

Screwtape Lectures

Letter 1

The first letter begins with a suggestion that the patient spend time with a “materialist friend.” This reference to materialism is foundational to Lewis’s approach to addressing modern cultural challenges to Christianity. In subsequent writings, he will explore and expand the dangers and limitations of materialism in multiple ways:

In *Miracles*, he will explain the failure of materialism to provide a foundation for reason.

In *The Abolition of Man*, he will show the loss of human dignity that comes from a materialistic dismissal of beauty.

In *The Problem of Pain*, he will posit that there is no satisfying explanation for pain or hope for comfort apart from the spiritual hope of transcendence/Heaven.

From the beginning of *Screwtape Letters*, the title character comments on the foolishness of using argument to lure the patient away from the Enemy (God): “It sounds as if you supposed that *argument* was the way to keep him out of the Enemy’s clutches.” This sentence is key to understanding Lewis and his agenda of asserting that the rise of modernity has brought about a decrease in rationality and a loss of the value of truth. In other words, the modern world values something because it is useful, not because it is true. Thus, Screwtape tells his pupil Wormwood, “Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church. Don’t waste time trying to make him think that materialism is *true*! Make him think it is strong, or stark, or courageous.” In practice, Lewis blatantly demonstrates his opposition to this way of thinking. He is a master of argument, as his writings demonstrate.

In the second paragraph, Screwtape further explains his warning against the use of reason, in effect saying that in a battle of reason, God wins. Contrary to the propaganda of the Enlightenment, reason is not an enemy of faith in God. As Lewis will explore in the book *Miracles*, the very existence and act of reasoning requires a spiritual dimension. Otherwise, reason, viewed from a materialistic ideology, has no foundation. Indeed, if you are a materialist, you are required to believe that “the brain secretes thought as the liver secretes bile” (French philosopher Pierre Cabanis). It is this insight that led Lewis to become a Christian. He realized that rationalism and materialism were totally inadequate in explaining the world as we know it. The very act of reasoning, or thinking, is a spiritual action and implicitly leads to God!

The final paragraph of letter 1 is also noteworthy. In it, Screwtape says, “Thanks to the processes which we set at work on them centuries ago, they find it all but impossible to believe in the unfamiliar while the familiar is before their eyes.” Lewis is alluding, again, to the Enlightenment, in which the pursuit of certainty was rooted in the belief that only what is tangible or measurable is to be considered true knowledge. The irony of this belief is that even a scientific approach to knowledge is based on the non-tangible, unprovable assumption that the

world is orderly and trustworthy. By having Screwtape warn against logic, Lewis is confronting the widespread diabolical lie in our culture that science and faith are opposed to each other.

(3.5 minutes to read out loud)

Letter 2

In letter 1, the patient was in danger of becoming a Christian; in letter 2, the patient has become a Christian. According to Screwtape, however, all is not lost: "There is no need to despair; hundreds of these adult converts have been reclaimed after a brief sojourn in the Enemy's camp and are now with us."

Some theological traditions maintain that the heart of being a Christian is "making a decision for Christ." According to this tradition, having once made the decision, one simply has to wait to get into Heaven—which is assured. Lewis's position is that making a decision for Christ begins a process that only ends when we step into Heaven. Along the way, there are temptations and spiritual battles that must be fought. Jesus freely offers salvation by grace to all of us. However, no one who consistently chooses to sin on purpose can be assured he/she will be welcomed into Heaven! Every day is a spiritual battle that can be won or lost. As we begin the journey of discipleship, it is a challenge to overcome the mental and bodily habits that initially favor evil. In Christian theology, this is called the process of sanctification.

In the New Testament, the Church is the community of those who are gathered together to follow Jesus. Lewis, through Screwtape, gives two contrasting views of the Church, views which I believe he shares. His experience of the Church (he was an Anglican) was rather negative, a viewpoint shared by Screwtape, who calls it "a sham Gothic erection on the new building estate" filled with socially unattractive people who use an incomprehensible liturgy and "one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print." Despite this attitude towards the Church, Lewis faithfully attended his local parish church at Heading Quarry in the eastern suburbs of Oxford as well as the daily morning prayers offered at the Magdalen College. His brother Warnie regularly attended church with him, but they sat beside a column that sheltered them from the sight of most in the sanctuary. Lewis attended services because he realized there was a spiritual dimension to the Church that transcended his immediate impressions. Screwtape describes a similar spiritual perception of the Church as "spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners."

