

What Does the Bible Say about the Dangers of Vanity?

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The idea of vanity is a frequent theme that appears throughout the Bible. It is a unique word because it applies in a variety of situations and can affect both people who are believers and people who are not. Vanity can be about how you see yourself, or it can be about what you are pursuing. The influence of vanity can be subtle and other times it can be obvious. Because of its destructive nature, it is critical to know what the Bible has to say about vanity.



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What Is Vanity?

There are two key definitions of the word vanity, and I will refer to dictionary.com for these definitions.

- 1 - Excessive pride in one's appearance, qualities, abilities, achievements
- 2 - Lack of real value; hollowness; worthlessness

When the [Bible](#) speaks about vanity, it is usually referring to one of these two definitions. The context of the [Scripture](#) will tell you which definition is appropriate. Let me give you an example.

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others” ([Philippians 2:3-4](#)).

Just for clarity, in the Old Testament the word vanity is used more often. In the New Testament the word vain is used, which you see in this passage. In this context, the word vain and vanity mean the same thing. Paul is reminding us not to have a prideful or arrogant heart. Let me show you another example.

“He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance *with its gain*. This too is vanity (emptiness)” ([Ecclesiastes 5:10](#), AMP).

The word vanity here is pointing to the object of a person’s affection, which in this case is money or wealth. Those who love money will never have enough or ever be satisfied, which is why this is an empty and meaningless pursuit. In these examples we see that vanity can be about how you see yourself or about the empty things are that you are doing or pursuing.



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What Does the Bible Say about Vanity?

Here are a few more scriptures that speak to the influence of vanity.

Vanity as pride

“Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other” ([Galatians 5:26](#)).

“In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises. He boasts about the cravings of his heart; he blesses the greedy and reviles the Lord. In his pride the wicked man does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God” ([Psalm 2:2-4](#)).

Vanity as worthlessness

“Whatever my eyes looked at with desire I did not refuse them. I did not withhold from my heart any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor; and this was my reward for all my labor. Then I considered all which my hands had done and labored to do, and behold, all was vanity and chasing after the wind and there was no profit (nothing of lasting value) under the sun” ([Ecclesiastes 2:10-11](#), AMP).

Quite honestly, there are so many more scriptures that talk about vanity as pride and vanity as things that are worthless or meaningless. If you want a homework assignment (this is the teacher coming out of me) read the book of Ecclesiastes and note all the things that Solomon highlights as being vain or meaningless.

One of the problems with vanity is that it clouds your judgment. It can cause you to have an over-inflated opinion of yourself or what you do. It can also lead you to chase after things that have no real value. Both of these things can make you lose sight of your need of God.



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Is Vanity a Sin?

“Haughty eyes, a proud heart, and evil actions are all sin” ([Proverbs 21:4](#)).

I think it is safe to say that vanity is a sin. Whenever you view yourself or anything you do with excessive pride, it is sin. The [Bible](#) clearly warns us about not looking at ourselves more highly than we ought to. When a person is consumed with vanity then they become greater in their own eyes than they really are. This does however, lead to two questions worth considering.

Is there a difference between being proud and being vain?

Is there ever a moment where it is ok to be proud?

The answer to both questions is yes. There is nothing wrong with being proud of an achievement or accomplishment you have made. Our friend recently earned her PhD – that is something to be proud of and worth celebrating. However, if she believes that because she has earned her PhD that she is now smarter and better than someone else, then that is where pride and vanity have kicked in. This is when being proud becomes sin. Celebrate and be proud of what you have accomplished. Just don't let it go to your head.

What Are the Warning Signs That Vanity Is in Your Heart?

You become the center

If you want to know if vanity has grabbed your heart, think about what you talk about. What is the center of your conversation? Some people only talk about three people, me, myself and I. If you become the center of your conversation all the time. If you only want to talk about yourself and you have no concern for anyone else, then that is a warning sign that vanity is creeping in.

You cannot rejoice when someone else rejoices.

Do you celebrate just as much when something good happens to someone else or do you quickly dismiss it because it takes the spotlight off you? This can be a sign of vanity. You are quick to celebrate yourself, but not to celebrate with others. The Bible clearly tells us to rejoice with those who rejoice ([Romans 12:15](#)). If you refuse to do this or cannot do this then watch out - vanity may be invading your heart.

You don't associate with people lower than you.

Do all your friends have to have the same social status as you? Do they need to be in the same economic bracket as you? Do you know and associate with people from "the other side of the tracks?" Depending on how you answer these questions, there could be evidence that vanity might be creeping into your heart. Paul reminds us of this in Romans:

"Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited" ([Romans 12:16](#)).



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Unusual Places Where Vanity Can Show Up

As crazy as it sounds, vanity can show up in two places it does not belong: in prayer and in ministry. You would assume that vanity would not appear in these places, but it is far more common than you may think. Jesus spoke about this in this parable.

“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get’ ([Luke 18:9-12](#)).

Can you imagine the arrogance to even pray a prayer like this? The center of the prayer is himself and all he has done. We must guard against vanity creeping into our prayer life and our service. Even in ministry the possibility exists to become enamored with your own gift or all you have accomplished. My friend calls it “Look at Me Syndrome.” If you are not careful, then you can begin to think you are greater than what you really are. When this type of pride sets in you are ripe for destruction.

“Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” ([Proverbs 16:18](#)).

One Sunday I was playing the keyboard for worship at the church we used to attend. As I was playing, I started listening to how I was playing, and this sense of pride welled up in my heart. I thought to myself - this is sounding good. I was becoming excessively proud of my ability in that moment. However, something unusual happened that had never occurred before or since. The moment pride sprung up in my heart, the smell of garbage began to fill my nostrils. In that moment God was informing me that when vanity wells up in your heart, this is what it smells like to me. I have never forgotten that moment. Since that day I try to never focus on “look at me,” but always focus on “look at him.”



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What Should We Do When We Are Feeling Vain?

If you ever start feeling vain, there are two things I want you to remember.

Remember God's attitude towards vanity and pride.

[Proverbs 6:17](#) reminds us that one of the things God hates is haughty eyes, which is another way of saying a proud or vain heart. In the book of James, he even says God opposes the proud. When vanity is creeping at your door, remember that if it sets in, you will now have God standing against you. That is a no-win situation.

Remember Jesus' example for us.

The other thing to do is to remember Jesus' example for us. [Philippians 2](#) says it all.

“You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross” ([Philippians 2:5-8](#)).

If Jesus humbled himself, and he was God, then there is no reason we should not humble ourselves as well.

I want to leave you with a verse that ties this conversation together.

“For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the [faith](#) God has distributed to each of you” ([Romans 12:3](#)).

Never forget who you are. Never forget whose you are. Never forget that everything you have and do comes by God's grace. When you keep this mindset, it will help stop vanity from creeping in.

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