

Screwtape Letters Study Guide

Preface

“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.”

1. What are the two errors in which man can view the notion of devils?
2. Why does C.S. Lewis caution us about the state of belief and disbelief in the supernatural?

Letter 1 – Reason vs Jargon & Distraction

Summary

Screwtape redirects Wormwood from using reason and the lure of materialistic friends to using everyday distractions and sensory pleasures to pull the patient away from God. Screwtape discusses how mankind has emerged from a period where his thoughts and belief systems would guide his actions to his current position of no longer searching for The Truth, but rather defining his own existence on what makes him feel good.

1. Screwtape explains that the “patient” doesn't think of doctrines as primarily true or false, and advises the use of Jargon over argument as a way of keeping him from the Church. Why does the devil fear reason?
2. Can you think of ways jargon can deter Christian zeal? What are some distractions that can turn us from God and how can reason be used to bring us back to the faith? (¶1)
3. What is the “abominable advantage of the Enemy's” Screwtape alludes to in paragraph 3? How can this bring us comfort in our daily struggles with temptation? Read Hebrews 2:14-18 for help.
4. Read Luke 10:39-42. How do we let everyday distractions draw us away from our time with God?

Letter 2 – Distractions in the newly engaged Christian

Summary

The patient has recently become a Christian. Screwtape advises Wormwood to get his patient to focus on trivial matters – the oddities of fellow parishioners, his disappointments in the Mass to keep his spirituality shallow and the virtue of humility from taking root.

1. Screwtape advises Wormwood to draw attention to the neighbors in the pew beside the patient; to have the patient concentrate on their poor singing, odd clothes or boots that squeak. How can disappointments with our fellow Christians turn us from Christ? How can we combat this?
2. How do you let your Church experience (poor homilies, friendliness or rudeness of parishioners, quality of music) distract you from the reality of Christ's presence in the Eucharist and your reason for attending Mass?
3. “In every department of life it marks the transition from dreaming aspiration to laborious doing” (§3) Why does God *allow* for ‘disappointments’ and spiritual dryness?

Letter 3 – Family, Annoying habits vs Christian Charity

Summary

Screwtape advises Wormwood to cooperate with Glucose, the demon working on the patient's mother, to deteriorate the mother/son relationship through a series of steps: keep the patient's mind focused on spiritual matters not Christian duty, keep the patient praying for his mother's sins, not her physical needs, generate exaggerated annoyance of the other while believing in one's own self-imposed righteousness, create a double standard by encouraging judgment and oversensitivity to the other's words and actions while expecting one's own words to be taken at face value, and finally, to create friction between mother and son concerning the son's recent conversion to Christianity.

1. Screwtape's advice is to keep to the patient prayers focused on the state of his mother's soul, rather than her rheumatism (§3). What are the 2 advantages he says will follow? What does this sort of prayer cause the patient to focus on?
2. How do we let the selfishness, irritations, and overbearing natures of others steal our peace?
3. What methods can we employ to grow in patience and charity? Read Matthew 4: 38-42, 1 Peter 2: 18-20 and Eph 4: 2-3 for guidance.

Letter 4 – Prayer

Summary

Screwtape reprimands Wormwood for the young devil's shifting of blame to Screwtape for his own failure to keep his patient from prayer. Screwtape then provides a lengthy discourse on 'prayer prevention and superficiality': don't let the patient engage in deep prayer, convince him that body position in prayer is irrelevant, keep prayers focused on self or some object, not God (prayers of petition versus prayers of praise or thanksgiving), and to direct prayers to be based on feelings not Truths.

What is Prayer?

"Great is the mystery of Faith!...This mystery, then requires that the faithful believe in it (Apostles Creed), that they celebrate it (Liturgy), and that they live from it in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God. This relationship is prayer." - Catechism 2558.

"For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy."- St. Therese of Lisieux.

1. Screwtape advises Wormwood to keep his patient from prayer altogether. This is in direct contrast to God's instruction in the following Scriptural verses: Lk 18:1, Col 4:2, 1 Thes 5:16-18. Discuss God's counsel.
2. What kinds of prayer does Screwtape want to avoid?

3. Screwtape says, “that whatever their bodies do affects their souls.” Catechism 2562 says, “Whether prayer is expressed in words or gestures, it is the whole man who prays.” How does a prayerful posture affect your prayers? Read Catechism 2559 for a hint.

4. Screwtape says, “Whenever they are attending to the Enemy Himself, we are defeated” (§3). To what do you think he is referring?

5. Why is “this real nakedness of the soul in prayer” (§4) essential to the devout Christian life?

Letter 5 & 6 – War, Worry & Fruit in Suffering

Summary – Letter 5

World War II has emerged on the European front. At first glance, Wormwood appears “delirious with joy” by the anguish of his patient over the war. Screwtape, however, advises Wormwood to “not allow any temporary excitement to distract [him] from the real business of undermining faith and preventing the formation of virtues.” Although the violence of war breeds pain and suffering (to the delight of the demons), it can also turn people toward God for consolation and preparation for death (engagement in the Sacraments).

1. What does Screwtape say is, “that wine which is the reward of all our labours?” (§1)

2. When Screwtape says, “if we are not careful, we shall see thousands turning in this tribulation to the Enemy,” (§1) to what is he referring? Why is there value in trials, tribulation and suffering? 2 Cor. 12:6-10

Summary – Letter 6

Screwtape is delighted that the uncertainty of military service may cause Wormwood’s patient fear and anguish. He advises Wormwood to direct his patient to fear not the objects of his fear (his personal crosses) but fear itself. Screwtape also encourages Wormwood to divert his patient’s attention away from God and godliness while seeking to transfer his (patient’s) hatred of war onto his colleagues. Finally, by keeping the attainment of all virtue in the realm of ‘Fantasy’, the patient will not be able to make virtue ‘habit-forming’.

1. In letter 6, Screwtape says, “there is nothing like suspense and anxiety for barricading a human's mind against the Enemy.” Why does the devil like worry and why does it separate us from Christ? Read Matt 6: 24-34 to hear what Jesus says about worry.

2. Explain the demons' "spiritual law" (§3) in keeping human attention from God.

3. In the last paragraph of Letter 6, Screwtape speaks of the concentric circles of Will/Heart, Intellect and Fantasy. What can we learn from his instruction to move all virtues to the circle of fantasy? Read James 2: 14-17 for insight here.

