

Screwtape Letters Commentary
Letters 11-20
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Letter 11

Who would ever think that humor could be used as a demonic tool? Evidently, Lewis thought so; he gives it a good deal of attention in letter 11.

As the letter opens, Wormwood receives affirmation from Screwtape because the patient's new friends (mentioned in the previous letter) are "thoroughly reliable people; steady, consistent scoffers and worldlings who without any spectacular crimes are progressing quietly and comfortably towards Our Father's house. You speak of their being great laughers."

Screwtape enumerates various sources of laughter: "Joy, Fun, the Joke Proper and Flippancy." The exposition of each type of humor is worth the read in this letter, especially if you haven't given humor much thought. What Screwtape likes about humor is the pride the English take in it. Humor can be used destructively as a means of excusing shameful acts or providing a screen for cowardice and cruelty. He explains, "A thousand bawdy, or even blasphemous, jokes do not help towards a man's damnation so much as his discovery that almost anything he wants to do can be done, not only without the disapproval but with the admiration of his fellows, if only it can get itself treated as a Joke."

Lewis was part of the Oxford social set and no doubt had occasion to see all the different shades of humor in action among students and professors. While he knew that humor could be diabolical, Lewis placed a high value on friendship and enjoyed meeting and sharing laughter with a very special social set who called themselves the Inklings, an informal group of over a dozen friends, including J.R.R. Tolkien, who were busy writing and publishing in the 1940s and '50s. They met twice a week, Thursday evenings in Lewis's rooms at Magdalen College and Tuesday mornings at the Eagle and Child pub. Over smoking pipes and pints of ale, they shared lots of stories, laughs, and "wheezes." Lewis was described by friends as someone with a hearty laugh and a twinkle in his eye. Colin Durez, in *The A-Z of C. S. Lewis*, wrote, "To his close friends in the Inklings club...Lewis was the jovial life and soul of the party, puffing on his pipe, swilling his theology down with the best bitter or cider, delighting in a good joke or pun."

Letter 12

In letter 11, we learned about the diabolical dangers of humor and laughter. It is sobering to think that demons can take something wonderful and use it as a means of damnation. In letter 12, we learn about another unsettling dimension of the diabolical: the power of mundane and trivial choices.

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis considers the way that small, daily choices either conform us to the image of Christ or de-form us from it:

Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature. . . Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.

A key diabolical strategy is to hide the eternal significance of our small daily choices. Screwtape explains, “[The patient] must not be allowed to suspect that he is now, however slowly, heading away from the sun on a line which will carry him into the cold and dark of utmost space.”

Another danger we must be conscious of is our inherent allergy to God that benumbs us. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned, the thought of God has made us uncomfortable. Like them, we all have a “vague cloud of half-conscious guilt.” The result is that we want to be with God, but at the same time, we don’t. We know we are supposed to say our prayers, but any excuse to avoid praying is welcome. We attend church, but it becomes a boring habit rather than a spiritually energizing experience. The demons can easily tempt us into doing nothing so that we live in a mentally and spiritually numb state. This numbness is “strong enough to steal away a man’s best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why.”

Screwtape eagerly teaches Wormwood to wield the power of the mundane because

“[i]t does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. 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.”

Lewis fully apprehends the power of the mundane and the trivial and does us a great service by calling our attention to it.

Letter 13

Letter 13 begins with good news. For a while, it looked like Wormwood was winning the day and the patient was succumbing more and more to the power of evil. However, in this letter, we find that God steps in and extends a truly saving grace, which “amounts to a second conversion—and on probably a deeper level than the first.” God truly saves us from evil and delivers us from temptation.

It is fair to say that one benefit of reading the *Screwtape Letters* is that not only do we gain insight into how the demons tempt and harass us, but Lewis also gives us insights into the way God works in our lives. There are two wonderful examples of God’s providence in this letter: God loves to bless us with pleasure and God wants to enrich and strengthen our sense of self.

First, Screwtape rebukes Wormwood for allowing his patient two pleasures: “[Y]ou first of all allowed the patient to read a book he really enjoyed, because he enjoyed it and not in order to make clever remarks about it to his new friends.” And then, horrors of horrors, “you allowed him to walk down to the old mill and have tea there—a walk through country he really likes, and taken alone.”

