

Book Club: The Great Divorce by CS Lewis

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 June 2015

Preacher: Sam Foerster

[0 : 00] Please join me in prayer. Father, we need your grace to perceive truth from error. And all truth is your truth.

Would you be pleased to visit with us and cause this to be a fruitful time as we search some of the works of C.S. Lewis for truths which you have shown him for us. May your truth be perceived, loved, and obeyed.

We pray these, for it seems to me that it will be your will to do so. Amen. So you should all have a handout with some song lyrics on one side and some other material on the other side.

So if you turn away from the song lyrics, and we'll start on this other. I'm going to read it directly, but it's a little, it'll help you to have it in front of you.

This is by R.C. Sproul. Premise A says no cat has eight tails. Premise B, that one cat has one more tail than no cat.

[1 : 15] And the conclusion from that would be that one cat has nine tails. Words are capable of more than one meaning in their usage.

Such words are highly susceptible to the unconscious or unintentional commission of the fallacy of equivocation. Equivocation occurs when a word changes its meaning, usually subtly, in the course of an argument.

This has been illustrated with the classic cat of nine tails argument. We see this in this syllogism that the word cat subtly changes its meaning.

In premise A, no cat signifies a negation about cats. It is a universal negative. Premise B, no cat is suddenly given a positive status.

Premise B assumes already that cats have one tail per cat. If we had two boxes, with one box empty and the second box containing a single cat, we would expect to find one more cat in that box than in the empty box.

[2 : 18] If cats normally have one tail, we would expect one more cat's tail in one box than the other. The conclusion of this syllogism rests on the shift from negative to positive in the phrase, no cat.

The conclusion rests upon equivocation in the first premise. No cat is understood to mean a class of cats, positively, that actually possesses eight tails. So why did I place this material in such a prominent place to begin our talk on C.S. Lewis and the Great Divorce?

Well, I want to talk for a bit about why I enjoy Lewis and what he has helped me with over the years. We will get to the Great Divorce in a bit. But first, I want to look at another example of equivocation.

This one more important or critical. Who cares about the cat of nine tails? This topic of how many tails cats have seems, well, pretty unimportant. The concept of equivocation, though, if it leads to confusion or wrong conclusions about matters of substance, I find to be important.

In the cat of nine tails, the conclusion is so obviously wrong that we aren't convinced by it, even if we are not all that sure what error we make to get to that seemingly natural conclusion.

[3 : 34] Ridiculous as it is. In the Great Divorce, Lewis uncovers many examples of equivocation, which are much harder to spot and which have more serious consequences than being wrong about a cat's number of tails.

I want to give another example from C.S. Lewis, although not yet from the Great Divorce. It comes from a book titled The Problem of Pain. Someone has called this, The Problem of Pain, the single most vexing question in the whole matter of religion.

Does it make sense to believe in an all-good, all-powerful deity in the face of the world's terrifying suffering and violence? So we're going from looking at a most trivial example of equivocation to the opposite extreme.

Let me read some of you what Lewis says. If God were good, he would wish to make his creatures perfectly happy. And if God were almighty, he would be able to do what he wished.

But the creatures are not happy. Therefore, God lacks either goodness or power or both. This is the problem of pain in its simplest form. The possibility of answering it depends on showing that the terms good and almighty and perhaps also the term happy are equivocal.

[4 : 50] For it must be admitted from the outset that if the popular meanings attached to these words are the best or the only possible meanings, then the argument is unanswerable.

He goes on. By the goodness of God, we mean nowadays almost exclusively his loving kindness. Sorry, his lovingness.

And in this we may be right. And by love, in this context, most of us mean kindness. The desire to see others in the self happy.

Not happy in this way or in that, but just happy. What would really satisfy us would be a God who said, of anything we happen to like doing, what does it matter so long as they are contented?

We want, in fact, not so much a father in heaven as a grandfather in heaven. The senile benevolence who, they say, like to see young people enjoying themselves. And whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, a good time was had by all.

[5 : 50] Not many people, I admit, would formulate a theology in precisely those terms. But a conception not very different lurks at the back of many minds. I do not claim to be an exception.

I should very much like to live in a universe which was governed on such lines. But since it is abundantly clear that I don't, and since I have reason to believe, nevertheless, that God is love, I conclude that my conception of love needs correction.

