

"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."

Genesis 1, 26-28

The concept of our having "dominion" over all else that lives and moves on earth has created problems. It is, of course, a human concept, based on human words which tried to express an answer to questions about the origins of human existence.

The Psalmist captured the spirit of awe and wonderment, in Psalm 8, which uses the Genesis concept but in the context of a psalm of praise to the excellence of God: "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour."

Psalm 8, 3-5

But, the concept of "dominion" has led many people to think of themselves as highly exalted - as being, indeed, "a little lower than the angels" - indeed, only just lower!

One result of this ego-centric, anthropo-centric thinking is the attitude that "dominion" includes a right to exploit the earth's resources with no thought for the future - to take all we can get, now, because we are entitled to it, rather than to use only what we need. And note that there are many different interpretations of "need". Think of banks advertising the availability of loans for people who "need" a second car, a swimming pool, a boat, a holiday.

The exploiters ignore the truer interpretation of "dominion" as involving "stewardship": the careful use and control of resources, always ensuring the replacement and renewal of what is used.

I see in the exploiters' self-centred and self-important attitude an absence of the humility that Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount, and in his parable of the Pharisee and the publican, and in his exhortation to be "as little children".

Instead, the exploiters have succumbed to the "Great Sin". They see themselves not only as "a little lower than the angels" but, indeed, as greater than God - because God is only the creation of human imagination".

In a prayer "For One who is Proud", William Barclay wrote:

O God, I know that my besetting sin is pride.
So often I find myself looking down on others, and even despising them. I find myself thinking of my own cleverness, and of my own triumphs and achievements. I find myself thinking that I am sensible and that other people are fools.
O God, take away my pride and my self-conceit.

I took the title of this sermon from an article by C S Lewis, who wrote that there is one vice from which no one in the world is free, which all people loathe when they see it in someone else, and of which hardly any imagine that they are guilty. People admit that they are bad-tempered, or that they cannot keep their heads about sex, or drink, or even that they are cowards. Few, however, accuse themselves of this vice.

The vice Lewis was writing about is pride, or self-conceit. According to the Christian tradition, pride is the essential vice, the utmost evil. Unchastity, anger, greed and drunkenness are mere flea-bites in comparison. It was through pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice; Lewis called it the complete anti-God state of mind.

If you want to find out how proud you are, ask yourself: How much do I dislike it when other people snub me, or refuse to take notice of me, or patronise me, or

show off?" The point is that each person's pride is in competition with everyone else's pride. Pride is essentially competitive, while the other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident.

Pride gets pleasure not out of having something, but out of having more of it than the next person has. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but that is not the case. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others.

It is the comparison that makes you proud - the pleasure of being above the rest. Nearly all those evils which people put down to greed or selfishness are really far more the result of pride.

Greed will certainly make a person want money, for the sake of a better house, better holidays, better things to eat and drink. But only up to a point. What is it that makes someone with two million dollars a year anxious to get five or ten million a year? It is not the greed for more pleasure; two million will give all the luxuries that any person can really enjoy.

It is pride - the wish to be richer than some other rich person, and (still more) the wish for power. For power is what pride really enjoys: nothing makes a person feel superior to others more than being able to move them about like toy soldiers.

What is it that makes a political leader or a whole nation go on and on, demanding more and more? Pride.

It is pride that has **been the chief cause of misery** since the world began. Other vices may sometimes even bring people together: you may find good fellowship and jokes and friendliness among drunken people or unchaste people. But pride always means enmity; it is enmity. And not only enmity between person and person, but enmity to God.

C S Lewis wrote that in God you come up against something immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that - and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison - you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud person is always looking down on things and people; and as long as you are looking down you cannot see something above you.

That raises a question: How is it that people who are eaten up with pride can say they believe in God and appear to themselves very religious? It means they are worshipping an imaginary God. They are imagining how God approves of them and thinks them far better than ordinary people. C S Lewis said that they pay a penny-worth of imaginary humility to Him and get a pound's worth of pride towards their fellow beings.

Lewis wrote that pride can often be used to beat down the simpler vices. Teachers, in fact, often appeal to

a student's pride or, as they call it, self-respect, to make them behave decently. Many people have overcome cowardice, or lust, or ill temper by learning to think that these vices are beneath their dignity - that is, they overcome them by pride. The devil laughs.

He is

content to see you becoming chaste and brave and self-

controlled, provided, all the time, he is setting up in you the cancer of pride.

Pride is spiritual cancer; it eats up the very possibility of love, contentment, even common sense.

C S Lewis noted that pleasure in being praised is not pride. He wrote that 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. Here the pleasure lies not in what you are but in the fact that you have pleased someone you rightly want 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.

The vain person wants praise too much and is always angling for it. It is a fault, but a childlike and even humble fault. It shows that you are not yet completely contented with your own self-esteem. You value other people enough to want them to look at you. The real, diabolical pride comes when you look down on others so much that you do not care what they think of you.

When we say that a person is proud of his/her child, or family, or school, it may be asked whether pride in this sense is a sin. I think it depends on what, exactly, we mean by "proud of". Often "proud of" means to have warm-hearted admiration for. Such admiration is far from being sin. But it might, perhaps, mean that the person in question puts on airs on the ground of his/her distinguished relative.

This would be a fault, but even then it would be better than being proud simply of oneself. To love and admire anything outside oneself is to take one step away from spiritual ruin; though we shall not be well so long as we love and admire anything more than we love and admire that creative force which some people call God.

Do not imagine that if you meet really humble people they will be what most people call "humble" nowadays. In short, they will not be the sort of people who are always telling you that, of course, they are nobody.

Probably all you will think about them is that they seem cheerful, intelligent sorts who take a real interest in what you said to them. If you dislike them it may be because you feel envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. They will not be thinking about humility; they will not be thinking about themselves at all.

If anyone would like to acquire humility, the first step is to realise that one is proud. It is a big step, too. Nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means that you are very conceited indeed.

There is an old story about a man who used to be pretty good. He was intelligent, witty, versatile, popular, and so on. But he had one great failing. He was terribly conceited. He went to a psychiatrist, and eventually overcame the problem of his conceit. Now, he's perfect!

I finish with more words by William Barclay, in a prayer for "When We Have Done Well":

Thank you, O God, for the success which you have given me today.

Help me not to rest on my oars because I achieved something, but to work still harder, to aim still higher, to do still better.

Keep me from becoming conceited. Help me always to think, not of what I have done, but of what I still must do; not of the few things in which I have succeeded, but of the many things in which I have failed.

Help me to be happy in the joy of achievement, but save me from a boastful and a foolish pride.

Amen.

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Based on "The Great Sin" by C S Lewis, The Reader's Digest, August 1975