

The Sin of Pride (Self-Conceit)

A Sermon by Richard Baxter

Naturally men are prone to spin themselves a web of opinions out of their own brain, & to have a Religion that may be called their own: And it's their Own in two respects: 1. Because it is of their own devising, and not of Gods revealing or appointing: 2. Because it suiteth with their own carnal ends and interests. Men are far readier to make themselves a faith, than to receive that which God hath formed to their hands. And they are far readier to receive a Doctrine that tends to their carnal commodity, or honour, or delights, than one that tends to self-denial, and to abase themselves, and exalt the Lord. 2. And when they have hatched or received such opinions which are peculiarly their Own, they are apt to like them the better, because they are their own, and to value them because of the Interest of self. O Sirs, that you did but know the commonness and danger of self-conceitedness in the world! Even with many that seem humble, and verily think that it is the spirit of God that beareth the greatest sway in their understandings, yet self doth there erect its throne. O how secretly & subtly will self-insinuate, and make you believe that it's a pure self-denying light which guideth you, and hat what you hold is merely by the cogent evidence of truth, or the illumination of the Spirit, when it is but a Viper that self hath hatched and doateth on, because it is her own.

Because the Papists have gone too far in teaching men to depend on the Church and on their Teachers, therefore self-conceitedness takes advantage of their error, to draw men into the contrary extreme, and make every Infant-Christian to think himself wiser than his most experienced Brethren and Teachers; and every raw unstudied Christian to think himself wiser than those that have been searching into the word of truth by study and prayer almost all their days: and therefore to cry down that learning, wisdom and study, which they are unacquainted with; that seeing they have it not themselves, they may at least be thought as wise men without it, as those that have it, and so may provide for the reputation and interest of self: O what sad work hath this great sin of self-conceitedness made in the world! In too many places men make it their Religion to strive who shall be greatest for wisdom and abilities in the eyes of men: and it is the very work of their Prayers,

and conference, and teaching, to exercise self-conceitedness, and to make it appear that they are some body in knowledge: Hence is it that they are so apt to fall upon novelties who either few receive, or none before themselves devised, that being singular, self may be the more observed, and they may have something which may be called their Own: Hence also it is that they are so little suspicious of their own opinions, never bending their studies impartially to try whether they are of God or not, but rather to maintain them, and to find out all that can be said for them, and against the contrary minded: Hence is it that men have such light and contemptuous thoughts of the judgment of those that excel them in knowledge, and that the voice of Korah, and those other Conspirators, Numb. 16. 3. is grown so common in the mouths of ignorant proud professors, [Ye take too much upon you (say they to their Guides and Teachers) seeing all the Congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them: wherefore then lift ye up your selves above the Congregation of the Lord?] It is the Holiness of the Congregation, and all its members, and the presence of God himself among them, that is pleaded against the Superiority of Moses & Aaron, as if with so Holy a people, that had God himself to be their Teacher and Guide, there were no need of men to be lift up above the Congregation of the Lord. But it was self that was intended, whatever was pretended. From this self-conceitedness also it is that the weightiest common truths that self hath no special interest in, are so little valued and relished, and insisted on; and that a less and more uncertain point which self hath espoused, shall be more relished, insisted on, and contended for: Hence also is most of the common confidence of men in their own Opinions; that when the point is doubtful, if not certainly false, in the eyes of wiser men than themselves, yet the fool rageth and is confident, Prov. 14. 16. He can carry on a conceit of his Own with as brazen a face, and proud contempt of other men's arguments, as if he were maintaining that the Sun is light, and other men pleaded to prove it dark: when, alas, it is self-interest that is the life, the strength, the goodness of the cause. Hence also it is that men are so quarrelsome with the words and ways of others, that they can scarce hear or read a word, but these pugnacious animals are ready to draw upon it, as if they had caught an advantage for the honouring of their valour, and were loath to lose such a prize and opportunity for a victory and triumph: Hence it is that hearing at the sayings and doings of others, is the first, and most common, and most sensible part of their Commentaries. And that they can make heresies and monsters not only of tolerable errors, but of truths themselves, if they have but the

inexpiable guilt of crossing the wisdom of these self-conceited men. Hence it is that opinions of their own are more industriously cultivated and studiously cherished, by a double if not a tenfold proportion of Zeal and diligence, than common truths that all the godly in the world have as much interest in as they, though the common truths be incomparably the greater. And hence it is that men are so tenacious of that which is their Own, when they easily let go that which is Gods; and must have all come to them, and every man deny his own judgment, except themselves; and that it must be the glory of others to yield to them, and their glory to yield to none, but to have all men come over and submit to them. All these are the fruits and discoveries of self as it reigns in men's understandings, who possibly may think that it's Christ and the Spirit that's there exalted.

