

Screwtape Letter #1—Questions

And so it begins, but notice that it's not at the beginning. Screwtape is responding to a letter that Wormwood wrote—but we don't get to read. In fact, - we never get to read what Wormwood writes—much as we never really get to “hear” what Satan “says” to us.

We are going to jump right in—so pay close attention to the characters!



My dear Wormwood,

I note what you say about guiding your patient's reading and taking care that he sees a good deal of his materialist friend. But are you not being a trifle naïve? It sounds as if you supposed that argument was the way to keep him out of the Enemy's clutches.

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Don't waste time trying to make him think that materialism is true! Make him think it is strong, or stark, or courageous—that it is the philosophy of the future. That's the sort of thing he cares about.

1.1 What is the relationship between Screwtape and Wormwood?

1.2 Why does Screwtape call the man “the patient”?

The trouble about argument is that it moves the whole struggle on to the Enemy's own ground.

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By the very act of arguing, you awake the patient's reason, and once it is awake, who can foresee the result?

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Your business is to fix his attention on the stream. Teach him to call it 'real life' and don't let him ask what he means by 'real'.

1.3 Who is "The Enemy" and who is "Our Father Below"?

1.4 What does Screwtape mean by "real life"?

1.5 Even as he tells Wormwood to keep the patient focused on "real life" - he is worried that "argument" - thinking & reasoning—will move the struggle to The Enemy's ground. By the very act of arguing, you awake the patient's reason; Why would Screwtape be worried about this?

Remember, he is not, like you, a pure spirit. Never having been a human (oh that abominable advantage of the Enemy's!) you don't realise how enslaved they are to the pressure of the ordinary. I once had a patient, a sound atheist,

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He knew he's had a narrow escape and in later years was fond of talking about "that inarticulate sense for actuality which is our ultimate safeguard against the aberrations of mere logic:. He is now safe in Our Father's house.

1.6 There is a statement that Screwtape makes which is very telling—it gives an insight into something he is worried about:

Remember, he is not, like you, a pure spirit. Never having been a human (Oh that abominable advantage of the Enemy's!)

What is he talking about and why is this an advantage for God?

You begin to see the point?

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Above all, do not attempt to use science (I mean, the real sciences) as a defence against Christianity. They will positively encourage him to think about realities he can't touch and see

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Do remember you are there to fuddle him. From the way some of you young fiends talk, anyone would suppose it was our job to teach!

Your affectionate uncle

SCREWTAPE

1.7 Having already considered “reasoning” in 1.5, notice the statement **Above all, do not attempt to use science (I mean, the real sciences as a defence against Christianity.** This sounds so backwards from what many people believe to be the case. How is it that science—which is so often used to try to disprove that God even exists—can be something that these devils are so afraid of?

The Screwtape Letters #2—Questions

Things sounded rather well for Screwtape and Wormwood at the end of the first letter. Letter #2 doesn't start quite so well. Not well at all—from their point of view.



My dear Wormwood,

I note with grave displeasure that your patient has become a Christian. Do not indulge the hope that you will escape the usual penalties; indeed, in your better moments,

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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. All the habits of the patient, both mental and bodily, are still in our favour.

2.1 We see a bit about how the workers in Hell are treated when they make mistakes—and the expectations about desired punishments for mistakes. Contrast that with how God treats his followers when we make mistakes.

One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy.

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Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like the body of Christ and the actual faces in the next pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on the Enemy's side. No matter.

2.2 Why does Screwtape encourage Wormwood to focus on church members that are his patient's neighbors he has previously avoided?



Your patient, thanks to Our Father Below, is a fool. Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune,

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Never let it come to the surface, never let him ask what he expected them to look like. Keep everything hazy in his mind now, and you will have all eternity wherein to amuse yourself by producing in him the peculiar kind of clarity which Hell affords.

2.3 Ouch! Now we see a stark example of what Screwtape thinks of Wormwood's patient—of people—of us. Again, contrast this with God's view of us.

2.4 Take the comparison further and compare what Screwtape writes to how God views us when we first start to become believers—or even just want to get to know about Him.

Work hard, then, on the disappointment or anticlimax which is certainly coming to the patient during his first few weeks as a churchman. The Enemy allows this disappointment to occur on the threshold of every human endeavour.

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The Enemy takes this risk because He has a curious fantasy of making all these disgusting little human vermin into what He calls His 'free' lovers and servants—'sons' is the word He uses, with His inveterate love of degrading the whole spiritual world by unnatural liaisons with the two-legged animals.

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But also, remember, there lies our danger. If once they get through this initial dryness successfully, they become much less dependent on emotion and therefore much harder to tempt.

2.5.1 What "anticlimax" does Screwtape expect the patient will experience?

2.5.2 According to him, why does God allow Christians to go through such experiences?

2.5.3 Have you faced these experiences in your own spiritual life? What has resulted?

I have been writing hitherto on the assumption that the people in the next pew afford no rational ground for disappointment

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At bottom, he still believes he has run up a very favourable credit-balance in the Enemy's ledger by allowing himself to be converted, and thinks that he is showing great humility and condescension in going to church with these 'smug', commonplace neighbours at all. Keep him in that state of mind as long as you can.

Your affectionate uncle

SCREWTAPE

2.6 Screwtape claims that Wormwood's patient is not fully convinced of his own sinfulness:

He has not been anything like long enough with the Enemy to have any real humility yet.. At bottom, he still believes he has run up a very favourable credit balance in the Enemy's ledger by allowing himself to be converted...

