

# THE ENTITLEMENT CURE



## FINDING SUCCESS IN DOING HARD THINGS THE RIGHT WAY

DR. JOHN TOWNSEND

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF BOUNDARIES

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*The Entitlement Cure*

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

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## CHAPTER 1

# THIS DISEASE HAS A CURE

## TWO STORIES, TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS, same problem.

A couple contacted me about some trouble with their twenty-five-year-old son, who was still living at home. He had quit college and was unemployed after losing several minimum-wage jobs. He spent his days playing video games with his friends and his evenings partying. The couple had tried everything to get their son motivated to move on in his life. They'd had friends give him job interviews and had tried to get him interested in an online degree, at their expense. After more than a year of no changes, they were at their wits' end.

We met in my office in southern California. Dad had driven from his office and wore an open-necked dress shirt, slacks, and a frustrated expression. The son, in jeans and a T-shirt, sat with arms crossed. His facial expression and his overall manner were detached, as if expressing that nothing anyone said here would matter. Mom sat between them, in jeans and a blouse, anxiously looking back and forth between her two men.

As the discussion progressed, it quickly became clear that parents and son did not see life the same way. In fact, their viewpoints could not have been more polarized.

Mom and Dad had grown up in a middle-class environment and had worked their way through college. Both had continued to work through the child-rearing years. They believed that taking responsibility made you a better person.

Their son, on the other hand, had grown up in better financial circumstances than either of his parents had enjoyed as children. Yet, though he'd been given more, he gave less. He had no interest in work and a great deal of interest in having fun.

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When I asked him about his side of the situation, he spoke at first about wanting to get on with his life. He had a plan to leave home and begin a career, he said, but his parents just weren't patient and encouraging enough. He blamed them for his lack of progress. "If they would get off my back and support me," he said, "I'd get my life together faster."

I kept digging away with questions, probing to expose how he *really* felt. Finally, we got to the core of things: "Why should I leave?" he said. And when I asked what he meant, he replied, "Things are fine. I have a nice home and I have fun with my friends. The only problem is their attitude. If they would chill out, it would all be great. *I'm their son. They owe me.*"

I sat back, looked at each of them in turn, and said, "He's right about one thing: As far as he's concerned, things are fine. He has a comfortable living situation that he likes, and he has to do little to earn it. As long as he thinks you owe him this, nothing is likely to change."

Now shift gears. A different situation, this time a business scenario. I consulted with a company that had an energetic and extroverted sales manager, but whose team was just not pulling in its numbers. Her people had serious performance problems.

I interviewed her in her office. She was in her late thirties, dressed in an understated business-casual style. Pictures of her kids and husband adorned the walls. At the beginning of our session, she was defensive, insisting that her boss hadn't made his expectations clear and that he had not resourced her with enough staff and data to do her job properly. But I had already received information from her boss showing that this wasn't true. The company had done a good job of setting her up for success; she simply hadn't produced.

Finally, I said, "You're a very relational person. I think you are friendly and warm with others, and you work hard. But still,

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apparently, you aren't closing deals, nor is your team. The company's expectations—”

She interrupted: “Really, though, shouldn't that be enough? I'm a good person, a caring person. I hold this office together with my relational skills. And this company wants me to turn that off and become a work machine with no personality. *I deserve to be appreciated for the things that I do for the company.*”

No matter what I did or said, I could not move her from the position that her relational skills should be enough, even if sales failed to come in. I knew I had a difficult assessment to give her boss.

## The Universal Disease

Do you see the common thread in these two incidents? In both cases, the individuals preferred doing life the way they wanted to, and they felt comfortable with their choices. They had little interest in performing difficult behaviors that didn't come naturally to them.

And both of their lives had stopped working.

The most important commonality, however, is that both expressed attitudes of *entitlement*. Entitlement is the belief that *I am exempt from responsibility and I am owed special treatment*.

Entitlement is: The man who thinks he is above all the rules. The woman who feels mistreated and needs others to make it up to her.

I need you to understand the concept of entitlement thoroughly, so that you can recognize it and help others get past it. It is not always easy to understand. Entitlement is *not* the person who has needs or struggles that she cannot deal with on her own. She is in need. Chronically ill individuals and disabled veterans often are in great need of help, and we need to help them. Entitlement

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*is* the person who is capable of taking care of himself and still expects others to do that for him, because he feels he is owed that. This includes the able-bodied adult child who continues to live with his parents, refusing to work, to contribute to the home's upkeep, or even to clean up after himself. It can also include the worker who takes advantage of disability benefits after she has recovered.

