

Reflections

JUNE 2019

From Individual Humility to Corporate Pride

In his book, *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis devotes a chapter to “friendship.” After making the case for the importance of friendship (see our February 2015 *Reflections*, “The Gift of Friendship Love”), Lewis warns that there is possible danger even in good friendships:

Friendship (as the ancients saw) can be a school of virtue; but also (as they did not see) a school of vice. It is ambivalent. It makes good men better and bad men worse. It would be a waste of time to elaborate the point. What concerns us is not to expatiate on the badness of bad Friendships but to become aware of the possible danger in good ones...

It will be obvious that the element of secession, of indifference or deafness (at least on some matters) to the voices of the outer world, is common to all Friendships, whether good, bad, or merely innocuous. Even if the common ground of the Friendship is nothing more momentous than stamp-collecting, the circle rightly and inevitably ignores the views of the millions who think it a silly occupation and of the thousands who have merely dabbled in it... There is no offence in this. As I know that I should be an Outsider to a circle of golfers, mathematicians, or motorists, so I claim the equal right of regarding them as Outsiders to mine. People who bore one another should meet seldom; people who interest one another, often.

Thus, like an aristocracy, it can create around it a vacuum across which no voice will carry.



The danger is that this partial indifference or deafness to outside opinion, justified and necessary though it is, may lead to a wholesale indifference or deafness. The most spectacular instances of this can be seen not in a circle of friends but in a Theocratic or aristocratic class...

A circle of friends cannot of course oppress the outer world as a powerful social class can. But it is subject, on its own scale, to the same danger. It can come to treat as “outsiders” in a general (and derogatory) sense those who were quite properly outsiders for a particular purpose. Thus, like an aristocracy, it can create around it a vacuum across which no voice will carry. The literary or artistic circle which began by discounting, perhaps rightly, the plain man’s ideas about literature or art may come to discount equally his idea that they should pay their bills, cut their nails and behave civilly. Whatever faults the circle has — and no circle is without them — thus become incurable. But that is not all. The partial and defensible deafness was based on some kind of superiority — even if it were only a superior knowledge about stamps. The sense of superiority will then get itself attached to the total deafness. The group will disdain as well as ignore those outside it. It will, in effect,

have turned itself into something very like a class. A *coterie* is a self-appointed aristocracy.

I said above that in a good Friendship each member often feels humility towards the rest. He sees that they are splendid and counts himself lucky to be among them. But unfortunately the *they* and *them* are also, from another point of view *we* and *us*. Thus the transition from individual humility to corporate pride is very easy.¹

As you think about your circles of friends, can you think of any faults? How do your friendships affect your views of “outsiders”?



“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.”

ROMANS 12:16 (NIV)

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, in *The Beloved Works of C.S. Lewis*, Inspirational Press: New York, 1998, pp. 256-257.