In this letter, we are also introduced to Lewis's key to healthy spirituality as expressed in *Mere Christianity*: God allows us to experience difficulties because he wants us to make choices to believe and obey based on what is right rather than on what we feel. Screwtape misrepresents this by saying, "[The Enemy] therefore refuses to carry them, by their mere affections and habits, to any of the goals which He sets before them."

(3 minutes to read out loud.)

Letter 3

The third letter provides insight into the way personal domestic life can be used to tempt, irritate, and harass. Lewis also helps us see that the line from the Lord's Prayer, "lead us not into temptation," is not necessarily about big sins like stealing, adultery, or bearing false witness. Sin is a daily challenge of the mundane—often we don't think of our attitudes and inner responses as sins at all. But they are. And Satan exploits this misconception. Our thought life is where the battle for holiness begins.

Diabolical opposition is in our thought life and in our daily relationships, especially those we have with the people with whom we live. Our spiritual opponents encourage us to be spiritual hypocrites that are judgmental of others. It is not for nothing that Jesus cautioned,

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." (Matthew 7:3-5)

In this letter and throughout the book, Lewis draws from his own life. For instance, during World War I, he and a buddy, Paddy Moore, agreed to care for each other's parents should one of them be killed. Paddy was killed and Lewis, true to his commitment, took Mrs. Moore into his house and cared for her until she died in 1951, over thirty years! I have read that in some ways she filled a maternal need in Lewis's life, as his own mother died when he was ten years old. After his conversion, "Mento," as he called her, was irritated by his church attendance and made her feelings known.

(2 Minutes to read out loud.)

Letter 4

In letter 4, Lewis explores the challenges of prayer, emotions, and mental idolatry. Lewis does not think much of cultivating a prayerful mood or devotional attitude, as illustrated in Wormwood's attempts to misdirect his patient from an intentional address to God in prayer to a confused concoction of jumbled ideas about God as well as his own feelings. Screwtape explains that the patient "may be persuaded to aim at something entirely spontaneous, inward, informal, and unregularised . . . [in] an effort to produce in himself a vaguely devotional *mood*." For Lewis, feelings toward God are of little value. What matters is the intentional address to God. What counts spiritually is not the feeling of prayer, but the act of prayer.

Lewis does think there is a place for silent prayer, but he reserves that for those who are more spiritually advanced. It is notable that in the very last book Lewis wrote, *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*, he says that silent prayer is an important part of his prayer life: "In fact I tried to pray without words at all—not to verbalise the mental acts." This is not easy! "To pray successfully without words one needs to be 'at the top of one's form,'" says Lewis.

Concerning the challenges of a regular prayer life, Lewis points out that the presence of God may be a Christian's desire, sort of, but there is also something that is scary about God: "The

humans themselves do not desire [God's presence] as much as they suppose. There's such a thing as getting more than they bargained for." After Adam and Eve sinned, God came looking for them and found them hiding in the bushes. That is where we have been ever since. This leaves a lot for Wormwood and Screwtape to work with.

Letter 5

In letter 5, Lewis presents a diabolical view of death, or rather, the experience of dying. It is a challenging letter. According to Screwtape, dying in a nursing home from old age is preferable to being killed in war, as far as the demons are concerned. Screwtape exclaims,

How much better for us if all humans died in costly nursing homes amid doctors who lie, nurses who lie, friends who lie, as we have trained them, promising life to the dying, encouraging the belief that sickness excuses every indulgence, and even, if our workers know their job, withholding all suggestion of a priest lest it should betray to the sick man his true condition!

I am reminded of an experience I had in a hospice—I was there as a pastor for a member of my congregation. When I spoke to the patient about her faith in Christ as she was facing imminent death, family members in the room were offended. I was pulled from the room and taken into the hallway, where I was hotly admonished not to speak to her about death!

