

The Temptation of the “Inner Ring”

By Dr. Art Lindsley



One of the most memorable of C. S. Lewis' essays is entitled “The Inner Ring.” It describes the experience and desire of us all at various stages of life—to be accepted within the “inner ring” of whatever group matters to us at the time.

To feel “excluded” or “out of it” is a miserable feeling. Yet the desire to be “in” can make you say things you would not otherwise say, or not say things you should say. This desire to be on the inside of whatever group you aspire to can affect your work, your political affiliations, your relationships in the community, and in the church.

For pastors, there are temptations in church and denominational politics as well as status in the community or in pastors' associations. C. S. Lewis says,

I believe that in all men's lives at certain periods, and in many men's lives at all periods between infancy and extreme old age, one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring and the terror of being left outside.

In school, you can desire to be in student government, on a sports team, in a club, or just be accepted by the “cool” kids. In college maybe the desire is to part of a fraternity or sorority.

At work perhaps the desire is to be “partner” at your law firm, to get a promotion, to be part of the executive team.

In church the desire could be to be an elder, on the vestry, or on the deacons' board; or, for a pastor, to be “successful” in having a growing congregation.

These desires are not necessarily wrong in and of themselves. Certain inner rings are unavoidable. Someone has to be in student government, become a partner, be a leader in a denomination, get a promotion, or be an elder, and it is not wrong to desire that position or influence. However, as Lewis says,

The desire which draws us into Inner Rings is another matter. A thing may be morally neutral and yet the desire for that thing may be dangerous...Unless you take measures to prevent it, this desire is going to be one of the chief motives of your life, from the moment you enter your profession until you are too old to care... If you do nothing about it, if you drift with the stream, you will in fact be an 'inner ringer.' I don't say you'll be a successful one; that's as may be. But whether by pining and moping outside Rings that you can never enter, or by passing triumphantly further and further in – one way or the other you will be that kind of man.

You will have certain choices that will be like a crossroads, sending you down one road or another – towards virtue or towards vice. The choice will usually be subtle and small. Perhaps you are meeting with your boss and something comes up that has a hint of being not quite ethical. Just as you are being vetted for a promotion or being a partner of the firm it is indicated that “we” always do it this way. Lewis says:

And you will be drawn in, if you are drawn in, not by a desire for gain or ease, but simply because at that moment, when the cup was so near your lips, you cannot bear to be thrust back again into the cold outer world. It would be so terrible to see that other man's face – that genial, confidential, delightfully sophisticated face – turn suddenly cold and contemptuous, to know that you had been tried for the Inner Ring and rejected.

If you give in to that first compromise, it may lead to another and yet another. There is an old saying that goes: “Sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.” That first act of moral compromise can lead to further acts so that it becomes a habit that shapes your character and destiny.

Lewis says it may eventually “end in a crash, a scandal, and penal servitude: it may end in millions, a peerage, and giving prizes at your old school. But you will be a scoundrel.” That first small compromise may lead somewhat innocently down a path to real corruption.

For instance, I once got to know a pharmacist who ended up in federal prison. He told me he had once sold a drug without a prescription to someone who asked him for it. Over time, that first sale led to numerous sales and a pattern of drug dealing. He told me that when he first sold a drug illegally, he never imagined that he would end up in prison. That first act led to a habit that profoundly impacted his destiny.

But what if you do get “in?” Will it lead to the satisfaction that you seek? You may get something, but you will not get what you wanted. Lewis says,

As long as you are governed by that desire you will never get what you want. You are trying to peel an onion; if you succeed there will be nothing left. Until you conquer the fear of being an outsider, an outsider you will remain.

If you get “in,” the initial rush of excitement will not last. Sooner or later you will have to look for a new ring to enter.

So what should you do? Don't desire the inner ring, but do good and excellent work that will put you in the circle that really matters. Lewis says,

The quest of the Inner Ring will break your hearts unless you break it. But if you break it, a surprising result will follow. If in your working hours you make the work your end, you will presently find yourself all unawares inside the only circle in your profession that really matters. You will be one of the sound craftsmen, and the other sound craftsmen will know it.

This may not lead to fame, fortune, or influence but it will lead to respect of those who know the field. This pursuit of good work will often lead to friendship – people who see the same truths and value the same things. You will find this circle not exclusive in the same sense as before, but inclusive of those who grasp these common fruits and values.

So it is better not to seek admission to the glorious moments of the age, not because they're over our heads or beyond us, but because we may not be good enough to withstand the temptations involved with being in power or being close to power.

Jim Houston, the founder of the C. S. Lewis Institute, was once asked to move to Washington D. C. He didn't do it, and one central reason was that he didn't feel he could withstand the spiritual temptations of heading up a ministry in such a center of political power.

It would be good to ponder our own situation. What circle do you desire to enter? Have the rings you are in compromised your spiritual effectiveness? Do you need to pray for deliverance from this temptation to desire acceptance into more inner circles? Do you need to talk to a friend, a pastor, a counselor, or a mentor about this issue?

Above all, focus on doing your work well and let the results take care of themselves.