

THE VALUE OF PRAISE: *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* AS A PORTRAIT
OF WHO WE ARE AS WORSHIPPERS

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Although we all love to receive compliments, not all compliments are worth receiving. The source of the compliment matters. It matters if the person is discerning, honest, and not trying to extract a favour from you. It matters if the person knows what they are talking about. If a great singer were to praise your voice it would mean more than if your tone-deaf mother did.

When someone you esteem as a person of great discernment praises your skills in a field they know well, you appreciate it far more than if it were from someone insincere, less knowledgeable about the field, or even someone just trying to be nice. If someone who truly knows you compliments your character, it means more than if a stranger were to say it.

Praise that is steeped in truth and sincerity is the only praise that really matters. This is why Jesus says that it is worshippers who worship in Spirit and truth that the Father seeks.

These thoughts arose for me in a different sort of way as I read Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). The novel is a masterwork of character study—particularly related to people who are ready to make pronouncements about others and those whose traits are misunderstood. If all the characters from the novel were to gather in the same church and sing hymns of praise to our God, which ones would be worthy worshippers? Where might you fit, in comparison with them, and what might you do, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to become a more fit worshipper?

Many of these people would need to undergo a significant transformation before being able to bring true worship (whether in song or in silence) to God. Although in some ways at opposite

ends of the spectrum, the manipulator and womanizer Wickham, and the arrogant aristocrat Lady Catherine de Bourgh—neither are ready to prioritize anyone but themselves. Our worship, if we have such attitudes, is only external playacting.

Jane Austen clearly believed when she wrote *Pride and Prejudice* that we are as honest as we allow ourselves to be, that we are able to improve our skills of discernment and we can learn from our own foolish mistakes. If you have recently read the novel, or seen the film (2005), or viewed the visually stunning five-and-a-half-hour BBC miniseries (1995), you will recognize much from my portraits of Austen's characters and be able to thoughtfully consider each one.

Every member of the Bennet family, whom we are introduced to right from the start, expresses their opinions of others, as does every character in the book. Elizabeth's mother is only ready to praise those she wants something from—particularly rich and handsome young men she would like to have marry one of her daughters. She is dishonest, perhaps even with herself, when she speaks of the character of such young men, since her assessments have little to do with their behaviour, and her pronouncements change even when behaviour does not. Any praise for God coming from Mrs. Bennet's lips would have to do with whether God gave her what she wanted or not.

The obsession of the youngest sisters is to flirt with whatever handsome young man in a soldier's uniform comes into view—regardless of his character. In a field of wildflowers, or a church service, they would have no thoughts for worship. Even the virtuous eldest daughter Jane has no sense of discernment; she seems incapable of finding fault in anyone, and therefore any praise from her would be shallow. In a contest when no one loses, no one wins. If Jane Bennet were to say you are kind or intelligent or talented, it would mean nothing because to her everyone is. Would words of praise from any of these girls mean very much?

Like so many of these characters, we all fall short of being worthy worshippers—and yet we are encouraged to make the effort. In Ps 100, as in other psalms, we are instructed to,

Worship the LORD with gladness;
come before him with joyful songs.

The psalm also directs us to know him for who he is and for what he has done. This is where our praise springs from.

You might expect that the clergyman Mr. Collins would be most fit for worshipping God. He certainly must be a student of Scripture and has developed eloquence of speech. Collins's character, however, has been formed through his attempts to curry favour. He is insincere, cringing before his benefactress with false humility, bragging to others of his connections, and valuing status and comfort above everything. It seems to me that to Collins, religion is merely his line of business and that he is more concerned with what Lady Catherine de Bourgh thinks, than with what God thinks.

In a novel such as *Pride and Prejudice* that is so much about people who are biased in their assessments of others, we need a protagonist whose judgment is sound. Austen—in her brilliance—has given us Elizabeth Bennet, who is a discerning character from the start, but is also capable of making serious errors in such judgment. What the author does so well, is lead us through Elizabeth's humble reassessment of the prideful prejudice that has influenced her judgment of Wickham's character, and more significantly, of Darcy's.

Elizabeth's errors come from judging based on appearance. When the prophet Samuel is sent to anoint a new king for Israel, God warns him not to make this mistake: "People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7, ESV). Elizabeth begins to view Mr. Darcy differently once she starts to get to know him—listening to what those who know him best say about him and learning more about him through his actions. She becomes wise enough to repent of her earlier prejudices, realizing they were not based on truth.

And so, we must consider our own pride and our own prejudices, as barricades to our being the sort of worshippers the Father seeks. We must learn to discern and worship our God based on who he is—not on what we can get out of the deal. We must set our self-interest aside, trusting him even when our

most-desperate prayers are met with silence. We must worship him in Spirit and in truth.