

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Screwtape Letters- by C.S. Lewis

Part 2: Self-Knowledge¹

Many writers have used the famous quote from Socrates, “The unexamined life is not worth living,” but few have ventured to explain the implications of such introspection. Without even alluding to Socrates, C.S. Lewis explored the importance of self-examination in several chapters of his book, The Screwtape Letters. Screwtape, the seasoned demon and main character of the book, recoils at the idea of authentic self-knowledge. He knows that authentic prayer gives birth to not only knowing God, but also knowing one's self. There are three temptations against authentic self-knowledge that Lewis elaborates on in his book.

Interestingly, the first point of attack against self-knowledge that Screwtape suggests is to keep a Christian's mind off of the most obvious things and preoccupied with less obvious things. Isn't it interesting that most of us lack self-awareness in the very areas that other people notice immediately about us.

For example, we might concern ourselves with trying to understand why we fear spiders, while everyone else wonders why we talk so incessantly. We might be so oblivious to our inability to be quiet that if someone were to suggest that we talk an awful lot we would scoff at them and deny it. We would spend several days building in our minds defense cases against their accusation (all the while talking ceaselessly about it, of course). Screwtape suggests that a Christian should be tempted to, “keep his mind off the most elementary duties by directing it to the most advanced and spiritual ones.”² This is particularly effective since most of us will think that we are meditating on holy and important things since they are “advanced and spiritual,” all the while missing the opportunity to grow in the most basic understanding of who God created us to be.

The real “genius” of this type of spiritual attack is that it accomplishes its evil goals while appearing holy. Authentic self awareness does not come through human “navel-gazing,” but through God-gazing. Ironically, it comes through keeping our eyes focused on God, our Creator. He knows us more intimately than we know ourselves. Our knowledge about ourselves must, therefore, come from God. Lewis explains how Satan wants nothing more than to “keep [us] watching [our] own minds and trying to produce *feelings* there by the action of [our] own wills,” rather than keeping our hearts and minds focused on God.³

At the root of the attack against our self-awareness (and, therefore, our relationship with God) is Satan's desire for us to be ignorant about our feelings. If we can be tempted to try to produce particular feelings within ourselves while navel-gazing, then we will miss how God is communicating to us through the feelings that He is stirring up within us. Lewis spends an entire chapter on this idea, using the example of a man who is afraid of war.⁴ If a man is afraid of an impending war, it is far easier for him to make the object of his fear—the enemy—the focus of his prayer and meditation. It is far more difficult, yet far more rewarding to let God speak to his heart about the fear he is feeling. The former can lead to other sins, like anger, prejudice and blame, while the latter gives us an opportunity to come to know ourselves and God.

We live in a culture that promotes self-stupidity. We often seem much more preoccupied with the lives of others than with our own life. We surround ourselves with distractions and medications that keep us from even feeling our own emotions so that we will not have to deal with them. Lewis, a modern prophet, reminds us that we will not grow in our relationship with God if we are afraid of knowing who we are and we will not know who we are if we are afraid to grow in our relationship with God.

¹ This article is part two of a twelve part series that I writing on C.S. Lewis' The Screwtape Letters.

² The Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, pg. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, pg. 16

⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 25-29.