The pleasures the patient experiences are known to be two that Lewis also enjoyed. He loved to walk through the English countryside with friends for several days at a time on holiday and spend the night in rooms that were available at English country pubs. And Lewis loved to read for pleasure, not just because he was an academic. You can read about Lewis’s love of reading in a rather difficult book he wrote, *An Experiment in Criticism*, in which he explains, “In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. . . . Here as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.” He adds, “[L]iterary people are always looking for leisure and silence in which to read and do so with their whole attention.” Lewis reminds us that God is the author of pleasure and he wants us to learn about and to enjoy what he has made.

Screwtape further rebukes Wormwood because the pleasures allowed the patient to experience a healthy sense of self. That this is a problem may come as a surprise, as Jesus told his disciples they must deny themselves to take up their crosses and follow him. Lewis makes the point in *The Problem of Pain* that a wrong sense of self and self-will is our fundamental problem, and this is what Jesus meant in what he said to his disciples. Lewis writes, “[T]o surrender a self-will inflamed and swollen with years of usurpation is a kind of death.”

But there is more. The “self” is a great gift of God. Screwtape knows about the wonder of this sense of self: “When [the Enemy] talks of their losing their selves, He only means abandoning the clamour of self-will; once they have done that, He really gives them back all their personality, and boasts (I am afraid, sincerely) that when they are wholly His they will be more themselves than ever.”

One other item to call to attention in this letter is the value of action. This idea was broached in a previous letter and will come up again in future ones. Screwtape says, “Let him do anything but act. No amount of piety in his imagination and affections will harm us if we can keep it out of his will. . . . [A]ctive habits are strengthened by repetition but passive ones are weakened. The more often he feels without acting, the less he will be able ever to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel.”

Letter 14

Humility arises as a subject in letter 14 because of Screwtape’s alarm over the patient beginning to understand his spiritual limitations. Instead of making great resolutions, the patient is just hoping, by God’s grace, to make it through the next day. According to Screwtape, this is a sign that the patient is starting to develop humility, something Screwtape deems “very bad.”

There is some humor in Screwtape’s advice on how to subvert humility. One way is to befoul the patient by encouraging him to be proud of being humble. Screwtape advocates “smuggling into

his mind the gratifying reflection, ‘By jove! I am being humble.’” This approach has limited value because eventually the patient, too, sees the absurdity of such a response, so Screwtape warns, “But don't try this too long, for fear you awake his sense of humour and proportion, in which case he will merely laugh at you and go to bed.”

From Screwtape, we get a wonderful picture of what godly humility is all about. It is not to think less of yourself, rather it is not to think of yourself at all! To illustrate this, Screwtape says, “The Enemy wants to bring the man to a state of mind in which he could design the best cathedral in the world, and know it to be the best, and rejoice in the fact, without being any more (or less) or otherwise glad at having done it than he would be if it had been done by another.”

God wants us to use our talents to their fullest and enjoy them. True humility involves not self-denigration, but a proper sense of self-love in that we love ourselves because God loves us. As God spoke through Jeremiah for all God's people, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness” (Jeremiah 31:3).

Letter 15

Screwtape notes that there is a lull in the war and, therefore, the patient's anxiety is understandably reduced. Since the demons love it when we live in either “foolish confidence or tortured fear,” he encourages Wormwood to look for another way to turn up the heat and heighten the patient's anxiety. While inducing us to be stuck in the pain of the past is a good diabolical tactic, even better is encouraging our fear of, or even hope for, the future. Screwtape likes the future, especially because it “inflames hope and fear.” He continues, “[W]e want a man hag-ridden by the Future—haunted by visions of an imminent heaven or hell upon earth.... We want a whole race perpetually in pursuit of the rainbow's end, never honest, nor kind, nor happy *now*” (emphasis added).

Lewis was an astute observer of culture and knew firsthand the intellectual climate of the mid-20th Century, one in which the Western world uniquely focused on the future, as seen through the lenses of evolution and other current philosophical systems. In his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes how he moved through materialism, idealism, and other then-current philosophies to become, finally, a Christian and to discard false hopes. As he considered his spiritual journey, he saw in those philosophies more than merely intellectual activity. In them, he also perceived diabolical activity that created false hope. Accordingly, Screwtape says that is why demons have encouraged “schemes of thought such as Creative Evolution, Scientific Humanism, or Communism, which fix men's affections on the Future.”

As we read about the future from Screwtape's point of view, we learn that it is spiritually healthy to be industriously engaged in the present while preparing, not merely for the future, but for eternity:

The humans live in time but our Enemy destines them to eternity....He would therefore have them continually concerned either with eternity (which means being concerned with Him) or with the Present—either meditating on their eternal union with, or separation

from, Himself, or else obeying the present voice of conscience, bearing the present cross, receiving the present grace, giving thanks for the present pleasure.