Yet mistake me not: I do not say or think that a man should forsake a certain truth for fear of being accounted self-conceited, nor that he must presently captivate his own understanding to a learned man, or the stronger, or more numerous side, for fear of being self-conceited. Much less must I deny that grace of God that hath made me savingly wise by his illumination, that was formerly foolish, disobedient, and deceived in the days of my ignorance. The world must give us leave to triumph over our own former folly with Paul, Tit. 3. 3, 4, 5. and say with the same Paul, that we were no better than mad when we were enemies to the Gospel, Act. 26. 11. and with the man in Joh. 9. 25. [One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see.] It's no self-conceitedness for a man that is brought from the blind distracted state of sin, into the light of the sanctified, to know that he is wiser than he was before; and that he was formerly besides himself, but now is come to his understanding again. Nor is it any self-conceitedness for the meanest Christian to know that a wicked man is more foolish than he; or for a Minister or any man that God hath caused to excel in knowledge, to hold fast the truth he knows, and to see and modestly oppose the errors of another, and to know that in that he is wiser than they. God doth not require that we shall turn to every man's opinion, and reel up and down from sect to sect, and be of the opinion of every party that we come among, and all for fear of thinking ourselves wiser than they. David knew he had more Understanding than his Teachers: Psal. 119. 98, 99. and true believers fear not to say We know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness, 1 Joh. 5. 19. & 3. 19. & 2. 3. And Paul would not forbear the reprovng of Peter,

for fear of being thought to be self-conceited, Gal. 2. some men are so desperately self-conceited that they take every man to be self-conceited that is not of their conceits.

But when self is men's instructor, and chooseth their Text, and furnisheth them with matter, and nothing is savoury but what is either suited to the common interest of self, or which it hath not a special interest in; when men are absolutely wise in their own eyes, and comparatively wiser than those that know much more than they; when self-interest serves instead of evidence to the receiving, retaining, or contending for a point; when men think they know that which indeed they do not know; and observe the little which they do know, more than an hundred fold more that they are ignorant of; doubtless here's self-conceitedness with a witness; and they that will not see it in a lower degree, methinks should see it in such a case as this. He that will not believe that a man is drunk when he reels and stammereth, may know it when he lieth spewing in the streets.

Well Sirs, I beseech you see that self in the understanding be mortified and pulled down. It's the throne of God, the Lanthorn of holy truth, the temple of the Spirit; and shall self-Rule there? The understanding is it that guideth the soul and all the actions of your lives: and if self-rule there, what a Ruler will you have? and what a case will heart and life be in? If your eye be dark, your Light be dark, how great will be your darkness: and if it be selfish, it is certainly so far dark. O believe the Holy Ghost, Prov. 26. 12. [Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? there is more hope of a fool than of him.] For a mere fool that is ignorant only for want of teaching, hath no such prejudice against the truth, as the self-conceited have: Nor is it so hard to make him know that he is ignorant: nor yet to make him willing to Learn: He that knoweth himself to be blind, is willing to be led. Moreover the self-conceited have much to unlearn, before they can be fit to receive the truth in a saving manner.

