

Procrastination and Avoidance

“Do the most difficult and painful things first.”
—Fifty-five Maxims, Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko

The *Screwtape Letters*, by C.S. Lewis, provides an insidious yet insightful journey into methods used by the devil to overcome the followers of the Lord—or, as he refers to Him in this book: the “Enemy.” Screwtape, the demon-protagonist in the book, responds by letter to reports written by his underling-nephew, Wormwood, regarding his attempts to undermine people of faith and bring them under the obedience of “Our Father Below,” i.e., Satan. Reading the book requires a change of orientation in order to see the world as the demon does.

As Orthodox Christians, more specifically as seminarians, we are used to reading a wealth of material on how to combat evil. But this book jostles us and reverses our orientation. Screwtape instructs his nephew how to combat faith; how to undermine virtue; how to dash hope. By careful reading, we are struck by the demon's argumentation, and we have to admit, with sadness, how easily we have succumbed to his train of thought.

In his Twelfth Letter, Screwtape instructs his nephew how to use the small, cumulative sins to twist the spiritual progress of human beings:

Dear Wormwood,

You are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy. It does not matter how small the sins are, provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out in the Nothing. Murder is not better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.

Your affectionate uncle, SCREWTAPE

Screwtape's strategy is subtle, innocuous, and ingenious! Procrastination and avoidance are two such “gradual ways,” that lead us away from God. Essentially, they are coping mechanisms that we learned in our youth, to elude dealing with hurtful, undesirable, or uncomfortable situations. Basically, we use them as convenient methods to escape reality; and gradually, they lead us into darkness.

In my childhood, I hit a ball through a window during a sandlot baseball game, and I ran away in fear, hoping, in a delusional way, that no one had seen it, and not realizing that everyone had seen it. I can remember the horror that made me try to evade standing face-to-face with the owners of that property.

I'd like to say that such avoidance and procrastination did not follow me into my adult life, but regrettably, I cannot. I remember putting off a visit to a parishioner after he was admitted to a nursing home because at one time, this same man had been bent on seeing me fail as a pastor. When I finally made my visit—I had either gained courage or found freedom from anger, I can't remember which—it was too late: he had died in the early morning hour. I experienced first hand the consequences of my bad decisions.

Procrastination and avoidance are deadly in pastoral life.

Such examples could be multiplied. We find numerous ways to "put off" uncomfortable duties: to address a failed responsibility; to reconcile a resentment; to change lifestyle habits like overeating; or to discipline ourselves in prayer. Fear and Shame are bedfellows of Avoidance and Procrastination.

We also might crazily imagine that if we just leave well enough alone, problems will resolve themselves. We pray that equilibrium will return to our lives before we have to dirty our hands. We're convinced that inspiration will eventually come without effort.

We hold onto the deluded hope that "tomorrow," or "next week," or "when my life is settled" or "next Great Lent" will provide a perfect venue in which we will perform our duties and complete our tasks. Meanwhile, we cater to our weak wills and justify our puny efforts. We foolishly imagine that either a time or location shift (or both) will expunge the demons from our hearts, and then are disappointed to find that neither had done so.

In 2007, Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko collated "Fifty-five Maxims" regarding the spiritual life, and he included this simple truth: "Do the most difficult and painful things first." This wise advice penetrates our hearts only when we have experienced the consequences of our fear-ridden, unruly, immature lives.

There are many reasons for avoidance and procrastination. But allowing them to become habitual always results in unhealthy consequences. Inertia solves nothing.

Our Lord taught, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord" (Matt 25). Jesus' words instruct us to diligently chip away at the lethargy, apathy, and sluggishness that plague us. Let us try, with just a "few things," to overcome our inaction.

We hear in our liturgical services: "Today, salvation has come to the world," and St. Paul encourages us in a number of his letters to "redeem the time" (Eph 5:16; Col 4:5). Each moment is a moment in which God can act. Each moment is pregnant with possibilities. Each moment is sacramental. So, let us seize each moment and redeem it.

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