



June 2010—*Hindrances to Prayer*

In *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis gives us insights into one of the devil's key strategies against believers through the advice of a senior devil to his younger protégé:

The best thing, where it is possible, is to keep the patient from the serious intention of praying altogether. When the patient is an adult recently re-converted to the Enemy's party, like your man, this is best done by encouraging him to remember, or to think he remembers, the parrot-like nature of his prayers in childhood. In reaction against that, he may be persuaded to aim at something entirely spontaneous, inward, informal, and unregularized; and what this will actually mean to a beginner will be an effort to produce in himself a vaguely devotional *mood* in which real concentration of will and intelligence have no part...If this fails, you must fall back on a subtler misdirection of his intention. Whenever they are attending to the Enemy Himself we are defeated, but there are ways of preventing them from doing so. The simplest is to turn their gaze away from Him towards themselves. Keep them watching their own minds and trying to produce *feelings* there by the action of their own wills. When they meant to ask Him for charity, let them, instead, start trying to manufacture charitable feelings for themselves and not notice that this is what they are doing. When they meant to pray for courage, let them really be trying to feel brave. When they say they are praying for forgiveness, let them be trying to feel forgiven. Teach them to estimate the value of each prayer by their success in producing the desired feeling; and never let them suspect how much success or failure of that kind depends on whether they are well or ill, fresh or tired, at the moment...But even if He defeats your first attempt at misdirection, we have a subtler weapon. The humans do not start from that direct perception of Him which we, unhappily, cannot avoid. They have never known that ghastly luminosity, that stabbing and searing glare which makes the background of permanent pain to our lives. If you look into your patient's mind when he is praying, you will not find *that!* If you examine the object to which he is attending, you will find that it is a composite object containing many quite ridiculous ingredients...But whatever the nature of the composite object, you must keep him praying to *it*—to the thing that he has made, not to the Person who has made him...Once all his thoughts and images have been flung aside, or if retained, retained with a full recognition of their merely subjective nature, and the man trusts himself to the completely real, external, invisible Presence, there with him in the room and never knowable by him as he is known by it—why, then it is that the incalculable may occur.

Whether we are seeking a devotional mood or special feelings or praying to a distorted image of God, the effect is the same - to draw our attention away from the true object of faith and source of help, the Living God. Is *he* the focus of *your* prayers?

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C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, (Chicago: Lord and King Associates, Inc.), pp.33-35.