When pondering heaven and eternity, we are close to what I believe to be the very heart of Lewis's understanding of life as a longing for Joy, which he attributed to something beyond this world. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, "Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world." That hunger for, not the future, but for eternity, is what the devils are desperate to suppress.

Letter 16

In letter 16, Screwtape returns to the Church, a subject that he introduced in letter 2, and suggests a number of ways to use it to ensnare Wormwood's patient. First of all, it is much better for the patient to "church hop" rather than to settle into one congregation. Screwtape says, "Surely you know that if a man can't be cured of churchgoing, the next best thing is to send him all over the neighbourhood looking for the church that 'suits' him until he becomes a taster or connoisseur of churches."

Screwtape likes it best when, rather than going to the local parish church in which attendance is based on proximity, we choose a church based on personal preference. It's fair to say that the demons have been very successful. A cursory examination of the landscape of the modern church reveals scores of denominations, showing how divided and conflicted Christianity has become. And with all the differences, members have become critical of each other, and each church has become a "common cause" church—just what Screwtape wants.

Screwtape also prefers that the pastors of churches abandon the common lectionary—preselected topics and readings that have been used for centuries—and make sermon choices and scripture selections based on the pastor's personal interest. Consider the pastor of Wormwood's patient as Exhibit A: "In order to spare the laity all 'difficulties' he has deserted both the lectionary and the appointed psalms and now, without noticing it, revolves endlessly round the little treadmill of his fifteen favourite psalms and twenty favourite lessons." Again, what Screwtape prefers has become "normal" in much of Christendom. Like the "parish" principle, lectionary readings are strange to a majority of those attending church today.

It was out of concern for the conflict and differences Lewis observed in churches that he wrote what was to become his popular book, *Mere Christianity*, voted one of the most significant Christian books of the 20th Century. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis articulates common essentials of the Christian faith. He felt that focusing on the conflicts and differences among denominations was an impediment to spreading the Good News of the Gospel to non-believers. He wanted to do the opposite. More than differences, there is a fundamental unity that Christians share across all denominations. Lewis wrote, "It is at her centre, where her truest children dwell, that each communion is really closest to every other in spirit, if not in doctrine. And this suggests that at the centre of each there is something, or a Someone, who against all divergences of belief, all differences of temperament, all memories of mutual persecution, speaks with the same voice."

Letter 17

Gluttony is the subject of letter 17. When we think of serious sins that the devils can use to trip us up, gluttony is certainly not one of the first that comes to mind. There is a reason for this that Screwtape reveals: “One of the great achievements of the last hundred years has been to deaden the human conscience on that subject, so that by now you will hardly find a sermon preached or a conscience troubled about it in the whole length and breadth of Europe.”

Why gluttony? Remember, it is not only the dramatic sins that put us in spiritual danger but also the day-to-day, mundane sins. I tend to think of a glutton as a person who eats too much, but we find out from Screwtape that there are different dimensions to gluttony, not merely of excess but also of delicacy. For example, the patient’s mother has been seduced into a form of gluttony that seeks not too much food, but just a little food, prepared in just the right way. She can never be satisfied and this leads to a “daily ill temper.” And there is Wormwood’s patient, who is an example of a typical male who is not so much inclined to delicacy as he is to vanity. In this manifestation of gluttony, men want to proudly announce which are the best restaurants that prepare food in just the right way. What we discover from Screwtape is that gluttony is about the preoccupation with food in the wrong way, be that through excess, restriction, or finickiness.

One of the complicating dangers of gluttony is that it predisposes us to other sins, such as sensuality, lust, pride, and just plain self-centeredness. Gluttony is one of the classic seven cardinal or deadly sins, a list developed by the early church as a guide to holy living. Lewis takes a brief but helpful look at all seven, devoting a chapter to each in *Mere Christianity*.

Pondering gluttony, I like to think the opposite of a glutton is a godly connoisseur—one who learns to enjoy and savor good food because it is a gift from God.

Letter 18

In letter 18, Screwtape says that the demons consider the issue of sex a bit of a “yawn,” but it is, nevertheless, a fruitful area for temptation. Since demons are only spiritual, they don’t understand the physical side of life, including sex. In this letter, Lewis reframes how we think about “being in love” as a basis of marriage in a number of ways. In *The Four Loves*, he writes about the four Greek words for love and addresses, in more detail, *eros*, the subject of this letter.

