

“Breaking Good”

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Heroes are better than we are; saints are better than themselves. – Fr. George Rutler

There has been a bit of hubbub of late about a television program. Fair warning: there are no spoilers in this article and I have never seen the show in question. The only thing I know is that the main character has, for one reason or another, chosen to move from a respectable job to a criminal one. Whether for good reasons or bad, or coming to a bad end or a good one, I know not. I suspect that the program raises some interesting philosophical questions, and I hope that the writers wrestle with life's big questions thoughtfully. On the other hand, drilling deep doesn't guarantee that I'll strike oil if I'm not in the right formation.

There is a great deal of literature (yes, I am including television series and movies as literature, for what it's worth) which tries to get us inside the mind of the fallen, the perverse, and the evil. In this type of literature, the only “anti-” in a modern antihero is our anti-quoted understanding of good and evil. Good may be good, but evil is really just misunderstood. According to these stories, the prostitute with the heart of gold and the good thief are not really in need of redemption, a good deed at the end of their life only proves that they were really good all along.

The trouble with this kind of thinking is that it is fundamentally unjust and patently unlikely. Most often the thief and the prostitute end as they have begun unless they have a change of heart and a change of life. Moreover, the newtonian heft of a prodigal life of dissolution requires a divine ton of mercy. We cannot wish the evil we have done or the evil we have

experienced away. We need a savior who has counterbalanced the weight of our sin and whose response is not only equal and opposite our depravity, but which overcomes and conquers the death and carnage.

When I was in high school, I read C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, which contain a series of fictional letters from a high-level, experienced demon to his protege. I grew up in a time when people were fascinated by the demonic and the hellish. I suppose this was in part due to movies like *The Exorcist*, and in part due to the gas crisis in the seventies. In these *Letters* the demons understand our nature and our weaknesses in an upside-down way which allows us to understand our strengths and our supernatural destiny.

In other words, by reading these letters I grew to know and understand myself. This is what is missing in much of our reading and watching of modern literature. In some cases, the literature itself is faulty, false, or shallow. In other cases, our reading of even good literature can be thoughtless or depthless. So, I want to propose a twofold solution which was handed on from a long time ago. First, *whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things*. The words of Scripture, the lives of the saints, and the classic spiritual works have much to give us, especially when we have given so much time to the tube (or diode, nowadays). They urge and instruct us in breaking good. And second, because we have a tendency just to let our literature be only between commercials rather than between our ears, I will repeat, *think about these things*.