O how many thousands are undone by self-conceitedness! It is this that keeps out Knowledge, and every Grace, and consequently all true peace and comfort; and this it is that defendeth and cherisheth all sin. Let us shew men the plainest word of God for duty and against sin, and shew them the clearest reasons, and yet self-conceitedness bolts the door against all: Yea so wonderfully doth this sin prevail, that the ignorant silly people that know almost nothing, are as proudly self-conceited as if they were the wisest men: They that will

not learn, and cannot give an account of their knowledge, in the very Catechism or Principles of Christian Religion, nor cannot pray, nor scarce speak a word of sense about the matters of Salvation, but excuse themselves that they are no Scholars, yet these very people will proudly resist their Teachers, though they were the wisest and most learned men in the Land: Let us but cross their conceits of Doctrine or Practice in Religion; about their own title to Church-privileges, or fitness for them, and they are confident and furious against their Ministers, as if we were as ignorant as they, and they were the wisest men in the world: so that pride and self-conceitedness makes people mad, or deal like mad men. We cannot humble men for sin, nor reclaim them from it, till they know the sin, and the danger of it: and self-conceitedness will not let them know it, no nor let them come to us to be taught: but they are wise enough already: and if we tell them of the sin and danger, they are wiser than to believe the Word of God or us! They will tell us to our faces, they will never believe such and such things, which we show them in the Scripture. O the precious light that shineth round about you all, and would make you wise, if self-conceitedness did not keep it out by making you seem wise already. 1 Cor. 3. 18. These men that thus deceive themselves, by seeming wise to themselves, must become fools in their own eyes, if ever they will be truly wise; and confess themselves, as Paul himself did, that they were foolish and deceived, when they served their lusts and pleasures, Tit. 3. 3. This Pride and Self-conceitedness is like the barm in the drink, that seems to fill up the vessel, but indeed works it all over: This is the Knowledge that puffeth up, 1 Cor. 13. like the pot that by boiling seemeth to be filled, that was half empty before; but it's empty in the bottom, and presently boils over, and is emptier than before. So is it with the self-conceited, that have a superficial knowledge, while they are empty at the bottom, and by the heat of pride, that little they have boileth over to their loss. It is the humble that God reveals his secrets to, and the hungry that he filleth with good things, and the full that he sendeth empty away. He will have no Disciples that come not to his School as little Children, teachable and tractable, not thinking themselves too old, or too wise, or too good to be taught. If you would see the mysteries of the Gospel savingly, you must even creep to Christ on your knees, and cry, Lord be merciful to me a sinner! He will not lift up your minds and hearts to heaven, till you think yourselves unworthy to lift up your very eyes to heaven, because you have sinned against heaven. And if you were even lifted to heaven, should you there but be lifted up with pride or self-conceitedness, you

should soon have a prick in the flesh, to let out that dangerous, venomous wind that puffs you up.

And if you should have any Knowledge of the most precious truths, as long as you are thus proud and self-conceited, it will not be savoury and effectual on your hearts. Humility feedeth, and Pride starveth every Grace. The Spirit of God will not dwell with the proud: He will beat you out of your selves, unless you drive him away from you. Some seeming raptures and comforts, the self-conceited have; which are but the deluding flatteries of self, and the encouragements that Satan giveth to his servants: (For Satan will needs be a comforter for a while, as the Holy Ghost is to the Saints: and his followers also have their joys.) But it is the humble soul that hath the solid comforts.

From the dust of Humiliation, we have the clearest sight of Glory, and consequently, the sweetest tastes of it. As high as the rain comes from, it is the lowest valleys that receive it most, and retain it. Faith itself will not prosper in the proud and self-conceited: To such the Gospel will be foolishness, or an offence. It is only the humble that savingly close with its mysteries. Humility cherisheth the fear of God, and makes us say, how shall we do this evil? or neglect this duty? But Self-conceitedness and Pride is blind and bold, and destroyeth in men's apprehensions, the difference between things sacred and common, the holy and the unclean: It disposeth them to such an unreverent boldness with holy things, as usually ends in a profane contempt: so that such can at last despise holy Ordinances which they should live upon. Repentance and this Pride are deadly foes. To be Penitent and Proud, is to be Hot and Cold, alive and dead. Though Christ love not to find you in the dust of earthly-mindedness, yet he loves to find you in the dust of humility. The Publican that hanged down the head, did sit the way better to the sight of God, than the self-conceited Pharisee. The most self-denying humiliation is the nearest way to heaven, and the most self-exalting Pride is the surest and nearest way to hell. I had rather sit with Mary washing and wiping the feet of Christ, than ask as the Mother of James and John, to sit at Christ's right hand and left hand in his Kingdom. Mary was in a manner thanked for the Love of her humility: and they were in a manner denied the request that so little savoured of self-denial. Our Lord doth not use to thank people for their service, and yet he did that which was next to it, to this humble, self-denying, penitent woman. He doth not use to deny his own Disciples a