Lewis was a serious believer in both Heaven and Hell. For him, there are eternal consequences for what one believes. Screwtape feels that dying in a nursing home is preferable, from a diabolical point of view, to dying in war. He advises Wormwood to "consider... what undesirable deaths occur in wartime. Men are killed in places where they knew they might be killed and to which they go, if they are at *all* of the Enemy's party, prepared."

Lewis writes this against the backdrops of World War II, which was currently raging, and the first world war, in which he fought in the British army as a lieutenant in the trenches and was wounded. Wars are terrible and result in tragic loss of life. However, Lewis, in this letter, reminds us that we are all going to die--nobody gets out of this world without dying! In some strange way, war has the benefit of confronting us with our mortality, which we are all too eager to deny. We need to think again. Moses wrote in Psalm 90:12, "Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom." The point is that we need to realize that our days on this earth are limited, so we all must live in light of our deaths.

Letter 6

In letter 6, Screwtape continues to encourage Wormwood to create confusion among the patient's imagination, emotions, and will:

Think of your man as a series of concentric circles, his will being the innermost, his intellect coming next, and finally his fantasy. You can hardly hope, at once, to exclude from all the circles everything that smells of the Enemy: but you must keep on shoving

all the virtues outward till they are finally located in the circle of fantasy, and all the desirable qualities inward into the Will.

Lewis believes that the fatal acts of sin that put us under Satan's power are actions, not primarily in our feelings or our fantasies. That is why in this letter and also in letter 4, Screwtape encourages Wormwood to keep his patient preoccupied with managing his emotions and imagination. Screwtape tells Wormwood, "An important spiritual law is here involved. I have explained that you can weaken his prayers by diverting his attention from the Enemy Himself to his own states of mind about the Enemy."

It is ultimately not what we feel or think that counts but what we choose to do; the godly, virtuous life that defeats the tempters is the result of a trained will. Screwtape explains, "It is only in so far as [the virtues] reach the Will and are there embodied in habits that [they] are really fatal to us." A godly life is not about emotional responses to the past or anxieties about the future. It is about obedience to God in the present moment. Screwtape's twisted interpretation of this is "that [the patient] should accept with patience the tribulation which has actually been dealt out to him—the present anxiety and suspense. It is about *this* that he is to say 'Thy will be done,' and for the daily task of bearing *this* that the daily bread will be provided."

While our will and the actions we choose are the most important elements of godliness, we must be careful because our ideas and feelings do have consequences. Lewis places a high value on both the intellect and fantasy, as is evident by all that he has published. Think of this book, *The Screwtape Letters*, the three books in the *Space Trilogy*, the seven books of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and his final novel, *Till We Have Faces* as those directed at the imagination and involving fantasy while also engaging the intellect. For Lewis, these works are essential "door openers" that begin the reader's process of understanding the inner workings of the human soul. The outer circle is the imagination; next comes the intellect. Consider Lewis's amazing output of books directed at the mind—too many to mention exhaustively: *Mere Christianity*, *Miracles*, *The Abolition of Man*, and an untold number of essays published in various periodicals. What so many of us appreciate about Lewis is his thoughtful articulation of the Christian faith also embodied in his wonderful fantasies.

Letter 7

Letter 7 addresses two main issues: whether demons ought to make their existence known and the dangerous, diabolical temptation to make Christianity a means in service to a cause.

Screwtape says that the presence of Satan and demons was common knowledge in ages past—that is, among many cultures throughout much of human history. In the modern age, somewhere around the time of the Enlightenment, the diabolical realm chose to go incognito as a result of naturalism, rationalism, and materialism. Screwtape prefers the modern denial of a spiritual realm because it creates a materialistic worldview and allows for the complete dismissal of God, Heaven, Hell, angels, and demons. Remember, in much of his writing, Lewis is eager to point to the destructive power of materialism. In this letter, for example, he has Screwtape envision what might be called an "advanced materialistic option": "the Materialist Magician, the man, not

using, but veritably worshipping, what he vaguely calls 'Forces' while denying the existence of 'spirits.'”