Entitlement is *not* the person who keeps trying to please her boss but lacks either the skills or the clear instruction from management to perform well, and who is therefore always getting poor job evaluations. Entitlement *is* the person whose poor job evaluations result from her refusal to invest herself in her job and who consistently underperforms, not because she lacks the skills or hasn't received clear instructions from management but simply because she sees no reason to; she believes she deserves that paycheck for reasons completely unrelated to how well she performs, and that the company is lucky to have her.

Entitlement is *not* the spouse who feels inadequate because her partner is always expressing his frustration with their marriage and with the role she plays in it, even though she tries hard and wants things to be better. Entitlement *is* the spouse who thinks everything going wrong in their marriage is his partner's fault, and that if she doesn't shape up, she just might lose him. Since he has already made all the contribution to their marriage he needs to just on the basis of who he is, he's completely justified in just sitting back now and waiting for his wife to fix whatever's wrong, without any help from him.

There are many more examples, but the many faces of entitlement will always have at least most of these characteristics:

1. An attitude of being special—"I'm exceptional—and in fact, I'm of far greater value to this marriage (or family,

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or company) than the rest of them, and that's why I deserve special treatment. They're lucky to have me."

2. An attitude of being owed, of deserving something—"I didn't create this situation—*they're* the ones who are always complaining. So why should I do all the work, or even any of it? As far as I'm concerned, I should just stay in my office till they've cleaned up the mess. And my bonus had better not be any smaller than any of the others because of it."
3. A refusal to accept responsibility—"Why do they want me to pay rent? I didn't ask to be born. Besides, this will still be their house after I move out. And I can't pay rent anyway, because I don't have a job. None of the dead-end jobs around here are worth my time and effort. And there's no reason I should do my own laundry—Mom has to do hers and Dad's anyway—she can just do mine at the same time. It's no extra work."
4. A denial of one's impact on others—"Sometimes my husband and kids' lack of responsibility bothers me, and I say exactly what I feel. I'm telling them the truth. I don't sugarcoat it and I don't tone down my language, my volume, or how long I talk. They overreact to what I'm saying, and that's their problem. It's a free country, and I can say what I need to say."

Whatever the cause of the sense of entitlement, the end result is that the person believes that he or she doesn't have to play by the rules of responsibility, ownership, and commitment. And the end result of entitlement is predictable: The entitled person feels good and lives badly, while those around him feel bad about the situation but have more successful relationships and careers.

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It's tempting to make excuses for our loved ones (or ourselves) who evidence an attitude of entitlement, but the only effective response is to take responsibility, not to make excuses. People's life experiences may *influence them* toward entitlement. But they don't *create entitlement*. Many people who have suffered greatly in life, experiencing poverty, child abuse, and chaos, still take responsibility for their lives and choices, blaming no one. And there are individuals who have had it all—love, support, opportunity—who nevertheless see themselves as “owed”—by life, by society, by those around them.

This is important to know if you have an entitled person in your life. You may feel responsible for the part you may have played in influencing that attitude, or you may simply feel compassion for their circumstances. And it's certainly possible that you may have made mistakes in your relationship with them. It's possible that life may have thrown them curves. But those mistakes, those curveballs of life, do not create irresistibly an entitlement attitude; if they did, then all people who experienced those things would approach life with an attitude of entitlement, and they don't. At some point in life, people choose entitlement. They direct *themselves* toward an entitled viewpoint. Why? Ultimately, it's because—at least in their view—it is the Easy Way.

We see the word *entitlement* all over the media—when movie stars misbehave, when marriages go south, or when a young person displays extreme selfishness. You can find scores of examples of this mentality in families, in business, and even in the church. Entitlement has profound negative impacts:

- Companies that must deal with unmotivated employees
- Parents faced with raising self-centered children
- Dating relationships that don't work because of an “I'm special, and I deserve more than you're giving me” attitude

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- Young adults who refuse to grow up and so go nowhere
- Leaders who expect special treatment because of their position, not because of their character
- Marriages torn apart by the narcissism of a spouse
- Ministries saddled with prima donna leadership
- Professionals who wander from job to job looking for a place that will see them as the *wunderkind* they consider themselves to be—whether they’re productive or not

In short, entitlement has become a serious problem in our society, and it’s not getting better. It is impossible to calculate its cost in lack of company productivity, family success, relational love, emotional health, and spiritual vibrancy. Our world suffers greatly from a culture that supports entitlement.

The disease is not limited to any age or socioeconomic demographic. In my organizational consulting and in my psychological counseling, I have worked with seriously entitled people in their eighties and with highly responsible individuals in their teens. The disease cuts a wide swath.

Nor does the word *entitlement*, as I’m using it in this book, have anything to do with politics or government programs. The word has, in some circles, become a shorthand for tax-funded benefits to those who may or may not deserve them. For the duration of this book, forget that use of the word entirely. I’m talking about something entirely different—something that’s as likely to affect the critic of government programs as it is the programs’ beneficiaries.

