It places the opinion of the shamer on a pedestal, a place in our

hearts reserved for our King who said "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29).

Shame causes us to search for ways to prove ourselves to the world, to prove that we are worthy of love, acceptance and belonging. It's a futile cycle of climbing a mountain only to be told that we can't really call ourselves successful mountain climbers until we have climbed a higher one. After all, look at the accomplishments of all who have gone before! And there will always be another peak in the distance.

"ENOUGH" IS NOT ATTAINABLE
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but what choice do we have if we are living for the acceptance of the people calling us names? If our identity is determined by how we impress the entitlement watchdogs, the "enough" gatekeepers, we will live hopeless, desperate, empty, broken lives.

You can shatter entitlement among your students – both sides of the pendulum – by rooting their identity in Christ. He is only One who offers unconditional love. He is the only One who destroys the need to be enough and guides us out of the entitlement trap into true life. Jesus didn't seek power and fame, or even the rightful honor due Him. Instead, He humbled Himself to the lowest tasks, intentionally setting the example for us.

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

- John 13:3-5

Living out the identity of a Jesus-follower gives us the power over both labels. We are given the tools to reject shame by learning from His example of compassion, forgiveness and unwavering confidence in His identity as the Son of God. Just as He was firmly rooted in His Father's love and acceptance, we can root our identities in our adoption as sons and daughters.

We have no need to prove our "enough"-ness or our value. We didn't (and can't) earn what we have been given. That was the way it was meant to be all along. He accepts us just as we are and from that we can remove ourselves from the infamous rat race or "keeping up with the Joneses" or whichever cynic we are trying to impress.

We can reject the identity of entitlement, apathy and selfishness because we are focused on living life as the Servant King lived: humbly, selflessly, mercifully. We can acknowledge our imperfection because it is His enough-ness that matters, that saves the world, that changes history. It turns out finding love, acceptance and belonging was never about us – not our shame, not our failings, not our accomplishments – but there is One who shows us a better way, the identity of a Child of God.

¹ Dr. Brené Brown "The Gifts of Imperfection" (2010) Center City, Minnesota. Hazelden. (67)



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