

The Scholar, author, and Christian apologist C.S. 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 influential social groups, that he wrote an essay entitled “The Inner Ring.” I thought of that essay this week when praying over the 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 for human action. By “Inner Ring” Lewis means those small groups, cliques, circles that really control things. Joining the Inner Ring might mean making Partner for an attorney, joining the cool group for high school students, a promotion to the cutting-edge team at work, or getting invited to the right dinners in your social circle. In the Church it could mean being asked to work in

the chancery, close to the bishop. (The scandals in the Church and turning a blind eye to criminal behavior by many bishops and priests have much to do with the dynamics of Inner Rings).

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 struggles, anxieties, bitterness, fears come from the desire to enter the Inner Ring. And "unless we take measures to prevent it," Lewis warns, "this desire is going to be the chief motive of your life."

Here's how Lewis describes the experience of being tempted by the desire for 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 circle 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” – and at the word “we” you try not to blush with pleasure – something “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, that genial, sophisticated face – turn suddenly cold and contemptuous, 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 status and 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, honesty, 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 one 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 never would otherwise.

There will always be Inner Rings. There must be leaders in any society. Being such is morally neutral. But what about my motivations for wanting it badly enough to act against who I should be, or remain silent when I should speak up? That can destroy my soul. The temptation is out there for all of us -- pining for the highest seat, to be in the Inner Ring.

We may or may not succeed, but the mere desire can rule our life and make us a certain kind of person. If we make that first moral compromise to get in and 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; it may end with making

millions and becoming a peer of the realm. But either way you will be a scoundrel.

I'll end with two observations: 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, or learning, or wit . . . you merely wanted to be 'in'". But 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.

But, more importantly, it's precisely resisting the temptation of such ambitions that helps us find real 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 true the path to all the virtue, knowledge, humor, wit, 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.

Are you being tempted by the Inner Ring? Resist. As Jesus suggests when He advises us to take the lowest seat – 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, into the only Inner Ring that really matters, the highest of all, the Communion of Saints. That's because happiness is only to be found at the foot of the table, 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 share friendship with God, and His very life, in the Circle of Trinitarian love.