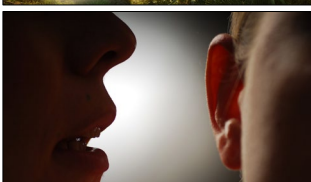
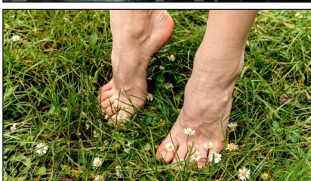


# Get on the Bus

## The Great Divorce Part 3: Listening

November 10, 2024



Today we're back on our trip through C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. Cuz this **short symbolic story** is just *jam-packed* with *people* and *places* that prompt us to *ponder* our own *spiritual state*. And as we follow Lewis's *characters* through his **metaphoric illustrations of Heaven and Hell**, we see our *actual* *spiritual struggles* reflected in *their resistance* to *Heaven's harsh reality*. Because, as isolated Ghosts from the *Grey Town* in Lewis's picture of *Hell*, each *character* serves as a *relatable example* of how *earthly attachments* can hold us *back* from life in *Heaven*. Some are moved by *greed, lust, anger, or pride* to *leave the line* before the *bus* for *Heaven* even *arrives* – while *self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, and self-sufficiency* make *Heaven miserable* for *others* who *made the trip* but refuse to *let go* of their *former lives*.

However, each Ghost who *stays* and *struggles* with *Heaven* gets *chased down* and *challenged* by a *more-than-solid Spirit* who tries to *help* them *understand* and *accept* *Heaven's more-than-solid reality*. And after Lewis listens in on a series of *those conversations, eventually*, someone speaks directly to *him* and asks *point-blank* if *he's* thinking of going *back* to *Grey Town*. And *that's* where we pick up the story, **hearing our heart**. Cuz **what we choose to do reveals what we have in our heart**. Which is why Proverbs prioritizes its *protection*, saying:

Above *all else*, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. [Which means it ultimately decides our destiny! So] – Proverbs 4:23 NIV

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a *sinful, unbelieving heart* that turns away from the living God. – Hebrews 3:12 NIV

Well *okay...* but exactly *how* do we *do* that? How do we keep our heart *from* being filled with the *wrong* stuff? Well, it all comes down *quality control* of our *input* – and that's not so much a "*what*" as it is a "*who*".

[Like Paul warns us:] Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character." - 1 Corinthians 15:33 NIV

Cuz you *didn't* arrive at *your* opinions all by *yourself* – whether you admit it or not, *your* beliefs were *developed* and *directed* by *all* of your daily discussions with *various* people. So the *important* question is, **whose words influence your actions?** And *remember*, the impact of others may be *inevitable* – but that *doesn't* make it all *bad*! Parents, teachers, role models and mentors all speak words to try and sway you toward the way you *should* go! Because **positive influence is part of God's plan** – I mean, c'mon, my *job* wouldn't *exist* if God said it was *off-limits*! It's just the *negative* and *destructive* influence that God forbids, the way Paul commands us all:

Do not let any *unwholesome talk* come out of *your* mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. - Ephesians 4:29 NIV



So, if guarding our heart is all about letting the *right* words affect our actions, choosing *who* we listen to is a *critical decision* – which makes discernment a *critical quality!* We need to know *whose* influence we should *trust* to build us *up!* And *Jesus* gives us a great *system of discernment to detect bad company:*

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. – Matthew 7:15-16 NIV

**What life does their speech produce?** *That's* the question that *should* shape how we *hear* others. And as we rejoin our story to find Lewis in *conversation* with another *Grey Town Ghost*, it's easy to see the *need* to discern who *he* should trust. Because, in Chapter 7, we meet the *Hard-Bitten Ghost*, whose deep-rooted *cynicism* encourages Lewis to *ignore* all the input of *others* by *undermining* their credibility. He's even suspicious of *Heaven* and questions *it's* motives:



**'That's all propaganda... Of course there never was any question of our staying. You can't eat the fruit and you can't drink the water and it takes you all your time to walk on the grass. A human being couldn't live here. All that idea of staying is only an advertisement stunt.' ... 'There seems to be some idea that if one stays here one would get—well, solider—grow acclimatized...'**

**'What would you say if you went to a hotel where the eggs were all bad and when you complained to the Boss, instead of apologizing and changing his dairyman, he just told you that if you tried – you'd get to like bad eggs in time?'**

Huh... no wonder after this discussion, Lewis notes how *depressed* and *miserable* he had become. All the *hope* he had *heard* from the *Solid Spirits* was called into *question* by this *Hard-Bitten Ghost*; and here, we see that **cynicism is destructive because it's obstructive.** It teaches us to *doubt* and *tune-out* any opinion *apart* from our *own*. **But what kind of life does that produce?**

Well, the cynicism of *this* Ghost led to a life *incapable* of becoming *better* – cuz when it *shut out* the input of *others*, it made it impossible to *learn* or *grow*. And all his *doubts* eventually became a *prison*, preventing him from even *considering* the goodness of *Heaven*. And I know how this goes cuz I used to *be* a cynic for *several* of the *same* reasons – *nothing* and *nobody* ever lived up to *expectations*. But, *later* I learned that *God agreed* – with one *caveat*: **nothing and nobody lives up to expectations on Earth.** Cynics might be *right* about the *underwhelming* reality of life *down here* – but that should *compel* them to examine the *overwhelming* reality of life *up there*. Which is what *God* calls us to *do!*

"Give ear and come to Me; listen, that you may live.... Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. ... For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. "As the Heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts. - Isaiah 55:3, 7-9 NIV

It's insanely arrogant to reject God without hearing Him out, but that's what cynicism *does*. It uses what we've *seen* to undermine what we *haven't* – it uses the brokenness of *this world* to *assume* the brokenness of *God's promises*. But **we shouldn't allow our earthly let-downs to undermine God's Heavenly reality!** Cuz cynicism can only *hold us back* from truth, it *can't* help us *hear* it.

And as the Hard-Bitten Ghost's *cynicism* justifies him *rejecting* Heaven to *return* to The Grey Town, we can hear a sense of *superiority* – *showing* how **cynicism inevitably grows into vanity**. And as if to make *that* point, the *next* scene Lewis *encounters* in chapter 8 is a conversation between a Well-Dressed Ghost and another Solid Spirit trying to convince *her* to let him *help her* travel *into* Heaven.



**'But they'll see me.' 'What does it matter if they do?' 'I'd rather die.' 'But you've died already. There's no good trying to go back to that.' 'I wish I'd never been born, what are we born for?' 'For infinite happiness, you can step out into it at any moment...' 'But, I tell you, they'll see me.' 'An hour hence and you will not care. A day hence and you will laugh at it.'**

And yet, despite the Spirit's *reassuring* words, the *heart* of the Well-Dressed Ghost *stayed* set on her own *anxiety* – because it was *full* of her own *opinion*. And she *couldn't* be inspired by the Spirit's *encouraging* words because **vanity means having a heart full of our own influence**. It means trusting *ourselves* over anyone else. And what kind of life does *that* produce?

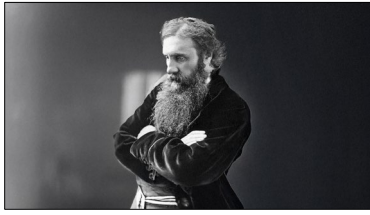
Well, like the *Cynical* Ghost, this *Well-Dressed* Ghost *also* lives in a *prison* of her own making – cuz she's *unable* to hear God's *positive perspective* that *would* lead her to a higher *hope*! In fact, *vanity* and *cynicism* are just two *sides* of the *same* coin; cuz they're just two *approaches* to empower *ego*, ***cynicism undermines others to elevate oneself*** while ***vanity elevates oneself to undermine others!*** But *either* way the volume of our own voice *finds* a way to drown out the *others*, which is a shame!