## The Challenge of Living with an Entitled Person

I consistently encounter among those who have entitled people in their lives, three emotions. All three are difficult and negative:

*Alienation.* Entitled people aren't easy to be around. Their attitude and their behavior produce consequences none of us wants to experience. People who live around an employee, a coworker, a spouse, or a child who feels "above it all" generally feel disconnected and alienated from the entitled individual. We all find it hard to relate to someone who thinks he or she is superior in some way to the rest of the human race and therefore shouldn't have to play by the rules. One father told me, "I remember being full of myself in my twenties. But I did care about how I impacted my friends and family. My daughter's level of entitlement is something else entirely, and I can't relate to it. There is just nowhere to go in the conversation. She simply doesn't care how she affects us in the family, much less how she is impacting her future."

*Anger.* What does the Bible teach about the daily responsibilities of life? "For each one should carry their own load" (Galatians 6:5). God expects us to spend time and energy carrying our loads of responsibility for family, finances, and other challenges. That's how a successful life works. So what happens when someone in your life takes little ownership of their own load, leaving you to make up the difference? You feel angry, which makes sense. You feel that everything is "not right," because it truly *isn't* right.

Today as I filled up my car at a service station, down an adjacent street a teenager drove insanely fast for one block. From one stoplight to the next, for about a hundred yards, his tires squealed and his muffler roared. Then he stopped, looked around, and smiled at the startled pedestrians. I felt angry. They felt angry. You'd feel angry.

*Helplessness.* See if this sounds familiar: You speak to the entitled

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person in your life time and again about the troubling situation, yet see no change. After a few attempts, a feeling of helplessness sets in. It's as if all your attempts accomplish nothing. People often feel as though their reasoned arguments and warnings, all their loving care, fall on deaf ears.

I encounter this feeling of helplessness a great deal with parents, employers, and spouses. They say they have tried every technique and strategy they know. They are on the verge of ending the relationship and walking away. While sometimes walking away *is* the best thing, most of the time it's the feeling of helplessness that drives the choice to leave, best choice or not. This book will give you more options.

### **Pocket Entitlement**

I'm describing a set of negative attitudes and behaviors that affect us all.

All of us exhibit some level of entitled attitudes, even highly responsible and giving people. It's just part of the human condition. I call this *pocket entitlement*. I have it, and so do you. Later in the book, I'll show how to deal with it. The disease infects all of us, although it affects some more than others.

This book was written primarily to help you help loved ones and associates who struggle with the entitlement disease. But because we *all* struggle with that disease in some way—because we all struggle with pocket entitlement—you'll find that many parts of this book address the issues in a more general way, directed as much to you and to me as to the ones we want to help. In truth, all parts of the book are equally applicable to those of us who want to clean up our own act and those children, spouses, and coworkers we want to guide through dealing with their own entitlement issues.

## Enter the Hard Way

There is a solution to entitlement, which I call the *Hard Way*. The Hard Way is the entitlement cure. It is a path of behaviors and attitudes that undo the negative effects of entitlement, whether in ourselves or in others.

Here's my definition of the Hard Way:

*The habit of doing what is best, rather than what is comfortable, to achieve a worthwhile outcome.*

When you deem something worthwhile, be it a career or financial dream, a great family or marriage or some self-care goal, you have two ways to go about it. Entitlement directs you to give the minimum, find the shortcut, and think only of yourself. The Hard Way takes the opposite tack. This habit focuses on doing whatever is best to reach the good goal, *even if it is difficult, uncomfortable, takes longer, and requires more energy*.

Does that sound hard? Yes, it does, because yes, it is. It's hard to wake up early in the morning and work out. It's hard to get to work on time. It's hard to spend hours a day inputting data when you are a creative person. It's hard to think creatively when you are more linear. It's hard to have difficult conversations, to face down tough challenges, and to do the same actions, over and over again, that are required to achieve success. As the saying goes, it's called work for a reason. But it pays off, just as good sowing leads to good reaping.

Are you hearing biblical echoes in this language? That's because this is a highly scriptural concept: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matthew 7:13–14).

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If you have a difficult relationship with an entitled person or group, or even if you have discovered entitlement in yourself, understand this: It doesn't have to stay this way. The Hard Way principles *work*. I have used them in many, many situations and relationships. In fact, the two examples I cited at the beginning of this chapter both worked out well when the entitled individuals applied the principles and skills described in this book. The steps are both practical and effective. If your entitled person has little interest in changing, then you of course can't force them to change—but you will find help here to enable you to deal with the situation.