Lewis states that from the various types of love known among creatures, we reach an inadequate but useful conception of God's love for man. He uses four analogies from the Bible to discuss some of the ways God loves us.

The analogies are the potter and the clay. The second would be man and beast, as we are his people and the sheep of his pasture. Three, he shows God's love to man as to be a father's love for his son.

And the fourth, an analogy between God's love for man and man's love for a woman. I'll read a bit about what he says about the second of these.

[7 : 02] Another type of love is the love of a man for a beast, a relation constantly used in Scripture to symbolize the relation between God and man.

We are his people and the sheep of his pasture. Its great merit lies in the fact that the association of man and dog is primarily for the man's sake. He tames the dog, primarily that he may love it, not that it may love him, and that it may serve him, not that he may serve it.

Yet, at the same time, the dog's interests are not sacrificed to the man's. The one end, that he may love it, cannot be fully attained unless it also, in its fashion, loves him, nor can it serve him unless he, in a different fashion, serves it.

Now, just because the dog is by human standards one of the best of irrational creatures and a proper object for a man to love, man interferes with the dog and makes it more lovable than it was in mere nature.

In its state of nature, it has a smell and habits which frustrate man's love. He washes it, house-trains it, teaches it not to steal, and is so unable to love it completely.

[8 : 14] To the puppy, the whole proceeding would seem, if it were a theologian, to cast grave doubts on the goodness of man. But, the full-grown and full-trained dog larger, healthier, and longer-lived than the wild dog, and admitted, as it were by grace, to a whole world of affections, loyalties, interests, and comforts entirely beyond its animal destiny, would have no such doubt.

It will be noted that the man takes all these pains with the dog and gives all these pains to the dog only because it is an animal high in the scale, because it's so nearly lovable that it is worthwhile to make it fully lovable.

He does not house-train the earwig or give baths to centipedes. Now, please pay attention here. Lewis goes on, we may wish, indeed, that we were of so little account to God that he left us alone to follow our natural impulses, that he would give over trying to train us into something so unlike our natural selves.

But in wishing this, we are asking not for more love, but for less. Did you get that? Do you see what Lewis has just shown us? I'd never have seen that on my own, that in asking him to allow me to settle for less than what is best for me, I am asking him to love me less.

I'm not asking him to love me more. I hope you see what I'm excited about here. Do you understand? I'm prone, while asking that God love me at times, to think or say to God, leave me alone.

[9 : 51] I can handle this on my own. I know better. But in this, I'm not asking to be loved more, but less. This is for me an impressive exposure of equivocation.

I don't see these things on my own. With Lewis, I see them often in *The Great Divorce*. Now, as we get to *The Great Divorce*, one caution from Lewis found in the preface.

He says, I beg readers to remember that this is a fantasy. It has, of course, or I intend it to have, a moral. But the transmortal conditions are solely an imaginative supposal.

They are not even a guess or a speculation at what may actually await us. The last thing I wish to arouse, the last thing I wish is to arouse factual curiosity about the details of the afterworld.

I'm not sure why, but in spite of reading that, I still found myself wondering if Lewis were suggesting a purgatory, or if hell might be as he describes *The Grey Town*. The Pacific Theater performed *The Great Divorce* a number of years ago.

[11 : 03] It was in the free program that they hand out that I found this note by Ron Reed, the artistic director. But that's the brilliance of this masterful reconsideration of William Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

As much as C.S. Lewis' voracious, utterly unique imagination plays with the question of what it might be like on the other side, that's still only a framing device, an entry point into what we humans look like on this side, at our profoundest moments and at our most mundane.

As in his masterful screw-tape letters, Lewis is unrelenting in his consideration of human narcissism, pettiness, arrogance, and quiet cruelty. He traces the seeds of hell in the most minute of earthly choices while finding room in heaven for the most monstrous of sinners.

He writes about humans who choose, gradually, perhaps unknowingly, to become monsters. So thanks, Ron, for the necessary reminder to not see this book as teaching us what the setting of hell or heaven might be like.

So, how many have read *The Great Divorce*? So a good half, I would say. For those who haven't read the book, I'll give a quick synopsis that will take us to heaven in this book.

[12 : 30] Lewis himself is the narrator of the story. The story begins at a bus stop in a town called Graytown. It has always been twilight there.