What Screwtape likes to take advantage of, is God’s expectation about sex: “abstinence or unmitigated monogamy.” He points out that abstinence has been difficult for humans ever since the Fall, and since the Romantic movement, “being in love” has become the only culturally acceptable basis for marriage in Europe and America. Since “being in love” is primarily a feeling, it does not provide a strong bond for marriage. We are inclined to move from one relationship to another, depending on how we feel, and such sexually promiscuous relationships outside of marriage are spiritually polluting.

Through Screwtape, we gain a deeper look into sex from God’s perspective. Sex is not merely for reproduction, nor merely an experience of romantic feelings--it has a spiritual dimension.

Copulation, the act of intercourse, according to the Apostle Paul, makes a couple “one flesh.” In other words, sex is a means of sharing one’s self with another self. Screwtape thinks this is ridiculous. In hell, the self is supreme and each self longs to consume others by means of competition. Screwtape says, “‘To be’ *means* ‘to be in competition.’” In contrast, the mystery of the Trinity clearly shows it is not the consumption of other selves but the surrender and service to another self that is the true act of love. We see this as Jesus surrenders to the Father and the Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus. Love is at the heart of God and God meant it to be our hearts as well.

One further insight about marriage in this letter—a principle that has been brought up before by Screwtape—is that “actions produce feelings.” Ironically, from a positive perspective, this means that marriage choices based on common values and common goals and even arranged marriages may not start with feelings of love but may, over time, produce them.

Letter 19

In letter 18, the focus was on sex, with love in the background. In letter 19, the focus is directly on love. We are reminded that the demons don’t understand the concept of love. Their self-centeredness makes it impossible for them to understand, as Screwtape demonstrates when he says, “We know that [the Enemy] cannot really love: nobody can: it doesn't make sense. If we could only find out what He is *really* up to! Hypothesis after hypothesis has been tried, and still we can't find out.”

We also learn that prior to creation, Satan and God had conflicting ideas about the issue of love, and we learn that God’s love is a primary reason why Satan revolted. Further, we also learn that God knew, before he even created the world, that the cross would be necessary (II Timothy 2:9. Revelation 13:8). Screwtape says, “When the creation of man was first mooted...the Enemy freely confessed that he foresaw a certain episode about a cross.” Lewis addresses the cross and eternity in *The Problem of Pain*, where he writes, “God saw the crucifixion in the act of creating the first nebula.” Lewis’s point is that love is costly and God, in his love, was willing to pay the price in the very act of creation.

Love, from a Satanic perspective, can be helpful or unhelpful. Like all other good gifts from God, when it is abused, it draws people away from God, and that which draws people away from God is good; that which draws people toward God is bad. Concerning love, Screwtape says, “Like most of the other things which humans are excited about, such as health and sickness, age and youth, or war and peace, it is, from the point of view of the spiritual life, mainly raw material.”

And finally, on the topic of love, Screwtape urges Wormwood to encourage his patient to develop a “love” relationship that can be exploited for spiritual damage. We will read more about this in ensuing letters.

Letter 20

In letter 20, Screwtape continues to guide Wormwood in the diabolical uses of sexuality. At the beginning of the letter, we find that the temptations to lust have failed due to God's gracious guidance and protection. Consistently resisted, lust was losing its power. However, as usual, Screwtape assures Wormwood, as he did in letter 2 after his patient had become a Christian, that all is not lost. The demons have a multitude of weapons and ways to ensnare us.

The demons from the deepest part of hell, "the Lowerarchy," have used fashion and fads to manipulate sexual taste for centuries. Under the guidance of the devils, "popular artists, dressmakers, actresses and advertisers...determine the fashionable type for each age." It's always changing. From beards and masculine men to feminine dandies, all have come in and out of style. Women have been encouraged to be boyish flappers or in contrast, buxom babes. In every age, the demons seek to create an unrealistic image that is mostly illusory and, therefore, will fail to satisfy.

Concerning sex, Screwtape invites Wormwood to look deeper into his patient's heart. Wormwood will discover that males have two embedded stereotypes of what they want in women: "[H]e is haunted by at least two imaginary women—a terrestrial and an infernal Venus"—or what others might characterize as a saint or a sinner or, perhaps, a witchy woman or a Madonna. One is radiant and wholesome. The other is crafty, sexy, and even cruel. Either type of woman can be used to erode a marriage and be the source of marital pain.