

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Screwtape Letters- by C.S. Lewis

Part 5: Evil¹

What is the most obvious manifestation of evil you have ever seen? Another way of asking this question might be—when did you most clearly see the face of Satan? While all of us witness many sins every day, we are rarely struck by evil so profoundly that we feel we have seen Satan. The lives of the saints teach us, however, that the closer we grow to God, the more clearly we will see him.

In chapter seven of The Screwtape Letters, Lewis explains that Satan's usual strategy is to remain hidden. In the words of the seasoned demon, Screwtape, "Our policy, for the moment, is to conceal ourselves."² By not revealing themselves, demons are able to suggest sin to us without our questioning the source of the suggestions. Without recognizing the source of temptation, we are far more willing to follow these sinful suggestions. If we relate this strategy to the military we would hear phrases like, "covert operation," and "camouflage." In this way, Satan's tactic is very militaristic.

Satan gains an even greater leverage in the battle if we do not even believe that there's a battle being waged. Imagine a war where one army does not believe that their enemy exists. It would be a slaughter! Satan would love nothing more than for us to believe that he does not exist and that temptation is a mere urge within ourselves that we can overcome through our own willpower; or, better yet, that sinful temptations are to be embraced. Screwtape offers us his opinion on the topic, saying, "We are really faced with a cruel dilemma. When the humans disbelieve in our existence we lose all the pleasing results of direct terrorism and we make no magicians. On the other hand, when they believe in us, we cannot make them materialists and skeptics."³

Because of this "cruel dilemma," and the "lukewarm and complacent" society we live in, Screwtape suggests that human beings be kept from all extremes and to "soothe them yet faster asleep."⁴ Usually, it is in the face of radical evil that we are awakened from our sleep. A great example of this was the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. In a brief moment, we realized evil in a new way. The lives of all Americans were affected, either spiritually, emotionally, physically, or financially. Church attendance dramatically increased. Hollywood seemed momentarily transformed into a monastery as actors, musicians, and singers spoke openly about their faith and our need for God. Satan must have hated our response. I wonder what he thinks about it now.

Ultimately, our awareness of evil will not have a lasting affect in our lives unless we become conscious of it on a daily basis. If the only times we recognize evil is when it cannot be ignored (ex. 9/11), then we will be at the mercy of Satan's attack every day. By being attentive to the subtleties of evil and the extraordinary grace of Jesus Christ, we will find ourselves growing in faith, humility, gratitude and joy. This last gift—joy—is absolutely despised by Satan. According to the famous French author and poet, Leon Bloy, "Joy is the infallible sign of the Holy Spirit." The only way we can possibly be joyful in the face of daily evil is by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ.

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

² The Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, pg. 31.

³ Ibid. pg. 31.

⁴ Ibid. pg. 32.