There are probably millions of inhabitants in the town. None of them get along with each other, so after bickering and fighting with their neighbors, they move to get away from each other. This happens again and again over the centuries so that some of the inhabitants live light years away from where the bus stop is.

Even as the characters in the story wait for the bus, they are arguing and bickering with one another. The bus will take him to heaven. As the bus arrives, most of the passengers have nasty complaints to make about the bus driver.

Lewis states, as the narrator, I could see nothing in the countenance of the driver to justify all this unless it were that he had a look of authority and seemed intent on carrying out his job.

I think some speculate that the driver might represent Jesus. The bus doesn't roll, but it flies and seems to have gone up for a long distance and taken hours to arrive at its destination.

[13 : 40] This will be seen from a different perspective later. This is the narrative as they arrive. Then suddenly we were at rest.

Everyone had jumped up. Curses, taunts, blows. A filth of vitriolation came to my ears as my fellow passengers struggled to get out. A moment later and they had all succeeded.

I was alone in the bus and through the door, through the open door there came to me in the fresh stillness the singing of a lark. I got out. The light and coolness that drenched me were like those of summer morning, early morning, a minute or two before the sunrise, only that there was a certain difference.

I had the sense of being in a larger space, perhaps even a larger sort of space than I had ever known before, as if the sky were further off and the extent of the green plane wider than they could have been on this little ball of earth.

I had got out in some sense, which made the solar system itself seem an indoor affair. It gave me the feeling of freedom, but also of exposure, possibly of danger, which continued to accompany me through all that followed.

[14 : 56] It is the impossibility of communicating that feeling or even inducing you to remember it as I proceed, which makes me despair of conveying the real quality of what I saw and heard.

At first, of course, my attention was caught by my fellow passengers who were still grouped about in the neighborhood of the omnibus, though beginning some of them to walk forward into the landscape with hesitating steps.

I gasped when I saw them. Now that they were in the light, they were transparent, fully transparent, when they stood between me and it, smudgy and imperfectly opaque when they stood in the shadow of some tree.

They were, in fact, ghosts, man-shaped stains on the brightness of the air. One could attend them or ignore them at will as you do with dirt on a windowpane.

I noticed that the grass did not bend under their feet. Even the dewdrops were not disturbed. Then some readjustment of the mind or some focusing of my eyes took place, and I saw the whole phenomenon the other way around.

[15 : 58] The men were as they had always been. As all men I had known had been, perhaps. It was the light, the grass, the trees that were different, made of some different substance, so much solidier than things in our country that men were ghosts by comparison.

Moved by a sudden thought, I bent down and tried to pluck a daisy which was growing at my feet. The stalk wouldn't break. I tried to twist it, but it wouldn't twist. I tugged it till the sweat stood out on my forehead and I had lost most of the skin off my hands.

The little flower was hard, not like wood or even like iron, but like diamond. There was a leaf, a tender young beach leaf lying in the grass beside it. I tried to pick the leaf up.

My heart almost cracked with the effort, and I believe I did just raise it, but I had to let it go at once. It was heavier than a sack of coal. As I stood recovering my breath with great gasps and looking down at the daisy, I noticed that I could see the grass not only between my feet, but through them.

I also was a phantom. Who will give me words to express the terror of that discovery? Golly, thought I, I'm in for it this time. This description of the ethereal ghost and the solid thickness of heaven brought to my mind the term shadowlands.

[17 : 18] I wonder if this was a term coined by Lewis. He used it in *The Last Battle*, which was published about ten years after the great divorce. Here are a few lines at the end of *The Last Battle*.

Aslan says to Lucy, You do not yet look so happy as I meant you to be. Lucy said, We are so afraid of being sent away, Aslan.

You have sent us back to our own world so often. No fear of that, said Aslan. Have you not guessed? The hearts leap and a wild hope rolls within them.

There was a railway accident, said Aslan softly. Your father and mother and all of you, as you used to call it in the shadowlands, are dead.

The term is over. The holidays have begun. The dream has ended. This is morning. And as he spoke, he no longer looked to them like a lion.

[18 : 19] But the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us, this is the end of all the stories. And we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after.

But for them, it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and title page. Now, at last, they were beginning chapter one of the great story which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before.

