

# Reflections

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## The Trouble Begins When...

**I**n his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis devotes an entire chapter, titled “The Great Sin”, to the sin of Pride or Self-Conceit.<sup>1</sup> He states: “The Christians are right: it is Pride which has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began.”<sup>2</sup> In thinking about this sin, however, one of the inevitable questions that comes up is, “Is everything we call pride sinful? Is it wrong for a parent to be proud of their child?” As part of this chapter, Lewis addresses some possible misunderstandings about Pride. An excerpt follows.

(1) Pleasure in being praised is not Pride. The child who is patted on the back for doing a lesson well, the woman whose beauty is praised by her lover, the saved soul to whom Christ says “Well done,” are pleased and ought to be. For here the pleasure lies not in what you are but in the fact that you have pleased someone you wanted (and rightly wanted) to please. The trouble begins when you pass from thinking, “I have pleased him; all is well,” to thinking, “What a fine person I must be to have done it.” The more you delight in yourself and the less you delight in the praise, the worse you are becoming. When you delight wholly in yourself and do not care about the praise at all,



you have reached the bottom. That is why vanity, though it is the sort of Pride which shows most on the surface, is really the least bad and most pardonable sort. The vain person wants praise, applause, admiration, too much and is always angling for it. It is a fault, but a childlike and even (in an odd way) a humble fault. It shows that you are not yet completely contented with your own admiration. You value other people enough to want them to look at you. You are, in fact, still human. The real black, diabolical Pride comes when you look down on others so much that you do not care what they think of you. Of course, it is very right, and often our duty, not to care what people think of us, if we do so for the right reason; namely, because we care so incomparably more what God thinks. But the Proud man has a different reason for not caring. He says “Why should I care for the applause of that rabble as if their opinion were worth anything?...”

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(2) We say in English that a man is “proud” of his son, or his father, or his school, or regiment, and it may be asked whether “pride” in this sense is a sin. I think it depends on what, exactly, we mean by “proud of.” Very often, in such sentences, the phrase “is proud of” means “has a warm-hearted admiration for.” Such an admiration is, of course, very far from being a sin. But it might, perhaps, mean that the person in question gives himself airs on the ground of his distinguished father, or because he belongs to a famous regiment. This would, clearly, be a fault; but even then, it would be better than being proud simply of himself. To love and admire anything outside yourself is to take one step away from utter spiritual ruin; though we shall not be well so long as we love and admire anything more than we love and admire God....<sup>3</sup>

As Lewis points out, it is right to have pleasure when we are praised by others. (And we should also remember to praise others.) It’s also a good thing for parents to have the right kind of pride in their children. Even as we rejoice and praise God for these blessings, however, let us take care that these good things not lead to self-conceit or to our loving anything more than God.



*“The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice;  
he who fathers a wise son will be glad in him.”*

PROVERBS 23:24 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> The first portion of this chapter is the subject of *Reflections*, December 2008, “The Greatest Sin”, <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/reflections-december-2008/>.

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Touchstone: New York, 1996 p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