heavenly request: and yet he did that which was next to a denial, when self-brought him the petition. He that hath taught us not to press to the highest room, lest with shame we hear, [Sit lower] doth hereby tell us what we must expect from himself: And he that hath bid us sit down at the lower end, that we may hear [Friend sit up higher] doth express his purpose for humble, self-denying souls. I had rather from the dust hear his [Come up higher] than from self-exaltation to hear [Come down lower.] O you that are proud, self-conceited wretches, did you but know what good it doth an humble soul, to feel Christ take him up from the dust, you would soon fall down that you might taste their comforts in his lifting up. O what a blessed feeling it is, to feel one's self in the arms of Christ! Our common compassion that makes us run to take up one that falls before us, is a spark of that compassion in Christ: who meddles with him that walks before us? but a man that falls down in a swoon, we are all ready to lay hands on! O happy fall, that makes us feel the arms of Christ!

Though the fall into sin be never the better, that occasioneth it, yet the fall into Humiliation is the better, that prepareth for it. He that in his agony had an Angel to minister to him, will not leave the self-denying, humble soul, without his Angel, or some way of relief that is suitable to the necessity.

Christ himself will not communicate himself to the proud and self-conceited. He is wisdom, but not to them that are wise in their own eyes already. He is Righteousness, but not to them that Justify themselves: He is Sanctification, but not to those that never found their own uncleanness. He is Redemption, but to none but those that feel themselves condemned. He hath the white raiment, and the treasures of grace and glory: but it's only those that penitently feel that they are poor and miserable, and blind, and naked. Truly Sirs, though I have no mind to trouble the well-grounded peace or comfort of any of your Souls, yet I would advise you, if you have never so good thoughts of your selves, suspect lest it should be the fruit of self-conceitedness: And if you should have never so much peace and joy, look well whether it come from God or self-conceit! And if it come not in against self, it's ten to one but it comes from self. If your Peace and Comfort be not won from Christ, in a way of self-denial, and as the spoils of the flesh, you have it not in the ordinary way of God. Did you come to your Joy and Peace by humility, and self-denial, and patience, and mortification, and by becoming little Children, and the servants of all, and by learning of

Christ to be meek and lowly? If not, take heed lest you nourish a changeling, an Imp of Hell, and a selfish brat, instead of the fruit of the Spirit; the peace and joy of the Holy Ghost. If you feel no great matter at home to trouble you, you are too Righteous to be Justified by Christ. If you groan not under your ignorance and unbelief, you are too wise to be Christ's Disciples. If you mourn not under the load and pain of sin, you are too well to be Christ's Patients. If you are readier to justify and excuse your selves, than to condemn your selves, and had rather hear your selves praised, than reprov'd, admonish'd, or instructed, and like Diotrephe's, love to have the pre-eminence, you are too high for Christ to take any acquaintance with you; and too full of self to have any room for his Love, and Spirit, and heavenly Consolations. He that gave us the Parable of the importunate widow, Luke 18. 2, 3. would have us understand that bare necessity is not enough to fit us for relief (for then the worst of men should be the fittest:) but it must be Necessity so felt, as to humble us, and drive us to importunity with God. The Prodigal was miserable when he was denied the husks; but he never felt his Father's embracement till he came to himself by denying himself, and returning to his Father. And this the self-conceited will not be persuaded to. The first that must touch Christ after his Resurrection, is not a King, nor a Lord, no nor a man, but a woman that had been a sinner. When she held him by the feet, Love did begin low in humility, but it tended higher, and ended higher. Christ hath told us that where much is forgiven there will be much love. For there's most of the fruits of God's love, and least of self, and most to abase self. It is not possible that love to Christ should dwell or work in any but the humble, that feel at the heart that they are unworthy of love, and worthy of everlasting wrath. The Proud and Self conceited cannot love him; for they cannot be much taken with Christ's love to them, except as the Pharisee in a way of self-flattery. But the poor soul that was lost, will heartily love him that sought and found him; and he that was dead, will love when he finds himself alive; and he that was condemned both by God and conscience, will surely love the Lord that ransomed him! And it is the apprehensions that men have of themselves that much causeth all this difference. The self-abhorring self-judging, self-denying sinner is melted with the love of God in Christ, because it is to such a worthless, sinful wretch. What Lord, saith he, is the blood of Christ, the pardon of sin, the spirit of grace, the privileges of a child, and everlasting glory for such an unworthy wretch as I, that have so long offended thee, and so much neglected thee and lived such a life as I have done, and am such an empty unprofitable worm? [O what a wonder of mercy is this!]

