

# C.S. Lewis: Don't Compromise Your Values to Fit In

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One of the most memorable of C.S. Lewis's essays is entitled "The Inner Ring." It describes our common desire to be accepted within the "inner ring" of whatever group matters to us at the time.

To feel "excluded" or "out of it" is miserable. Yet the desire to be "in" can make you say things you would not otherwise say or not say things you should say. This desire to be on the inside of whatever group you aspire to join can affect your relationships at work, in the community, and in the church.

## **Morally Neutral, but Potentially Dangerous**

These desires are not necessarily wrong in and of themselves. Certain inner rings are unavoidable. However, it's what you do with those desires, as Lewis says,

The desire which draws us into Inner Rings is another matter. A thing may be morally neutral and yet the desire for that thing may be dangerous. . . . Unless you take measures to prevent it, this desire is going to be one of the chief motives of your life, from the moment you enter your profession until you are too old to care. . . . If you do nothing about it, if you drift with the stream, you will in fact be an "inner ringer." I don't say you'll be a successful one; that's as may be. But whether by pining and moping outside rings that you can never enter, or by passing triumphantly further and further in—one way or the other you will be that kind of man.

You will face certain choices, crossroads that send you down one road or another—toward virtue or toward vice. The choice will usually be subtle and small. Perhaps you are meeting with your boss and hear something unethical. Your promotion appears to depend on doing things this way. Lewis says:

And you will be drawn in, if you are drawn in, not by a desire for gain or ease, but simply because at that moment, when the cup was so near your lips, you cannot bear to be thrust back again into the cold outer world. It would be so terrible to see that other man's face—that genial, confidential, delightfully sophisticated face—turn suddenly cold and contemptuous, to know that you had been tried for the Inner Ring and rejected.

If you give in to that first compromise, you may give in elsewhere. There is an old saying that goes, “Sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.” That first act of moral compromise can lead to further acts so that it becomes a habit that shapes your character and destiny.

Lewis says your compromise may eventually “end in a crash, a scandal, and penal servitude: it may end in millions, a peerage, and giving prizes at your old school. But you will be a scoundrel.” That first small compromise may lead somewhat innocently down a path to real corruption.

For instance, I got to know a pharmacist who ended up in federal prison. He told me he had once sold a drug without a prescription to someone who asked him for it. Over time, that first sale led to numerous sales and a pattern of drug dealing. He told me that when he first sold a drug illegally, he never imagined that he would end up in prison. That first act led to a habit that profoundly affected his destiny.

## **Dissatisfaction of Getting What You Desire**

But what if you do get “in”? Will you find the satisfaction you seek? Lewis says:

As long as you are governed by that desire you will never get what you want. You are trying to peel an onion; if you succeed there will be nothing left. Until you conquer the fear of being an outsider, an outsider you will remain.

If you get “in,” the initial rush of excitement will not last. Sooner or later you

will have to look for a new ring to enter. So what should you do? Don't desire the inner ring. Do good and excellent work that will put you in the circle that really matters. As Lewis says:

The quest of the Inner Ring will break your hearts unless you break it. But if you break it, a surprising result will follow. If in your working hours you make the work your end, you will presently find yourself all unawares inside the only circle in your profession that really matters. You will be one of the sound craftsmen, and the other sound craftsmen will know it.

This approach may not lead to fame, fortune, or influence. But it will lead to the respect of those who know the field. Pursuing good work will often lead to friendship—people who see the same truths and value the same things. You will find this circle not exclusive in the same sense as before, but inclusive of those who grasp these common fruits and values.

So it is better not to seek admission to the glorious moments of the age. But not because they're over our heads or beyond us. Rather, we may not be good enough to withstand the temptations involved with being in power or being close to power.

What circle do you desire to enter? Have these rings compromised your spiritual effectiveness? Do you need to pray for deliverance from this temptation to desire acceptance into more inner circles? Do you need to talk to a friend, pastor, counselor, or mentor about this issue?

Above all, focus on doing your work well and let the results take care of themselves.

*Editor's Note: Learn more about staying focused on the biblical purpose of work in [How Then Should We Work?](#)*

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# HOW then SHOULD We Work?

HUGH WHELCHER



Rediscovering the Biblical  
Doctrine of Work