God originated the Hard Way, and he lives it. All through the Bible, he does the best thing, even if it is a difficult thing. He never avoids it. The best example of this is Jesus, who suffered and died for no other reason than his love for a world that didn't want him: “Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame” (Isaiah 50:7). Setting his face like flint, Jesus faced a way harder than any of the rest of us have ever had to face and created a path for us all to be redeemed and to live.

*Ultimately, the Hard Way is simply God's Way.* It is how he runs the world, expresses his own values, and makes choices that affect us. You might even call it the righteous path, for it is the right and good way to live: “Thus you will walk in the ways of the good and keep to the paths of the righteous” (Proverbs 2:20). God's ways will never fail you, even when they make you uncomfortable for a while.

## The Promise

Any book that recommends “the Hard Way” as an entitlement cure needs a big promise, so here it is: If you learn the principles in this book and live them out, you will experience several positive outcomes:

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- *A path to reaching your own goals and dreams.* It's the best way to get where you need to go.
- *Better-quality relationships.* Hard Way people attract good people, and they have a good influence on entitled people.
- *A clarified career and job direction.* The Hard Way provides you with great focus and energy.
- *A way to face and solve challenges.* Whether our own personal attitude toward life is entitled or not, life throws us curves, and these principles will help you to avoid getting derailed.
- *Better self-care and life balance.* You will find here the habits necessary to be healthy and whole.
- *Spiritual growth.* God draws near to those who follow his Hard Way path.

My use of the term *Hard Way* may imply that there's another side to the coin, an Easy Way. But in reality there is no Easy Way, at least in the sense of a life of comfort, devoid of work and struggles. There is only the Hard Way—and the Hardest Way. You do not want the Hardest Way, because it yields the rotten fruit of entitlement. Ultimately, entitlement fails us. We don't develop the character abilities and relationships necessary to become the people God intended us to be. We won't be able to love those who can love us well. We can't succeed in the tasks and missions God has prepared for us.

Choose the Hard Way. It truly is the right way.

## CHAPTER 2

# THE DEEPER STORY

ONE OF MY CLIENTS is a successful business owner with a history of entitlement. As a young man, he thought he deserved special treatment, considered himself better than others, and in general made himself difficult to be around. He was far more than a disruptive class clown (although he was that, too). He flouted school rules and disrespected and insulted teachers. The parties he organized routinely got out of control. Finally arrested on a serious charge, he was defensive and blamed everyone but himself.

Nowadays, however, he is known as a compassionate yet hard-driving boss, well liked and respected.

“I’m writing a book on curing entitlement in our culture,” I told him. “As a guy who has recovered from it, what was the key for you?”

He thought a moment and replied, “Life had to kick me around a lot.”

Knowing his past, I agreed. This man had suffered relational losses, financial hard times, and a lack of respect from the public before he finally turned things around. Without question, he had been kicked around.

“I don’t think that’s all of it,” I answered. “I know a lot of people kicked around by life who are still totally self-absorbed and making life hard for themselves and the world.”

“True,” he said. “A lot of people I know have crashed worse than I have, and they’re still not getting it.”

“I think the second piece for you,” I said, “was that, at some point, *you decided that you had contributed to your misery and that you were the key to removing your misery*. You stopped denying, blaming, and excusing, and looked at the guy in the mirror. That’s when

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everything began to change. It was more than your suffering; it was how you interpreted the cause of your suffering. That's what caused the shift. There's a saying that 'we change when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of changing.' You hit that tipping point and decided that the time had come to change. But not everyone does—a lot of people will either remain in their pain, continuing to hit their heads against the wall of reality, or else someone keeps rescuing them from it."

"That's pretty much what happened to me," he admitted. "Eventually my parents and my friends decided not to enable my bad behavior, and when I got sick of the pain, that was my tipping point. I just wish I had done all of this sooner!"

## Why We Need to Know How

My friend is a classic example (and I know many) of a person who has turned around his life by jettisoning his entitled attitudes and behaviors. Whether you're suffering from the effects of your own attitude of entitlement or from the entitled behavior and attitudes of others, there is hope! I have learned over the years what works, what helps, and what makes a difference. This book collects the wisdom gained in those years.

But first, I think it's important to understand what *causes* entitlement. If you recognize the process that creates this poisonous mentality, you're halfway there. In medicine, a good diagnosis is half the cure. This chapter explains how people end up with the entitlement disease; the rest of the book explains how to cure yourself and others. Help prevent the spread of the infection!

The best way to impact a family, a business, a church, or a country is through individuals. When individuals see reality, understand what life requires, and get motivated and resourced to grow and change, the entire world changes. Jesus did it with

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twelve ordinary people. So when you read about the Entitled Culture, remember that the attitude we're discussing in this book infects a great many individuals. Help change the entitlement attitudes in the individuals around you, and you help change the entire culture.