Read Genesis 6:5; Psalm 19:12; Jeremiah 9:23, 24; 17:9; Luke 18:9-14; Romans 3:19. How do these passages speak to the issues of:

1 our ability to know fully the extent of our sin

2 the meaning of true humility

3 whether or not we can "run up a very favourable credit balance" with God?

Screwtape Letter #3 – Questions

Screwtape is on a roll again –full of advice for his nephew on how to affect his patient.

Let's see just how good the tactics might be. (or not)



My dear Wormwood,

I am very pleased by what you tell me about this man's relations with his mother. But you must press your advantage. ... build up between you in that house a good settled habit of mutual annoyance; daily pinpricks. The following methods are useful.

3.1) Notice how Screwtape says: The Enemy will be working from the centre outwards. Contrast this to how Satan works in our lives.



Keep his mind on the inner life. ...You must bring him to a condition in which he can practise self-examination for an hour without discovering any of those facts about himself which are perfectly clear to anyone who has ever lived in the same house with him or worked in the same office.

3.2) Why is Screwtape encouraging Wormwood to keep his patient focused on:

a) the most advanced and spiritual things

b) self-examination?

It is, no doubt, impossible to prevent his praying for his mother, but we have means of rendering the prayers innocuous. ... I have had patients of my own so well in hand that they could be turned at a moment's notice from impassioned prayer for a wife's or son's 'soul' to beating or insulting the real wife or son without a qualm.

3.3) Can prayers really be rendered "innocuous (harmless)?"



When two humans have lived together for many years it usually happens that each has tones of voice and expressions of face which are almost unendurably irritating to the other. Work on that. And, of course, never let him suspect that he has tones and looks which similarly annoy her. As he cannot see or hear himself, this is easily managed.

3.4) What is Screwtape's goal here – what does he mean by that first sentence – and how far can this go?



In civilised life domestic hatred usually expresses itself by saying things which would appear quite harmless on paper (the words are not offensive) but in such a voice, or at such a moment, that they are not far short of a blow in the face. ... Once this habit is well established you have the delightful situation of a human saying things with the express purpose of offending and yet having a grievance when offence is taken.

3.5) We can see the progression here, from step 1 to 4. Talk about this progression – and how easy or hard it might be to imagine it happening.

Finally, tell me something about the old lady's religious position. Is she at all jealous of the new factor in her son's life?—at all piqued that he should have learned from others, and so late, what she considers she gave him such good opportunity of learning in childhood? Does she feel he is making a great deal of 'fuss' about it—or that he's getting in on very easy terms? Remember the elder brother in the Enemy's story?

Your affectionate uncle

SCREWTAPE

3.6) Screwtape 's refers to "the elder brother". He doesn't say which one, but there area few to pick from:

Cain and Abel – in Genesis 4

Jacob and Esau – also in Genesis, chapters 25 +

The parable of the lost son – In Luke 15

(BTW – I have a more detailed look at the "non-prodigal son" – the "other" brother. Click [here](#) to see it.)

Consider one or more of these, and relate them to what Screwtape is saying – and how they are still relevant today.

Screwtape Letter #4 – Questions

Screwtape is unhappy – about prayer – and about blame.



My dear Wormwood,

The amateurish suggestions in your last letter warn me that it is high time for me to write to you fully on the painful subject of prayer. ... It also reveals an unpleasant desire to shift responsibility; you must learn to pay for your own blunders.

4.1) Notice how Screwtape says: **It also reveals an unpleasant desire to shift responsibility; you must learn to pay for your own blunders.** Contrast this with what Jesus says (and did) to (for) us.



The best thing, where it is possible, is to keep the patient from the serious intention of praying altogether. ... That is exactly the sort of prayer we want; and since it bears a superficial resemblance to the prayer of silence ... It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out.

4.2) Screwtape encourages getting the patient to either react against childhood experiences or to assume a level of prayer far in advance of what he is really prepared for. These both make sense – they will make it harder for the patient to focus on God , instead focusing on the act of trying to pray. But then he says **It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out.** Why would keeping things out of our mind be their goal?

If this fails, you must fall back on a subtler misdirection of his intention. ... and never let them suspect how much success or failure of that kind depends on whether they are well or ill, fresh or tired, at the moment.

4.3) Screwtape says Teach them to estimate the value of each prayer by their success in producing the desired feeling; and never let them suspect how much success or failure of that kind depends on whether they are well or ill, fresh or tired, at the moment. Looking at 1 Kings 18 and 19, consider how being emotionally drained and tired impacted Elijah.



But of course the Enemy will not meantime be idle. Whenever there is prayer, there is danger of His own immediate action. ... you will be helped by the fact that the humans themselves do not desire it as much as they suppose. There's such a thing as getting more than they bargained for.

4.4) What is the importance of his thought – But whatever the nature of the composite object, you must keep him praying to it—to the thing that he has made, not to the Person who has made him. You may even encourage him to attach great importance to the correction and improvement of his composite object, and to keeping it steadily before his imagination during the whole prayer. For if he ever comes to make the distinction, if ever he consciously directs his prayers 'Not to what I think thou art but to what thou knowest thyself to be', our situation is, for the moment, desperate.

Why would it be so important to keep the patient focused on some object representing God – whether real or imaginary – rather than to “the Person”?

If he ever actually prays to God – the Person – why is the situation so desperate for the devils?