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Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: Doublecheck your privilege this Thanksgiving

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 11.28.24

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In the lexical battleground of contemporary discourse, few terms have been as weaponized and misunderstood as “privilege,” a word that has metamorphosed from a neutral descriptor to an ideological cudgel bearing the intellectual fingerprints of Derridean deconstruction.

Jacques Derrida’s philosophical nuance — that conceptual identities emerge through intricate networks of differentiation — has been transmuted into a blunt instrument of social recrimination. What began as a sophisticated philosophical exploration of binary oppositions (one concept is “privileged” over its inverse) has devolved into a crude mechanism for generating guilt and social division.

Consider the archetypal narrative of the American dream: a working-class young man overcomes poverty through hard work and the support of his family. Yet, within today’s prevailing philosophical framework, he finds his hard-earned achievements delegitimized by an abstract accusation of systemic advantage. Is this justice or a distortion of meritocratic principles?

The contemporary discourse of privilege represents not an instrument of understanding but a rhetorical bludgeon designed to provoke rather than illuminate. Its true aim isn’t to promote empathy but to manufacture resentment, transforming complex human experiences into simplistic power dynamics.

What if we were to resurrect a more venerable conceptual framework instead? Not *privilege* as a mark of shame but *blessings* as an occasion for gratitude and responsibility? This is no mere semantic sleight of hand but a profound reorientation of moral perspective.

America's founding generation understood liberty not as an entitlement to be parsed and redistributed, but as a blessing to be cherished and extended. "To secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity" was not an abstract legalism, but a moral imperative rooted in a deeper understanding of human dignity.

The Christian theological tradition offers a rich alternative to the zero-sum game of privilege discourse: grace.

Grace is not something earned or extracted, but an unmerited gift that transforms the recipient into an agent of further generosity. To whom much is given, much is required – not as a burden of guilt but as an opportunity for meaningful contribution.

The biblical story of Joseph offers a profound meditation on privilege transformed through adversity and grace. Sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph could have been consumed by bitterness. Instead, reunited with those who wronged him, he declares, "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive."

Here is a radical reimagining of advantage — not as a weapon of resentment, but as an opportunity for redemption and broader purpose.

Consider, as well, the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25: A master entrusts his servants with varying amounts of wealth; the servants who multiply their gifts are celebrated, while the one who merely preserves his talent without investment is condemned. This is not a crude celebration of accumulation, but a nuanced

exploration of stewardship: blessings are not static possessions but dynamic resources to be cultivated for collective benefit.

The Book of Ruth provides another compelling account of privilege wielded compassionately. Boaz, a wealthy landowner, extends extraordinary kindness to Ruth, a foreign widow, providing her with protection and, ultimately, redemption. His privilege becomes a mechanism of social restoration, not through guilt, but intentional generosity.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians offers perhaps the most elegant theological articulation. "Being enriched in every thing to all bountifulness," he writes, "which causeth through us thanksgiving to God." The blessing is not an end but a beginning, a catalyst for further blessing.

In an age of atomization and resentment, the language of blessings offers a radical alternative. It suggests that our advantages are not weapons to be apologized for, but resources to be deployed to serve our broader human community.

The most subversive act in our current moment might well be a simple, unfashionable proposition: be grateful and then be helpful.

Happy Thanksgiving!

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And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."
Matthew 4:19



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