

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Screwtape Letters- by C.S. Lewis

Part 10: Past, Present, and Future¹

I recently saw an ad for an exercise machine. The company explained that a four minute workout every day on their machine would ensure a healthy and happy life. As I read the testimonials and the various statistics about the machine, I was very impressed. Life is a busy endeavor, so a four minute workout sounded very beneficial. Then I saw the price... just a little over \$14,000! The company is banking (pun intended) its success on the fact that we all believe that time is money.

C.S. Lewis knew the importance of time. Unlike most of us, he looked deeply into the meaning of time—beyond mere observations like, “time is money,” “I don’t have enough time,” or “time is of the essence.” Lewis put the meaning of time into its eternal perspective through the words of the seasoned demon, Screwtape. In explaining “time” to his nephew, Wormwood, he writes, “[God] therefore, I believe, wants [people] to attend chiefly to two things, to eternity itself, and to that point of time which they call the Present. For the Present is the point at which time touches eternity.”² Screwtape explains that the task of demons is to distract people from these two modes of time—the present and eternity—by having them focus on the past and the future. When at all possible, Satan desires for us to live in the future, which is, in the words of Screwtape, “the thing *least like* eternity.”³

The reason that the future is the least like heaven is because it is perpetual unfulfillment. “Hence nearly all vices are rooted in the future. Gratitude looks to the past and love to the present; fear, avarice, lust, and ambition look ahead.”⁴ Seeds of sin sown in the future are harvested in the present. Satan does not even mind it when our future desire is a charitable one, such as visiting a friend who is in the hospital, because until it is manifested in the present, it is not charity. This is why Screwtape’s demonic strategy is future-focused:

We have trained [people] to think of the Future as a promised land which favored heroes attain—not as something which everyone reaches at the rate of sixty minutes an hour, whatever he does, whoever he is.⁵

To live in the sanctity of the present moment demands that we be grateful for the past and mostly disinterested in the future. It is to ask, at every changing moment, the questions, “Where is *God* present right now?” and “How am *I* present to Him right now?” Christian heroism means “concerning [ourselves] with the Present because there, and there alone, all duty, all grace, all knowledge, and all pleasure dwell.”⁶

No matter what we say about time or how much money we spend trying to save it, time flows to eternity through the present moment. May we make the most of every moment by being present to God in every moment.

NOTE: In the time it took you to read this article you could have had a \$14,000 workout.

¹ This article is part ten 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. 71.

³ Ibid. pg. 76.

⁴ Ibid. pg. 76.

⁵ Ibid. pg. 139.

⁶ Ibid. pg. 79.