[Cuz we could hear about what we can't see] The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart. - 1 Samuel 16:7 NIV

Like we said at the *start*, it's the content of our *heart* that defines who we *are*. But when we're full of *ourselves*, vanity teaches us to base our *value* on our own *opinions*, good or bad. And that also means **vanity is dangerous because it paves the way for shame**. And as we see in *this* Ghost, vanity doesn't just make us self-centered, it makes us self-conscious – and in the end, she couldn't *hear* her Spirit's *help* cuz she couldn't overcome the *shame* that *she* spoke into *herself*. So, at this point we start to *sympathize* with Lewis as *he* starts thinking about *leaving* Heaven – cuz he's been so *disheartened* and *discouraged* by what he's *heard*. It seems like an impossible situation: **If we don't trust others, we're snared by cynicism; if we do trust ourselves we're trapped by vanity!** And the only *solution* sounds like a longshot: find *someone* you can *trust* who also has words of wisdom cuz:

Wisdom is like honey for you: If you find it, there is a future hope for you – Proverbs 24:14 NIV

For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." **[But]** ... how can they believe in the One of whom they have not heard? And how can they *hear* without *someone* preaching to them? ... How *beautiful* are the feet of those who *bring Good News*! - Romans 10:13-15 NIV



Which is exactly how Lewis feels in Chapter 9 when *his* Solid Spirit guide *arrives* with some *much-needed* wisdom. And when the Spirit introduces himself as **George MacDonald**, the Christian *poet* and *author* who'd greatly inspired *Lewis's faith*, Lewis gushes with relief that *he can trust him*, having *personally* discerned the *Godly* influence that MacDonald's books had produced in his life.

Because **tested words make trusted people**. And when the input of *others*, leads *us* deeper into our *relationship* with *God* and closer to *His words*, we can trust their guidance as **"tried and true."** And just like *all* the Solid Spirits sent to speak to the Grey Town *Ghosts*, MacDonald's whole *goal* is to *guide toward God* – not to *force understanding*, but to *invite questions*. Because **we're most willing to hear God's answer, when we ask the question!** Which is why it's commanded of *us* to:

Test all things; **[and]** hold fast what is good. - 1 Thessalonians 5:21 NKJ

So that's what Lewis and MacDonald do – Lewis asks more and more *questions* as they encounter more and more Grey Town *Ghosts* struggling to *trust Heaven*. And along the way, Lewis hears more and more *answers* that explain how **Heaven and Hell are both part of God's love and justice:**



And as MacDonald *ultimately* explains: **'There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done." ... All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek – find. To those who knock – it is opened.'**

**[Cuz, as we hear from God Himself:]** My people would not listen to Me ... So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices. If My people would only listen to Me ... you would be fed ... I would satisfy you." – Psalm 81:11-13, 16 NIV

But **we're only fed by the Lord after we're led to the Lord;** so it's critical to discern our *Godly guides!* Cuz when *their input* leads us to *God's Word*, we can trust *their words* to influence *our actions!*

For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of **[And we won't be willing to tell God "Thy will be done" – until we're also able to say:]** – Matthew 12:34-35 NIV

I have hidden Your Word in my heart that I might not sin against You. – Psalm 119:11 NIV

And as our chapter ends, we've learned 3 more lessons from what we've heard in the story so far:

- 1. Who we hear guides our heart.** And it's our *heart* that ultimately turns us *away from* or leads us *closer to* our life with God. But since the input of others is essential, we need to be careful because:
- 2. Cynicism and vanity limit our input to ourselves** When we undermine *others* by our *cynicism* or elevate *ourselves* by our *vanity*, our *own* input is *all* we can *hear* – and *that* prevents us from listening to what *God* wants to share. So we need to actively invite the right guides in our lives, but:
- 3. It takes our discernment to determine God's influence** we should weigh the words of who we listen to, by measuring the amount of Godly change they produce. And although earthly fellowship is essential to producing positive change – it should always lead us to a Heavenly relationship with God Himself, cuz nothing produces trustworthy *transformation* more than *His Word* in *our* heart.