Here's another reason for including this chapter. I wrote it *so that your frustration and irritation with entitled individuals doesn't prompt you to give up on them.* I run into a lot of attitude and personality issues in my work, and of all of those issues, entitlement creates the most impatience in those around the one who evidences it. It isn't fun to be around entitled men and women. Entitled individuals are hard to reach, and they show little concern for their negative impact on others. Entitlement destroys relationships and marriages. It alienates. It costs businesses a lot of money, often through a poor work ethic and lack of focus. It's no wonder we get so irritated, frustrated, and impatient!

I often saw evidence of those angry emotions when I started working on this book. People would hear of my project and say, "When is it coming out? I need it NOW! I am so tired of the selfishness and slackness. When can I get your book for my company/family/kids/friends?" I have never written a book whose topic generated such an intense reaction.

And that intense reaction came mostly from those who work so hard, push themselves to be so responsible, do things they don't want to do just to make sure the family, or business, or organization, stays on track . . . and then watch others coasting. *Someone* has to work harder to make up for that coasting, in effort, love, money, or time. It's natural for this imbalance to cause deep discouragement and resentment.

And it's just as natural to feel deep concern over how someone you love is wasting precious time and energy, destroying relationships, undermining their jobs, and so on. Nearly all of us can

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list people we care about, people we worry about, whose lives are either being destroyed or who are simply not reaching their potential because of attitudes of entitlement.

My writing coach on this book gave me some great advice that shaped the way I approached the material: “Don’t write a finger-wagging book that just gets people even more frustrated and feeling even more helpless. Describe the problem, but give people solutions and hope.” The same goes for our reactions to the entitled people around us. It’s easy for us to wag our fingers, scold, condemn—but that gets us nowhere. Instead, provide hope. Provide solutions.

The well-deserved irritation you feel at entitlement is not a solution; in fact, it tends to feed your impatience and frustration—it could even spur you to decide impulsively to leave the relationship or fire the employee. And that is not a decision that should be made impulsively or in the heat of anger.

Don’t let this attitude get the best of you. Instead, “Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong” (Psalm 37:1). The principles in this book will help you feel more empowered, more hopeful, and even more patient.

## The Case for Compassion

We could all stand to become more compassionate in our dealings with others, even toward the entitled individuals in our lives. Here are three reasons:

**1. It's not all their fault.** Entitlement comes not only from a person’s choices and attitudes, but also from the relationship environment he grew up in, especially the key connections that affected him deeply. To conclude hastily that a person is “just that way” or “chose to be this spoiled” misses part of the truth. It’s important to also recognize the underlying causes of that sense of entitlement.

Does this mean that we excuse the individual's entitled behavior? Not at all. Everyone is responsible for his or her entitlement, completely, 100 percent, no matter the causes. A *reason* is not an *excuse*. We are members of both a sinful and a sinned-against race.

### **2. We all have attitudes of entitlement, to some extent.**

Each of us has the disease, with varying degrees of severity. Everyone has some sense of "being owed," or of feeling we are "better than." It's an unfortunate part of being human, and part of Adam and Eve's fall from grace.

I make a distinction between what I call *global* and *pocket entitlement*. Global entitlement permeates all of the individual's attitudes and behavior, no matter what she is doing or saying. If you were to follow a globally entitled person for a week, you would observe it in many of his conversations and engagements with others. It would come out at a coffee time at Starbucks, in an assignment at work, through an incident at church, over an argument at home. This person just can't see beyond her own nose and her own sense of being special. This is hard-case entitlement.

But lots of us struggle with entitled attitudes in *specific contexts* of life—not in every situation, but only in certain ones. That's why I call the second category *pocket entitlement*. It affects only a few areas of life and rarely shows up in the others.

For example: A friend of mine is fun to be around and a great dad. But I visited his company one day and saw a very different person. He was demanding and authoritarian—as if the Inner King had emerged. But when we went back to his house, he became the same old guy.

When I asked him about it, he was surprised. He was completely unaware of his pocket entitlement, perhaps because he had no one observing him in both areas of life.

Sometimes pocket entitlement emerges during stress. Recently,

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while at an airport on a layover on my way to an important company engagement, it came out in me. I was spinning a lot of plates, with time-critical phone calls and emails to answer. When I heard on the speaker system that my plane was delayed, I clearly remember thinking, *Are you kidding me? I'm a decent person and I work hard. There's an executive team waiting in a board room for me, wanting my input, depending on me. I just do not deserve this right now!* I deserved a break, I thought, given the critical nature of my work and how hard I work at it. *They should get me a seat on another plane right now.*

How entitled is *that*? A stressful situation had turned my pocket entitlement on high.

So before you allow yourself to get too frustrated and irritated at the entitled person in your life, remember first to keep taking the beam out of your own eye (Matthew 7:5). The virus has infected us all, since almost the very beginning.

