

Falling Away ***Preparing for Post-Grad***

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some words or phrases that describe where you hope to be spiritually in the next 5 years?

2. What are some fears/concerns you have about your spiritual life in the next 5 years?

In this series on preparing for the Christian life after graduating from college, we have discussed the following: stewardship of time and money, cultivating community in family, friends, church, and marriage, and living out the gospel at work. But all this is for naught if we fail to realize this vital truth: apart from God's mercy, all Christians are prone to falling away.

The feedback we've received from this series and other similar series informs us that it's hard to see all this as "real" or practical. That's because for many of us in Trellis (our Sunday college gathering), we have yet to experience life after post-grad—it's all just abstract.

So let me try to conclude this series with a sober warning and encouragement about the human condition. Even the most dedicated Christians who were committed, leaders, and examples can fall away from walking with the Lord.¹

Insights from Screwtape

*The Screwtape Letters*² a fictional dialogue in which Lewis imagines a series of letters from an older devil to a younger, less experienced devil. The older devil is called Screwtape. He writes to his nephew Wormwood about how to best tempt humans away from God. In this book, the "Enemy" is God, and their master is Satan.

I. A Devil's Tactic is Spiritual Deception

A. Spiritual Deception occurs when a Christian fails to see his real spiritual _____ and _____.

"My only fear is lest in attempting to hurry the patient you awaken him to a sense of his real position. For you and I, who see that position as it really is, must never forget how totally different it ought to appear to him..."

"He must not be allowed to suspect that he is now, however slowly, heading right away from the sun on a line which will carry him into the cold and dark of utmost space." (p.57)

¹ By "fall away" I mean the basic idea of "no longer walking with the Lord." I am not addressing the possibilities of "losing one's salvation" or eternal security.

² All citations taken from Lewis, C.S., *The Screwtape Letters*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996.

B. How to maintain the Spiritual Deception

“For this reason I am almost glad to see that he is still a churchgoer and a communicant. I know there are dangers in this; but anything is better than that he should realize the break he has made with the first months of his Christian life. As long as he retains externally the habits of a Christian he can still be made to think of himself as one who has adopted a few friends and amusements but whose spiritual state is much the same...”

“And while he thinks that, we do not have to contend with the explicit repentance of a definite, fully recognized, sin, but only with his vague, though uneasy, feeling that he hasn’t been doing very well lately.” (pp.57-58)

1. **Devils like us going to _____.**
2. **Keep the sin _____.**
3. **Leave a Christian with _____ habits but internal _____ & _____.**

People Fall Away One Step at a Time

1. People fall away not rapidly, but in a gradual decline.
2. People fall away not out of a conscious decision to turn from God, but in the little, atomistic decisions.

Discussion:

1. Given that Spiritual Deception usually involves a Christian continuing to attend church, meetings, perhaps even serve, make up a list of “signals” or “stages” a person goes through before they spiritually “drop off”. These signals can also be personalized to you. For example, for other people, renting movies more often is not a bad thing, but for me, it’s a sign of me wanting to escape, waste time, etc.

Signal 1:

Signal 2:

Signal 3:

II. Spiritual Deception Reinforces Itself

- A. Such a feeling increases a Christian’s reluctance to think about God and thus, his real spiritual condition & direction.**
- B. Depression sets in as a Christian doesn’t know why she feels this way.**
- C. Temptations and explicit sins give way to wasting time, restlessness, not wanting to care.**

“This dim uneasiness needs careful handling. If it gets too strong it may wake him up and spoil the whole game. On the other hand, if you suppress it entirely—which, by the by, the Enemy will probably not allow you to do—we lose an element in the situation which can be turned to good account. If such a feeling is allowed to live, but not allowed to become irresistible and flower into real repentance, it has once invaluable tendency. It increases the patient’s reluctance to think about

“All humans at nearly all times have some such reluctance; but when thinking of Him involves facing and intensifying a whole vague cloud of half-conscious guilt, this reluctance is increased tenfold. They hate every idea that suggests Him, just as men in financial embarrassment hate the very sight of a pass-book. In this state your patient will not omit, but he will increasingly dislike, his religious duties. He will think about them as little as he feels he decently can beforehand, and forget them as soon as possible when they are over. A few weeks ago you had to tempt him to unreality and inattention in his prayers: but now you will find him opening his arms to you and almost begging you to distract his purpose and benumb his heart.” (pp.58-59)

III. How to combat the Spiritual Deception

A. Watch not only for big sins, but little, almost _____ compromises in your spiritual life.

B. Look at your words, habits, decisions, thoughts, and feelings not only in terms of condition, but also _____.

C. Remember the biblical measurements for spiritual growth

1. Am I loving the Lord my God more and more with all my mind and with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my strength?
2. Is such love evidenced by a greater obedience to His Word and purposes?
3. Do I have a greater appreciation for trials and suffering that bring me to God? (James 1:2-4; 2 Peter 1:5-10)

“You will say that these are very small sins; and doubtless, like all young tempters, 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... (p.60)

“Murder is no 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...” (p.61)

Why people don't discern this?

1. The individual signal/step is not a big step:
 - i. Start swearing a bit more, especially at work...
 - ii. Start attending a church with a slightly different theology on core doctrines. I.e., attending a mainline denomination (i.e., "liberal") or a Catholic church, a church that has a stronger emphasis on social justice but less on the Bible
 - iii. Start pulling back from serving in ministry
 - iv. Start pulling back from participating in small groups or other community ministries
 - v. Start doing activities with friends , co-workers, or even Christian friends (in same boat)

2. They think they are becoming more realistic, wiser, or less naïve.
 - i. This is the "real world", it's not as simple to be Christian.
2. They're just trying to fit in with their friends
3. They're trying to "reach out" to non-Christians or even Christian friends who may not be coming to church as much
4. They are giving more money to the church, so they feel a bit more justified
5. They are well respected/regarded and start to believe it more and more, despite other signs.
6. Other Christians see them as committed Christians and so they "know what they're doing"
7. They think, "My career path necessitates this, or is different than others" and that's why I have to make certain changes...
8. They think they already know most things about the Christian life: "I've heard it all already..."

Remember, the heart is deceitful above all things... (Jeremiah 17:7-10)

- 7 "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.
- 8 He is like a tree planted by water,
that sends out its roots by the stream,
and does not fear when heat comes,
for its leaves remain green,
and is not anxious in the year of drought,
for it does not cease to bear fruit."
- 9 The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately sick;
who can understand it?
- 10 "I the Lord search the heart
and test the mind,
to give every man according to his ways,
according to the fruit of his deeds." (ESV)

Discussion:

1. Discern through prayer and discussion with godly Christians your personal signals or weaknesses of the beginning of falling away.
2. Share your list with other Christians who will be willing to pray and check in with you about these areas.
3. If you're not a Christian, can you see how it's the little things & little decisions that change someone's life?