And so, I see this same similarity, a similarity between what we see here in the last battle and in the way the world is described in the great divorce.

That world is just so much more solid and that's what we're made for and that this, in perspective, that our time here will just seem like a moment and I guess a testing ground. Okay, now that we've got to the, as far as the beginning of heaven, I'll take a look at one of the characters and then we'll open it up for discussion, I think.

So, the character that interested me most was found in chapter five. One of the ghosts we met was during his life on earth, an Episcopal minister and then a bishop.

[19 : 53] We first met him on the bus. We get hints at that time that he may not really be a believer. He had stated that all the nightmare fantasies of our ancestors are being swept away.

All the ghosts have a bright spirit that has been sent to them for a particular reason. So, they've gone up to heaven. There are ghosts that come from the gray town and from heaven there's bright spirits that have real bodies.

So, they've all got their own ghost that's been sent to them. They knew them on earth. All the ghosts have, a bright spirit has been sent to them for a particular reason. the Episcopal ghost friend's name was Dick.

The ghost reminisces, so, sorry, I'm not saying that very well. So, the ghost and the spirit knew each other on earth. They were friends on earth. The ghost reminisces about some of the talks they'd had and suggests that the spirit will have broadened out his views as he had become quite narrow-minded on earth.

The spirit is accused of having believed in a literal heaven and hell. Despite the stark differences of the two locations, Greytown and heaven, the ghost refuses to see and believe in these.

[21 : 14] He says, oh, in a spiritual sense, to be sure, I still believe in them in that way. I am still, my dear boy, looking for the kingdom, but nothing superstitious or mythological.

This is a minor case of the equivocation where heaven and hell are different things to different speakers. A reality to the bright spirit and nothing superstitious or mysterious to the ghost.

This equivocation I may have been able to spot on my own, but since I talked so much of the equivocation at the beginning, there better be something more hidden than that.

Well, another example is where the ghost asks, do you really think people are penalized for their honest opinions? Sorry for the people that haven't read the book now. I mean, this will only make sense to the ones that have, as you recall, these conversations.

Do you really think that people are penalized for their honest opinions? The spirit's response is, the beliefs are sincere in the sense that they do occur as psychological events in man's mind.

[22 : 22] If that's what you mean by sincerity, they are sincere, and so are ours. But heirs which are sincere in that sense are not innocent.

They had both allowed themselves to drift, unresisting, unpraying, accepting every half-conscious solicitation from our beliefs, and they reached the point at which they no longer believed the faith.

So to me, that's wonderful. There was a difference between honest beliefs and sincere beliefs and whether or not they're innocent.

So we can have beliefs according to Lewis. They'll be real beliefs for us, but it doesn't necessarily mean that we haven't done things wrong to bring those beliefs about.

I also like the part where the ghost says that he might consider staying if certain conditions were met. Of course, I should require some assurances, he says.

[23 : 33] I should want to guarantee that you are taking me to a place where I shall find a wider sphere of usefulness and scope for the talents that God has given me and an atmosphere of free inquiry, in short, all that one means by civilization and the spiritual life.

No, said the other, I can promise you none of these things. No sphere of usefulness, you are not needed there at all. No scope for your talents, only forgiveness for having perverted them.

No atmosphere of inquiry, for I will bring you to a land not of questions, but of answers, and you shall see the face of God. Ah, but we must all interpret those beautiful words in our own way.

For me, there is no such thing as a final answer. The free wind of inquiry must always continue to blow through the mind, must it not? Prove all things. To travel hopefully is better than to arrive.

Now again, Lewis provides a brilliant response to the character through the spirit. So, regarding traveling hopefully is better than to arrive, the spirit's response is, if that were true and known to be true, how could anyone travel hopefully?

[24 : 47] there would be nothing to hope for. But you must feel, I'll continue to read here directly, but you must feel yourself that there is something stifling about the idea of finality.

Stagnation, my dear boy, what is more soul-destroying than stagnation? You think that, because hitherto you have experienced truth only with the abstract intellect. I will bring you where you can taste it like honey and be embraced by it as a bridegroom.

Your thirst shall be quenched. Well, really, you know, I am not aware of a thirst for some ready-made truth which puts an end to intellectual activity in the way you seem to be describing. Will it leave me to free play of mind, Dick?