### **3. Change happens only in the presence of compassion.**

No matter how self-involved or demanding a person is, compassion can make a difference—in fact, no lasting change will occur without it. If you’re trying to help, you will need to be “for” that person—for their welfare, for their success, and for their growth and transformation. We all need the grace of knowing someone is on our team.

A company called me in to help resolve a major conflict between one of the top salespeople and his sales manager. This salesperson was a high performer and routinely led the team in productivity. Unfortunately, he was also arrogant and a terrible team player. He would neither share information nor help others.

The sales manager was worried about her star’s entitlement attitude and its effect on the team. But she had an issue with entitlement herself. In her case, it showed up in her reaction to self-centeredness in others. If you wanted to bring out her anger

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and frustration, all you had to do was bring up narcissistic attitudes in others.

As a result, while the manager was clear about how she wanted her salesperson's attitudes to change, she was also always on his case and very critical. The escalation of hostilities between them affected the entire company.

When I talked alone to the salesperson, I could see that he did indeed have a chip on his shoulder. The entitlement was real. But when I said to him, "It does seem like she hasn't tried to see how hard you do work and how difficult all this is," he actually teared up a bit.

"I know I can be a jerk," he said. "But if she would just say a few good things every now and then, it would help."

And that's what happened. While the manager continued to insist that he show more team effort, she also made a point of asking about his life and affirming what he did well. Over time, his attitude became healthier, and the department rebounded.

If your approach to helping the entitlement-mentality people in your life is devoid of compassion, people will sense that and react against it. Much of this book is about how to help that globally entitled person in your life—and you will *always* have to begin with compassion if your efforts are to bear fruit. Do you recall anyone telling you that you are judgmental, unaccepting, impatient, harsh, or condemning? Before you attribute those statements to the speaker's unwillingness to hear the truth, honestly check out your heart. See if you are conveying acceptance—which is the companion of compassion: "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Romans 15:7). Of all people in the world, we who belong to Christ should be the most accepting, since we have experienced the grace that the world so urgently needs.

## Relational Patterns That Drive Entitlement

Human relationships, whether personal or professional, heavily influence a person's sense of entitlement. Parents, family members, spouses, friends, coworkers, church associates, and neighbors all play a role. We are the product of the relationships we invest in, as well as of the choices we make.

A large part of any growth system, whether management training, church discipleship, counseling, coaching, or family interactions, must involve what I call *de-entitlement training*. No college course has to teach us how to become more entitled! We know the lessons of entitlement by heart from an early age, and we need little training in it. Instead, we have to *unlearn* our natural entitlement.

Growth in the Hard Way means that we learn that the feelings and concerns of others are just as important as our own. We learn, in effect, that as we are loved, so we can love others in turn: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). All the care, support, grace, and structure we receive from healthy sources then gets used to make the world a better place as we serve, give, and sacrifice.

Let's consider the major patterns that create entitlement. Most of the time, they involve dysfunctional ways of praising, rewarding, correcting, and establishing consequences for bad behavior.

## Praise and Reward Problems

We sometimes reward (through actions) and praise (through words) our spouses, employees, children, and friends in ways that can actually harm them, even though it feels good at the time because it seems so positive. But what *seems* positive is not always what is best. A pizza slice or two is positive—but four can cause

problems. These unwise reward/praise approaches, although well intentioned, create bad fruit. Remember—these are patterns, not isolated events. Doing these things every now and then would be all right, but when they become trends, they risk fostering attitudes of entitlement.

**1. Praising what takes no effort.** Rewards and praise are most effective when they focus on an achievement that took time and energy. Most of the time, when praise is at its most effective, that achievement would involve a person's character or internal makeup. To repeatedly praise a little girl for being pretty puts her in a bind. What she hears is, *What gets me loved is something I can't do much about*. She also hears, *My inside isn't important, just my outside*. We all know people, especially women, who have received that sort of treatment. What happens to many of them as their bodies age over time? They become desperate to look young again, since that is the only thing that has brought them love and acceptance.

How would that little girl feel if instead she heard, “You work really hard and you do a good job at school.” Now what receives the praise? Her diligence, which she can do *a lot* about. Although her looks will fade over time, her character will not. Her character will grow and blossom and become even more beautiful her entire life.

**2. Praising what is required.** *Praise should be reserved for those times when someone stretches himself beyond the norm, puts extra effort or time into a task, or exceeds expectations.* It's not about doing the minimum, the expected. No one gets a party for showing up to work on time: “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’” (Luke 17:10).

A client of mine owned a media business. But before he went into business for himself, he'd had a harsh and uncaring boss. This

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boss had alienated people and ultimately ruined his company, after the rock stars and the high performers on whom he depended all left because they simply wouldn't put up with his behavior anymore.

