

I've told you before that I'm a big fan of C.S. Lewis. He was instrumental in my coming back to the Church. I once devoured all his apologetic works. That was forty years ago, but I've recently begun re-reading them, and today I want to begin with an insight I first found there.

Lewis was both bullied at school and eventually a famous scholar at Oxford University. It was from both experiences, being on the outside and the inside of different social groups, that he gave a talk entitled "The Inner Ring." I thought of that essay in light of today's Gospel. Jesus tells those dining at the Pharisee's house not to seek the places of honor at the head of the table. That particular social situation may seem far removed from our lives, but Jesus is speaking to all of us in this parable, as Lewis well knew.

Lewis' point was that the desire to be part of the "Inner Ring," to be at the head of the table, is a major motivation in our lives. By "Inner Ring" Lewis means those small groups, cliques, circles that really

control things. Joining the Inner Ring might mean making Partner, joining the cool group at high school, a place in the cutting-edge team at work, or getting invited to the right dinners in your social circle. For priests it could mean working close to the bishop.

These Inner Rings are informal and don't follow the organization's flow chart. But stay in a social setting long enough and you discover who really runs things. Lewis says that many of our anxieties, bitterness, and sins come from the desire to enter that Inner Ring.

Here's how Lewis describes the experience of being tempted by membership in the Inner Ring. He's talking about his own circle – British academic life, but you can think of a similar dynamic at a large tech company, a group of Middle School students, a school-mom's group. Here's how it works. “Over drinks or a cup of tea, disguised as a triviality sandwiched between two jokes, from the lips of a man, or woman, whom you have recently been getting to know rather better and whom you hope to know better still – just at the moment when

you are most anxious not to appear crude or a prig – the hint will come. It will be a hint of something which . . . the ignorant public would never understand . . . but something, says your new friend, which “we” always do. And you will be drawn in, not by a desire for gain . . . but simply because at that moment . . . you cannot bear to be thrust back again into the cold outer world. It would be so terrible to see the other man’s face – turn suddenly cold, to know that you had been tried for the Inner Ring and rejected.”

Lewis is getting at the point Jesus makes in His parable today. We are tempted by the first seats at the table, close to the big shots. The desire to gain those honors doesn’t corrupt us all at once. It’s sometimes a slow process that turns us bit by bit away from virtue and God. That “something” that “we” always do may be small at first, cutting corners in financial reports, joining in with a mocking word about that girl whom all the “in” girls hate, turning a blind eye to the

Director's questionable habit. But this desire to be included in the "in" group makes us do things we would not do otherwise.

There will always be Inner Rings. There must be leaders in any society. But what's my motivation for wanting in badly enough to act against who I should be, or remain silent when I should speak up? That can destroy my soul.

If we make that first moral compromise to be accepted, it gets easier and easier to sin to stay in – even though it will eventually destroy us. Lewis said it may eventually end in a crash, a scandal, prison; or it may end with making millions and becoming a peer of the realm. But either way you will be a scoundrel.

And the tragedy is, Lewis remarked, that "once the novelty is worn off, the members of this circle will be no more interesting than your old friends. Why should they be? You weren't looking for virtue, or knowledge, or loyalty, or humor . . . you merely wanted to be 'in'". But even that pleasure won't last. You will have to seek membership in the

next ring inward. And there is always another ring. It's like an onion. So, even on its own terms seeking the Inner Ring won't bring happiness.

In fact, it's precisely in resisting such ambitions that we find true happiness. The Inner Ring feeds on our fear of being outsiders. But, Lewis said, "Until you conquer the fear of being an outsider, an outsider you will always be (because there's always another, more powerful Inner Ring you're not yet in)." Humility is the true path to all the virtue, knowledge, humor, joy, charity that we search for in life but have so much trouble finding. We find those blessings, not in the Inner Ring, but in being ourselves and seeking others who are like us, in true friendships, which are exclusive only in the sense that they're formed between those, regardless of their social status or power, who are moved by love of the same things.

If you being tempted by some Inner Ring . . . resist. As Jesus teaches – if we refuse to seek the highest place at the table a miracle will happen. We will be invited by Jesus, the Great Host of the banquet,

up into the only Inner Ring that really matters, communion with Him.

That's because true happiness is only found in the company of the

Savior who took the lowest place Himself, leaving heaven to become a

mere human being, in order that we might have friendship with Him,

share in His very life.