

Reflections

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Our Public and Private Lives



One of the subjects C.S. Lewis discusses in his book *The Four Loves* is affection, the kind of love that especially includes the love of parents to offspring but also of offspring to parents.¹ Among other things, Lewis offers a warning about the bad manners parents sometimes exhibit to their children, although his observations have more general application. An excerpt follows.

We hear a great deal about the rudeness of the rising generation. I am an oldster myself and might be expected to take the oldsters' side, but in fact I have been far more impressed by the bad manners of parents to children than by those of children to parents. Who has not been the embarrassed guest at family meals where the father or mother treated their grown-up offspring with an incivility which, offered to any other young people, would simply have terminated the acquaintance? Dogmatic assertions on matters which the children understand and their elders don't, ruthless interruptions, flat contradictions, ridicule



of things the young take seriously—sometimes of their religion—insulting references to their friends, all provide an easy answer to the question “Why are they always out? Why do they like every house better than their home?” Who does not prefer civility to barbarism?

We're a happy family.
We can say *anything* to one another here. No one minds.
We all understand.

If you asked any of these insufferable people—they are not all parents of course—why they behaved that way at home, they would reply, “Oh, hang it all, one comes home to relax. A chap can't be always on his best behaviour. If a man can't be himself in his own house, where can he? Of course we don't want Company Manners at home. We're a happy family. We can say *anything* to one another here. No one minds. We all understand.”

one thing; to wear the same shirt till it stank would be another. There are proper clothes for a garden party; but the clothes for home must be proper too, in their own different way. Similarly there is a distinction between public and domestic courtesy. The root principle of both is the same: “that no one give any kind of preference to himself.” But the more public the occasion, the more our obedience to this principle has been “taped” or formalised. There are “rules” of good manners. The more intimate the occasion, the less the formalisation; but not therefore the less need of courtesy. On the contrary, Affection at its best practises a courtesy which is incomparably more subtle, sensitive and deep than the public kind. In public a ritual would do. At home you must have the reality which that ritual represented, or else the deafening triumphs of the greatest egoist present. You must really give no kind of preference to yourself; at a party it is enough to conceal the preference. Hence the old proverb “come live with me and you'll know me.” Hence a man's familiar manners first reveal the true value of his (significantly odious phrase!) “Company” or “Party” manners. Those who leave their manners behind them when they come home from the dance or the sherry party have no real courtesy even there. They were merely aping those who had.²

Once again it is so nearly true yet so fatally wrong. Affection is an affair of old clothes, and ease, of the unguarded moment, of liberties which would be ill-bred if we took them with strangers. But old clothes are

In light of what C.S. Lewis had to say on this topic, have you ever thought about how your manners at home differ from your manners in other situations? Are you the same person in private as you are in public?



*“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them,
for this is the Law and the Prophets.”*

MATTHEW 7:12 (ESV)

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, 1991), p. 31.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