So my client, having seen the trouble that went with a lack of praise and reward, overcompensated. He went too far in his attempt to avoid being the kind of boss who had so wounded him. He overpaid his staff. He didn't hold them to high standards in their work. He didn't correct them or change their compensation when they underperformed.

His actions created a happy staff. Who wouldn't like such an arrangement? And he truly was a nice, caring boss. But his employees didn't pull together as a team, nor did they perform well. When I saw all this, I helped him restructure his expectations, alter the company comp package, and change the corporate culture to insist on both high performance *and* high relationships.

Things were rocky for a while. Staff members now considered him unfair—after all, they had known only an entitlement-producing boss. A couple of them left. But most of the staff understood that if the company was to survive, a new culture had to be put in place, one that expected performance. Those who stayed buckled down and started showing good attitudes. Because of these changes, the business started flourishing. Don't get caught in the "praise for the minimum" trap!

### **3. Praising what is not specific.**

"You are amazing!"

"You are just awesome!"

"You're a great human being just because you are you."

Well, thanks for that vague compliment. But where do I go with it? Our culture is awash in these exaggerations that have roughly the same value as an empty calorie. Both yield insignificant benefits. Our brains have buckets where information goes.

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Praise should go in the right bucket: the bucket of hard work, of being kind, of being honest, of being vulnerable. But the brain has no appropriate bucket for such nonspecific, excessive statements, and therefore is unable to make constructive use of them.

I once praised in this way, until I realized that I did so only because it was a shortcut. It takes little effort to speak such phrases, and I could say them to my wife or a fence post, it didn't really matter. What requires effort is to take the time to observe and relate to a specific person about a particular praiseworthy behavior or attitude: "The homemade soup you took all day to make is amazing." "You are awesome in how you motivate our staff to make more phone calls every day." These statements go into the buckets that count.

### **4. Praising what takes an ability and creates an identity.**

We need affirmation when we try hard and achieve well. We also need to know when we have done well in our class, our staff, or our sport. That is why competition can be healthy. The message is, "You are good at what you do." But when the message crosses the line to, "You are a better person than others because of what you do," or "You deserve special treatment," trouble results.

If you are a parent, the right message is, "Great job on defense in the soccer game! You worked hard with your team and your individual plays were excellent. Now go and help the coach pick up the equipment." Top-tier executives, students, managers, and athletes all have to stand in line. Keep in mind that *while your child may be better in ability, she is no better intrinsically*. In the eyes of God, she is no better than anyone else, as the Lord is no respecter of persons (see Acts 10:34).

### **5. Praising what is not based on reality.** One of the saddest things I see an encouraging person do is to give someone hope even though no basis exists for that hope. Buoyed by an

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encourager who said, “You can do anything you want to,” an individual might spend years and all of his energy in traveling down a path that is simply the wrong path for him and that inevitably leads to disappointment.

Do you enjoy the current crop of talent-based TV shows? I do; I love both the talent and the energy. But a pastor at a church I recently attended pointed out that early in each season, you see a lot of train wrecks when individuals work their hearts out trying to sing, dance, or entertain when clearly they lack the skill or talent. “Why,” he asked, “didn’t anyone love them enough, early on, to say, ‘That’s not you; let me help you discover what you’re really good at?’”

My parents never told me I could play in the NBA if I wanted to, because they knew that while I liked basketball, I didn’t have a lot of talent. I am grateful that my parents helped me put my energies into areas where I had more strengths.

**6. A lack of warmth.** Ironically, entitlement can occur when a person gets little praise, care, or warmth. That might surprise you, but it makes sense.

We all need to know we are loved and accepted. It’s a basic human requirement for health and functioning. But when a person has a number of cold, detached, or self-absorbed relationships, he often creates what is called a *defensive grandiose identity*. That is, to protect himself from the emptiness or harshness of his relational sphere, he will craft a self-perception that is entitled, self-centered, and larger than life. That helps keep the hurt and loneliness at bay.

A business client of mine was seriously alienating himself from his staff and family. He couldn’t take criticism well, had to feel (and let people know) that he had all the answers, and presented himself as smarter and better than everyone around him. He had put himself in danger of losing both his company and his family.

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He and I began digging into who he was as a person. I didn't find in his background a family that spoiled him or praised him in the wrong way. Instead, I discovered that his home life as a child had included two damaged parents who had little interest in reaching into their bright son's internal world, understanding him, and caring for him. They functioned well in terms of providing structure and values. But because they did not offer him warmth, at his core he felt unlovable and ashamed of himself.

As we dug further, he remembered that when he went away to college, he reinvented himself. He tried out for sports, met girls, and got elected to student government. But his attitude went the wrong way. Instead of becoming grateful and caring, he came across as arrogant and superior.