I must insist on that, you know. Free, as a man is free to drink while he is drinking, he is not free still to be dry. The ghost seemed to think for a moment.

I can make nothing of that idea, he said. Listen, said the white spirit, once you were a child, once you knew what inquiry was for, there was a time when you asked questions because you wanted answers and were glad when you found them.

[25 : 58] Become that child again, even now. Ah, but when I became a man, I put away childish things. There are a lot of things going on here.

Free play of mind, what is that? You are free to have questions answered, but once they have been answered, you will no longer be free to have the same questions. What is the ghost looking for?

It is just blather and babble. again with the equivocation. I hope you are not sick of that word, but both the spirit and ghost are quoting scriptural principles here.

The spirit exhorts the ghost to be like a child, but the ghost responds that he has put away childish things. They are both quoting scripture.

truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. That's Matthew 18 and 3. John MacArthur says that this is how Jesus characterized conversion.

[27 : 06] Like the Beatitudes, it pictures faith as a simple, helpless, trusting dependence on those who have no resources of their own. Like children, they have no achievements and no accomplishments to offer or commend themselves with.

So that's what coming to Jesus like a child might be like. Lewis has said this, when I was 10, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so.

Now that I'm 50, I read them openly. When I became a man, I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up. And 1 Corinthians 13 11 says, when I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.

When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. So after the ghost response of when I became a man, I put away childish things, the spirit responds, you have gone far wrong.

Thirst was made for water, inquiry for truth. What you now call the free play of inquiry has neither more nor less to do with the ends for which intelligence was given you than masturbation has to do with marriage.

[28 : 25] I love this. Wouldn't you have thought that a more natural way of stating the order of the thirst and the water would be to say that water was made for our thirst? But that's not what it says here.

Here it is, thirst was made for water. Like water is a good thing and God's wondering how will I get them to go after it? I know, I'll give them the gift of thirst. Now this is just an analogy.

The real thing in this case is truth. Truth is a good thing. And God has given us inquiries and questioning minds so that we go after it. But it seems like the ghost had no interest in getting answers to his inquiries in that way.

The masturbation and marriage thing I'm not as certain of. But I think that it might have the idea of masturbation is meant for me and satisfying my needs whereas marriage has to do with meeting the needs of another.

The looking out for the needs is not what marriage is about. So the free play of inquiry, what is that in light of the available answers or in light of intelligence?

[29 : 41] It is nothing. The free play of inquiry is nothing in light of available answers. But that just didn't do it for the ghost. He wanted nothing to do with answers.

Then the ghost is asked by the spirit, can you still desire happiness?

The ghost I don't think understands the question. I think it was in his letter to I think Lewis wrote this in a letter to his brother. I begin to suspect that the world is divided not only into the happy and unhappy but into those who like happiness and those who, odd as it seems, really don't.

Near the end of our time with this ghost, he talks of a paper that he is scheduled to read when he gets back to the gray town. I shall end up by pointing out how this deepens the significance of the crucifixion, he said.

One feels for the first time what a disaster it was, what a tragic waste. There is a sense when I, maybe especially during our celebration of the Lord's Supper, that I'm sorry that this sacrifice, the crucifixion, was necessary.

[30 : 58] But I'm glad to have been instructed that I'm somehow able and I'm somehow able to believe that God who is infinitely wiser than me, saw the cross as a good thing and maybe created just to have the circumstances arise in a place where the idea of that high sacrifice would become a reality.

And you kind of have to have and give assent to that idea as good to be able to sing the words of this hymn.

My notes are a bit muddled here. Where is this hymn? I think it's this one right on, right on in majesty.

So just kind of remember what the ghost has just said, the crucifixion, what a waste and what a tragedy. But we sing, ride on, ride on, in majesty.

Hark, all the tribes' hosanna cry. O Savior, meet, pursue thy road with palms and scattered garments throats. Ride on, ride on, in majesty.

[32 : 15] In lowly pomp, ride on to die. O Christ, thy triumphs now begin, or captive death and conquered sin.

what a contrast to what this ghost had thought of the crucifixion. Okay, so that's the Episcopal ghost.

The episcopal ghost. The episcopal ghost. The episcopal ghost. The episcopal ghost. The episcopal ghost. The episcopal ghost.