In addition to obscuring the spiritual and accentuating the material, a favorite diabolical strategy is to turn Christianity into a means to some end other than God. The subject under discussion in this letter is patriotism during World War II and whether the patient should be encouraged to be a patriot or a pacifist:

Whichever he adopts, your main task will be the same. Let him begin by treating the Patriotism or the Pacifism as a part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part. Then quietly and gradually nurse him on to the stage at which the religion becomes merely part of the "cause", in which Christianity is valued chiefly because of the excellent arguments it can produce in favour of the British war-effort or of Pacifism.

The contemporary version of this strategy reveals itself in the discussion of the current moral temperature of the United States. The argument goes that the use of drugs, the decline of the family, the rise of crime, etc. means that what we really need is a spiritual revival. Which is true! And here is the diabolical nature of the argument. The true goal and end of a revival—the surrender to the Lordship of Christ and participation in the community of Christ—is subverted into a desire to make America a good place in which to live. It is indisputable that the fruit of conversion produces good citizens and a good society; however, good citizens and a good society are never the goals of conversion. When that happens, a heavenly spiritual goal becomes merely a means of attaining an earthly social goal. As Screwtape says, “Once you have made the World an end, and faith a means, you have almost won your man.”

There is another diabolical strategy mentioned in this letter that is worth pointing out—the push to extremes. Screwtape says, “All extremes, except extreme devotion to the Enemy, are to be encouraged,” especially when the present age is “unbalanced and prone to faction, and it is our business to inflame them.”

Letter 8

In letter 7, Screwtape encourages thinking in extremes for Wormwood’s patient. In letter 8, he encourages taking advantage of the ups and downs in life.

Everyone notices in the course of her/his spiritual journey that there are emotional phases that vary greatly from one another. One well-known phase is the “honeymoon” that often follows a teenage or even adult conversion. The sense of release, forgiveness, and the presence of God feels almost intoxicating. Eventually, though, the honeymoon phase gives way to something else, sometimes called the “desert phase,” one in which there is no sense of the presence of God at all and the Christian life becomes monotonous. After Mother Therese of Calcutta died, her personal diary revealed that that she had experienced years of such dryness.

Lewis is frequently thought of as a great apologist, clearly explaining and defending Christianity. He was also a great spiritual guide. He received thousands of letters from people asking for his

advice on how to live the Christian life. He made a commitment to answer every single letter, spending an hour or two each day corresponding with people he had never met but who had read something he had written and who were looking for spiritual insight and encouragement. Those letters have been compiled and published in books such as *Letters to an American Lady*, *C.S. Lewis: Letters to Children*, and *Yours, Jack*.

In letter 8, Lewis, through Screwtape, provides wonderful spiritual guidance for living the normal, mature Christian life. It is normal to experience ups and downs. This is due to what Lewis has Screwtape call the “law of Undulation”:

If you had watched your patient carefully you would have seen this undulation in every department of his life—his interest in his work, his affection for his friends, his physical appetites, all go up and down. As long as he lives on earth periods of emotional and bodily richness and liveliness will alternate with periods of numbness and poverty. The dryness and dullness through which your patient is now going are not, as you fondly suppose, your workmanship; they are merely a natural phenomenon which will do us no good unless you make a good use of it.

Lewis encourages us to understand that though we might prefer an emotionally satisfying periods in our spiritual journeys, it is the dry times (or troughs, according to the Law of Undulation) that most shape our souls. Screwtape knows the true power of those dry periods:

Sooner or later [the Enemy] withdraws, if not in fact, at least from their conscious experience, all those supports and incentives. He leaves the creature to stand up on its own legs—to carry out from the will alone duties which have lost all relish. It is during such trough periods, much more than during the peak periods, that it is growing into the sort of creature He wants it to be. Hence the prayers offered in the state of dryness are those which please Him best.

It’s good to know, and even a comfort, to know that when our spiritual journey is difficult God is not absent and will never abandon us. He is always working, however we feel, to shape our souls and conform us to the image of Christ.