But the full soul loathes the honey-comb. The self-conceited un-humbled sinner looks as mindlessly at Christ, as a healthful man at the Physician, or an innocent man at a pardon.

And that good that is in the Proud and Self-conceited doth seldom do much good to others, (much less to themselves.) As such do but serve themselves, so ordinarily God doth not bless their endeavours: but as they are perverted, they are the likeliest to pervert others, and propagate their self-conceitedness: Two words from a humble self-denying man, doth oftentimes more good than a Sermon from the self-conceited.

I admonish you therefore in the name of God, that you take heed of this part of selfishness and mortify it. It will else keep out God, and almost all that is good. If you are proud and self-conceited, you will hear a Minister rather to cavil with him, than to be edified: and when anything from God doth cross your foolish wisdom, you will but slight it, or make a jest at it: And if any truth of God do strike at the heart of your selfish interest, you will but fret at it, and secretly hate it, and perhaps, as the Devils open soldiers, publicly reproach it; and as the Jews did against Stephen, Act. 7. even gnash the teeth at the Preacher, or as they did by Paul, Act. 22. 22. [They gave him audience to that word (even that word that made against themselves) and then lift up their voices, and said, away with such a fellow from the earth; for it is not fit that he should live] This entertainment we still meet with from our hearers, when self hath brought them the next step to hell.

O Sirs, suspect your own understandings: Think not of them beyond the proportion of your attainments: Nor beyond your experience, and the helps, and time, and opportunities which you have had for knowledge, nor beyond the measure of your diligence for the improving of these. For these are God's ordinary way of giving in a ripeness in knowledge. Read and study, Heb. 5. 12, 14. 1 Tim. 3. 6. Set not up your own conceits too boldly against those of longer standing and diligence in holy studies, much less against your Teachers, and much less against a multitude of Ministers; and much less against all the Church of God; and least of all against God himself, as speaking to you by the holy Scriptures. O take warning by the swarms of heresies and scandals that have been caused by self-conceitedness and pride.

Object. If you may think yourself wiser than me and others without self-conceitedness, why may not I think my self-wiser than you and such others without self-conceitedness?

Answ. I may not do it in the cases before-mentioned. I may not think myself to be what I am not, nor exalt myself above them that are wiser than I, nor against my Guides, or the Church of God.

Object. But it is but your conceit that you are wise enough to be a Teacher, or wiser than others, and why may not I as well conceit it?

Answ. No man on his own Conceits must become a Teacher; but the judicious of that Calling must Call them, and judge of their abilities. And conceits are as the ground of them is. The true understanding of the grace that we have received is a duty, and fitteth us for thankfulness: but the false conceit that we have what we have not, is a dangerous delusion [For he that thinketh he is something when he is nothing, deceiveth himself, Gal. 6. 3.] What if a blind man should argue as you do with one that sees, and say, [You say that you see so far off, and why may not I say so too?] would you not answer him [I know that which I say to be true, and so do not you] And what if he still go on and say [you think that I am blind, and I think that you are blind; and why may not I be believed as well as you?] would this kind of talk prove the man to have his eye-sight? or should it make me question whether I have mine? He that seeth knoweth that he seeth, whoever questions it: and if another make doubt of it, let men that have eyes in their head be Judges, but not the blind. But I confess, spiritual blindness hath this disadvantage, that whereas I can easily make any other blind man know that he is blind, and therefore be willing to be led or helped: here the more blind men are, most commonly they are the more confident that they see, and scornfully say, as the Pharisees to Christ, John 9. 40. [Are we blind also?] For Pride will not let them know their ignorance. The same light that cureth ignorance must reveal it. Especially when men are born blind and never knew the saving illumination of the Saints, they will not believe that there is any other light than they have seen.