This story has a happy ending. He had enough self-awareness and had felt enough pain that he was motivated to deal with the early hurts of his cold childhood and then do some productive grieving, letting go, and asking for support to replace what he had lost. Almost immediately, he saw his family and company with new eyes. He cared more for them, listened well, and willingly entered their worlds.

Defensive grandiosity is simply a shell we construct to keep negative feelings at bay. When the entitled person begins the process of growth, the shell begins to dissolve, and healthy feelings and behavior begin to form.

## Correction and Consequence Problems

People need not only the right sorts of reward and praise but also the right sorts of corrections and consequences. This is the opposite side of the coin. It takes different forms. Companies have HR departments dedicated to solving performance and culture problems, and those solutions often involve communicating hard

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truths, offering first help and, if that doesn't work, then warnings, demotions, and sometimes letting someone go. Churches have a discipline structure. Parents have time-outs, withholding toys, and curfews. Each of those approaches, unpleasant as they may be, offers people the chance to grow with the right balance of grace and truth.

But when we avoid setting the right boundaries and following up with the appropriate consequences, we can inadvertently encourage entitlement. People young and old need to know the parameters regarding how they should behave. *Their right to do whatever they want ends at the point where it impacts others.* No one gets a free pass on either their behavior or their words.

We need these boundaries because they remind us that we aren't God. Some lines we don't have permission to cross. Israel did not thrive during its dark days when it had no king, for every person "did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25 KJV). Some of these lines are good for us, not only because of the reminder that we are human and not God, but also because they help us take better ownership of and self-control over our own lives. When you know where you stop and the other person starts, you tend to better take care of your own backyard.

I have worked with conflict-avoidant boards of directors, CEOs, pastors, parents, and spouses. They all dread hard talks and setting limits. But when they don't address these issues, they inevitably foster an attitude in others that *I have the right to do whatever I want because there is no reality that conflicts with my belief.* In other words, they develop a culture of entitlement. If you're on the board, if you're the CEO or the pastor or the parent, you need to *be* the reality that conflicts with this belief.

That's the message God gave to Nebuchadnezzar when the king thought himself greater than he was. He ended up going crazy for a long time, eating grass like a cow (Daniel 4:33). You

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probably don't sentence someone in your charge to eat grass. But you may have to say, "No—and if you continue this behavior, I will have to . . ." And then follow up on the warning. Just remember to be loving and be "for" the person you're trying to help when you set limits, no matter how unloving they behave toward you. If you lose compassion, it's harder for them to learn the lesson. You want them to learn to accept and adapt to reality. You don't want their takeaway to be, "I have a mean boss/parent/spouse." *Loving but firm* is both the right way and the Hard Way.

## Meet Needs and Starve Entitlement

It's important to recognize that people have real and valid needs for everything from acceptance to support to advice. A desire for something good is not necessarily an entitled attitude. God created us to have needs, so they must be a good thing and something that should be addressed: "And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

You have to learn the difference between a *need*, which should be met, and an *entitled desire*, which should be starved. Meeting a need leads to life, and feeding an entitlement leads to destruction. It comes down to this: *that which creates love, growth, and ownership vs. that which creates superiority or a demand for special treatment*. Praising the real person inside—her character—can never go wrong. Praising her false and grandiose attitudes and behaviors is like throwing your money down a hole. Don't waste your love and support. Place it where it bears good fruit.

## Skills

- 1. Don't forget compassion:** Have you failed to offer compassion to the entitled individuals in your life and sphere of influence? If so, ask God to help you maintain wise and reasonable limits but at the same time remember that their attitude is not wholly of their own choice.
- 2. Look at your own pocket entitlements** and take charge of them. What you notice tends to improve over time.
- 3. Review the list of the causes of entitlement.** Do you understand the “how” that affected the entitled persons in your life? Check to see how you might have been influenced as well. The rest of this book will help you cure the disease.

# ***The Entitlement Cure***

## **Finding Success in Doing Hard Things the Right Way**

By Dr. John Townsend

Today we live in a culture that says, “My life should be easy and work well for me.” This attitude, called entitlement, influences our most important institutions: family, business, church, and government. Its effects are devastating, contributing to relational problems, work ethic issues, and emotional struggles.

*The Entitlement Cure* by New York Times bestselling author Dr. John Townsend teaches you the skills of learning to tackle and resolve matters that are difficult, rather than avoiding them, giving up too quickly, or hoping someone else will take care of matters for you. The habits gleaned from this book will lead to success in relationships, finances, self-care, and work.

When you face what must be faced, you stand to meet your goals and resolve your struggles better and faster. In that sense, this book brings a great deal of hope and positivity to a tough arena of life.

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