

Reflections

AUGUST 2019

Lifeline or Death Line?

In C.S. Lewis's last sermon, given in 1956, he addressed the temptation of holding back — of “guarding the things temporal” — when coming into the presence of God. An excerpt follows.

This is my endlessly recurrent temptation: to go down to that Sea (I think St. John of the Cross called God a sea) and there neither dive nor swim nor float, but only dabble and splash, careful not to get out of my depth and holding on to the lifeline which connects me with my things temporal...

Our temptation is to look eagerly for the minimum that will be accepted. We are in fact very like honest but reluctant taxpayers. We approve of an income tax in principle. We make our returns truthfully. But we dread a rise in the tax. We are very careful to pay no more than is necessary. And we hope — we very ardently hope — that after we have paid it there will still be enough left to live on.

Swimming lessons are better than a lifeline to the shore.

And notice that those cautions which the tempter whispers in our ears are all plausible... It is really possible to be carried away by religious emotion — *enthusiasm* as our ancestors called it — into resolutions and attitudes which we shall, not sinfully but rationally, not when we are more worldly but when we are wiser, have cause to regret. We can become scrupulous or fanatical; we can, in what seems zeal but is really presumption, embrace tasks never intended for us. That is the truth in the temptation. The lie consists in the suggestion that our best protection is a prudent regard for the safety of our pocket, our habitual indulgences, and our ambitions. But that is quite false. Our real protection is to be sought elsewhere: in common Christian usage, in moral theology, in steady rational thinking, in the advice of good friends and good books, and (if need be) in a skilled spiritual director. Swimming lessons are better than a lifeline to the shore.

For of course that lifeline is really a death line. There is no parallel to paying taxes and living on the remainder. For it is not so much of our time and so much of our attention that God demands; it is not even all our time and all our attention; it is ourselves. For each of us the Baptist's words are true: “He must increase and I decrease.” He will be infinitely merciful to our repeated failures; I know no promise that He will accept a

deliberate compromise. For He has, in the last resort, nothing to give us but Himself; and He can give that only insofar as our self-affirming will retires and makes room for Him in our souls. Let us make up our minds to it; there will be nothing “of our own” left over to live on, no “ordinary” life...

For He claims all, because He is love and must bless. He cannot bless unless He has us. When we try to keep within us an area of our own, we try to keep an area of death. Therefore, in love, He claims all. There's no bargaining with Him.¹

Are you following Jesus without reservations?



“Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’”

MATTHEW 16:24 (ESV)

¹ C.S. Lewis, “A Slip of the Tongue,” *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1980), pp.187-190.