Letter 9

Lewis, through Screwtape, continues as a spiritual guide in letter 9, helping us navigate life’s spiritual phases. On one hand, he makes it clear that the demons want to encourage extremes—for us to either be really “up” or really “down,” according to the Law of Undulation. Each phase and the temperament of each patient can be exploited by the demons. When we are up, we are vulnerable to lust and inappropriate expressions of sensual pleasure. When we are down, we are in danger of discouragement and even giving up on the faith. However, “[t]he attack has a much better chance of success when the man’s whole inner world is drab and cold and empty.”

On the other hand, while extremes, from the tempter’s perspective, are to be encouraged, the tempter advocates moderation as well—a very special type of moderation: “Talk to him about ‘moderation in all things’. If you can once get him to the point of thinking that ‘religion is all

very well up to a point', you can feel quite happy about his soul. A moderated religion is as good for us as no religion at all—and more amusing.”

The demons are good at twisting things. Life's ups and downs clearly make us targets for temptation or the loss of faith. But even moderation can be used to make us spiritually dull. Jesus even warns against it, telling the church at Laodicea that because they were “lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--[he was] about to spit [them] out of [his] mouth” (Rev. 3:16).

Another issue to be considered involves pleasure. While the demons tempt us with pleasure, Wormwood must

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden.

After Mrs. Moore died in 1951, Lewis was delivered from a life burden and found his life to be rather pleasant and easygoing. During that period, he wrote to a friend saying, “Pray for me.” He knew that there were temptations and spiritual dangers even in the best of times.

Letter 10

Letter 10 explores a new dimension of spiritual warfare: social relationships. The patient has just been introduced to a new social set, just the sort of people that PBS and British TV love to show as the Oxford/Cambridge set of the 1940s and 50s-- privileged, upper-class, intellectual snobs who love to use cutting, snide humor: Screwtape describes them as “rich, smart, superficially intellectual, and brightly sceptical about everything in the world. I gather they are even vaguely pacifist, not on moral grounds but from an ingrained habit of belittling anything that concerns the great mass of their fellow men and from a dash of purely fashionable and literary communism.”

The very arrogant attitude of such people is infectious and corrupting. The danger is social pressure, the desire to be approved of by the “in-crowd,” which leads to adopting attitudes and actions that are ungodly and therefore diabolical. Added to the spiritual danger is hypocrisy, in which the patient acts one way with his snobby friends and another way when he is around the Christian community. Screwtape explains this to Wormwood: “You see the idea—the worldly friends touch him on one side and the grocer on the other, and he is the complete, balanced, complex man who sees round them all. Thus, while being permanently treacherous to at least two sets of people, he will feel, instead of shame, a continual undercurrent of self-satisfaction.”

This theme of dangerous and destructive social pressure is one that Lewis addresses on several occasions. His essay entitled “The Inner Ring,” for example, sounds the alarm against social pressure: “Unless you take measures to prevent it, this desire is going to be one of the chief

motives of your life, from the first day on which you enter your profession until the day you are too old to care.”

He expands upon this theme in several of his fictional works. In *The Silver Chair*, Eustace Scrubb discovers Jill Pole crying—Jill was running from “them,” the inner ring of bullies who controlled her school’s social structure. Together, Jill and Eustace escape into Narnia and begin their adventures. In *That Hideous Strength*, Mark Studdock, an aspiring academic at a fictional college that feels a lot like Oxford or Cambridge, falls under the spell of an inner ring. Through their influence and his hunger to be in the inner circle, Mark is drawn deeper and deeper into a dark, diabolical plot.

Another comment of note in this letter is Screwtape’s dictum: “All mortals turn into the thing they are pretending to be.” Lewis sees this as a powerful principle for good and for ill. In *Mere Christianity*, he suggests that those of us who desire to grow spiritually, even if we don’t feel very holy or righteous, should pretend that we are anyway, for if we do this, eventually our play acting will become a reality. Lewis explains, “Do not waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if your loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more.”

Lewis here is functioning as our spiritual guide; again he wants us to know that choosing to do what is right whether we feel like it or not, shapes our souls in ways that are conforming us to the image of Christ.