

**C.S. Lewis on Humility (and Pride)
Dr. Art Lindsley**

C.S. Lewis was given phenomenal gifts and tremendous opportunities to use them at Oxford (teaching), in Britain (on radio and through speeches), and throughout the world (his books). What considerations helped him to keep from losing his perspective and getting too puffed up?

One consideration that we all need to ponder is that we are all dispensable. The world will go on without us and others will take our place. Lewis says:

It is not chastening but liberating to know that one has always been almost wholly superfluous; whenever one has done well some other has done all the real work . . . you will do the same for him, perhaps, another day, but you will not know it.

In another passage Lewis is meditating on the greatness associated with great writers such as Shakespeare, Erasmus, and Montaigne. Lewis says:

What but to thank God for the “excellent absurdity” which enables us, if it so happen, to play great parts without pride and little ones without dejection, rejecting nothing through that false modesty which is only another form of pride, and never, when we occupy for a moment the centre of the stage, forgetting that the

play would have gone off just as well without us . . . This is the spirit which ought to govern even the smallest and most temporary assumptions of the higher place . . .

Lewis carried on a voluminous correspondence with many who wrote to him. One of the more interesting characters was an American lady (name not given) who often wrote to Lewis complaining of relatively petty things in her life dealing with health, finances, and other things. At one point she is complaining about other people, and Lewis warns her:

May God's grace give you the necessary humility. Try not to think – much less, speak – of their sins. One's own are a much more profitable theme! And if on consideration, one can find no faults on one's own side, then cry for mercy; for this must be a most dangerous delusion.

Often in the Narnian Chronicles the children are blinded by their pride and think they know better than Aslan the way to accomplish the task before them. Another important lesson is not to take themselves too seriously, to be aware of their need for help. After all, they are finite and fallen. There is a charming story in *The Horse and His Boy*. In this story a young boy, Shasta, takes off with a talking horse, Bree, in order to avoid being sold into slavery by a man who had found him floating in the water (as a baby). They meet an escaped princess, Aravis, and her talking horse, Hwin. At one point

in the narrative Hwin and Bree meet Aslan (the great lion). Unlike Bree, Hwin is not a very confident horse when she meets Aslan:

There was about a second of intense silence. Then Hwin, though shaking all over, gave a strange little neigh, and trotted over to the Lion. "Please," she said, "you're so beautiful. You may eat me if you like. I'd sooner be eaten by you than be fed by anyone else." "Dearest daughter," said Aslan, planting a lion's kiss on her twitching, velvet nose, "I knew you would not be long in coming to me. Joy shall be yours." Then he lifted his head and spoke in a louder voice. "Now Bree," he said, "you poor proud frightened Horse, draw near. Nearer still, my son. Do not dare not to dare. Touch me. Smell me. Here are my paws, here is my tail, these are my whiskers. I am a true Beast." "Aslan," said Bree in a shaken voice, "I'm afraid I must be rather a fool." "Happy the horse who knows that while he is still young. Or the Human either."

In another place, Lewis again shows his awareness of false humility. "A man is never so proud as when striking an attitude of humility." He warns, "Yes, pride is a perpetual temptation, but don't be too worried about it. As long as one knows one is proud one is safe from the worst form of pride." As Lewis indicates in the last quote, battling pride is easier said than done. If you knock it down in one place, it pops up in

another. Even in the act of trying to fight one prideful action, it can creep back in subtle ways.

Once Lewis was thinking about his own tendency to self-admiration:

And will you believe it, one out of every three is a thought of self-admiration: when everything else fails, having had its neck broken, up comes the thought “What an admirable fellow I am to have broken their necks!” I catch myself posturing before the mirror, so to speak, all day long. I pretend I am carefully thinking out loud what to say to the next pupil (for his good, of course) and then suddenly realize I am thinking how frightfully clever I’m going to be and how he will admire me . . . And then when you force yourselves to stop it, you admire yourself for doing that. It’s like fighting the hydra . . . There seems to be no end to it. Depth under depth of self-love and self-admiration.

The most extensive discussion of pride and humility comes in Lewis’s chapter, “The Great Sin,” in *Mere Christianity*. Though everyone is guilty of pride, almost no one will admit to it. People will admit to being bad –tempered, a coward or struggling with girls or drink, but seldom pride. Pride has been called the utmost evil. “It was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.”

Lewis goes on to say that if you want a test by which to know how proud you are, “ask yourself, ‘How much do I dislike it when other people snub me, or refuse to take any notice of me, or shove their oar in, or patronize me, or show off.’”

It is comparison that makes you proud. It is not necessarily pride to think that you are rich, clever, or good-looking. But it is pride to boast in being richer, cleverer, or better looking than others. Pride might make a man try to take another man’s girlfriend not because he wants her but to show himself better than the other man. Pride is never satisfied, but always demands more.

Pride is a major obstacle to knowing God. Lewis says:

As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.

Later, he says, “. . . pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense.”

Lewis is careful to point out a few things that are often confused with pride, but are not pride. First, pleasure in being praised is not pride, for Christ will say to some, “Well done thou good and faithful servant,” and it is not wrong to feel pleased when He says it. When a child gets good grades, it is not wrong to praise him or her or wrong for them to be pleased with the compliment. In fact, the prouder the person, the less they care what others think, as if their opinion mattered.

Second, it is not wrong for a father to be “proud” of his son, or of his father, or of his school, etc. In this case, proud might mean having a “warm-hearted admiration for.” This is not a sin. But if a father started bragging about his school as if his attendance there made him better than others, that would be a problem. Lewis says, “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.”

Third, the reason God forbids pride is because He wants you to know Him. To know God means to put off our airs and be who we really are.

Fourth, it is easy to miss-characterize humility and to think that we have to look dejected and forlorn. Lewis says:

Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call “humble” nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, swarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seems a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.

The first step in acquiring humility is to realize that you are proud. Until you realize this, nothing can be done about it. “If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.”

C.S. Lewis writes so well about our struggles because he was so honest about his own. He had many people around him who could keep him from getting a big head – the Inklings (J.R.R. Tolkien, et al.), Warren (his brother), Mrs. Moore (who was constantly critical), Joy (his wife, who had a very strong character), as well as many critics, academically and otherwise. Lewis was very reluctant to call himself humble, perhaps because he was so aware of his own pride.