

Rights vs. Entitlement: A Christmas Story

Kemi Searcy

A story tells of a king that left his throne, wandering incognito among his subjects. He dressed and ate like one of them, and experienced the hardships that many had. The elite of his day regarded him very poorly and he saw the inhumane treatment of many of his subjects. When the king returned to his throne, he denounced many lords in his kingdom, giving their lands to the upright lower class he had met. The upper class felt betrayed and thought the king was being unfair. But that is where the story ends. We could imagine the titled upper class' demise and how they protested. We could wonder about those in the lower class who did not receive the lands the king gave away. So, were the king's actions fair?

The definition of fairness is "in accordance with the rules or standards." That seems simple enough but if these rules and standards are interpreted differently by people, fairness is subjective. Many today are defending their idea of "fair" in demonstrative ways, both positive and negative. To understand what these people really want, we need to look at the subtle but important difference between "rights" and "entitlement."

Rights are those moral or legal items given to you through law, societal norms, or by authorities. Rights can change in accordance with rulings from elected officials or whoever's in charge. Our Constitution's amendments have granted rights to slaves, women and others, according the principles of law. Entitlement, on the other hand, is different in its origin and depth. Entitlement is what you deserve because of who you are, no matter what the law says. Our Constitution has awarded us the entitlement of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This means that as a citizen of the US, you are entitled to be alive, be free, and work for your happiness.

Many use rights and entitlement interchangeably, including some dictionaries, but the difference between rights and entitlement is essential to interpret current events. Lives and property have been lost this year because of people who believe they are entitled to protest in any way they want. But their right to protest is only secure as long as they remain within the law. That is what is fair.

In the same way, a few police officers have felt entitled to hurt people, some fatally, because of their badge. They were never entitled to do so. They have the right to arrest and detain people, and kill only in self-defense or to prevent the death of others, but only according to the law. This is what is fair.

This applies to the Christmas story. As part of the triune Godhead, Jesus' throne was established before time began. As God, He is entitled to do and act as He wants, no matter what anyone says or feels. According to Philippians 2:6, Jesus gave up his throne and came to Earth as a man. He did much more than the king in our first story. Jesus came as a helpless baby. He took on a flesh and blood body that grew tired, hungry, and vulnerable to heat and cold. He submitted to his parents and worked for a living. His ministry was accepted by the dregs of society and scorned by the elite. His disciples wanted Him to stage a coup over the government, but He didn't. He was berated, tortured, and ultimately died like a criminal.

Why would an entitled Being give up every right He had? While on Earth, Jesus' love for us moved Him to tears. His care for us caused His heart to reach out to anyone who would listen. His miracles went beyond earthly healing to spiritual eternity. Jesus didn't die uselessly. He chose to pay the price for every sin we have ever done or will ever do.

Jesus's treatment was monstrous! It wasn't fair! His crucifixion shouldn't have happened! But if it didn't happen, we wouldn't be allowed into heaven. It is by His blood that we are entitled to see God face to face. It is by His grace that we have the right to be His children on Earth, blessing others.

When you hear people decry their condition, put it into perspective whether their actions are their rights or an entitlement mentality. If they have been treated wrongly, help change laws that will give them the right to be treated equally. If they are acting in an entitlement mentality, where the cause justifies any means necessary, help them see a better way, a Jesus way of working to be treated equally under the law. During the holidays we sing, "Sleep in heavenly peace." Help us to sleep in heavenly peace this holiday season.

Now that's fair...