

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Screwtape Letters- by C.S. Lewis

Part 6: Laughter¹

We have all heard the saying, “Laughter is the best medicine.” University studies are beginning to find that this saying is actually true. Laughter appears to be a preventative medicine, linked to benefits like healthier hearts² and stronger immune systems.³ In addition to the physical benefits of laughter, there are many emotional and spiritual benefits. This is why the wise demon, Screwtape, is concerned when his nephew, Wormwood, reports that his “patient” is a “great laugher.”⁴ Using Screwtape as his mouthpiece, C.S. Lewis offers us some important insights about laughter.

Screwtape responds to his nephew, explaining that human laughter can be divided into four categories: “Joy, Fun, the Joke Proper, and Flippancy.”⁵ He offers examples of each type of laughter, writing:

You will see the first [type of laughter] among friends and lovers reunited on the eve of a holiday. Among adults some pretext in the way of Jokes is usually provided, but the facility with which the smallest witticisms produce laughter at such a time show that they are not the real cause. What that real cause is we do not know. Something like it is expressed in much of that detestable art which humans call Music, and something like it occurs in Heaven—a meaningless acceleration in the rhythm of celestial experience, quite opaque to us. Laughter of this kind does us no good and should always be discouraged.⁶

Describing the second type of laughter, Fun, Screwtape explains how it is closely related to Joy. He encourages his nephew to only tempt humans with this type of laughter as a way of distracting them from what God wants them to be doing. Any other use of this type of laughter could lead to “undesirable tendencies,” like “charity, courage, and contentment.”⁷ The Joke Proper, however, offers much more potential for turning humans away from God. Screwtape cites “indecent or bawdy humor,” as the evil helps of jokes, as well as the fact that vulgar jokes can help desensitize people to evil. After we have joked about evil things, they often do not seem as evil anymore.⁸

The most useful type of laughter for Satan, however, is flippancy. Screwtape describes this type of humor as a “serious subject [that] is discussed in a manner which implies that they have already found a ridiculous side to it.”⁹ It is the opposite of true joy.

As always, Lewis’ insight into human emotions and spiritual capacities gives us a lot of material for meditation and reflection. Like fire, laughter can be used to either heal and restore or singe and destroy. It is beneficial for us to occasionally take inventory of our hearts and see whether our laughter springs from sacred joy or buried anger. The former is manifested in peaceful unity while the latter produces divisive sarcasm. Unfortunately, it is often extremely difficult for us to tell the two apart. Evil spirits, however, do not seem to have a problem deciphering the origin of our laughter, encouraging the one type and stifling the other.

¹ This article is part six of a twelve part series that I am writing on C.S. Lewis’ [The Screwtape Letters](#).

² University of Maryland study, see www.umm.edu/features/laughter.htm

³ Midwestern Regional Medical Center, <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/PainManagement/story?id=711632&page=1>

⁴ [The Screwtape Letters](#), C.S. Lewis, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, pg. 53.

⁵ Ibid. pg. 53.

⁶ Ibid. pg. 53-54.

⁷ Ibid. pg. 54.

⁸ Ibid. pg. 55.

⁹ Ibid. pg. 56.