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Battlefield of the Mind: Examining Screwtape’s Preferred Method

by William O’Flaherty

William O’Flaherty hosts EssentialCSLewis.com which features the *All About Jack* podcast that spotlights authors of books related to Lewis (and recorded several podcasts on site at the 2016 Taylor Colloquium). In 2016 his first book *C.S. Lewis Goes to Hell: A Companion and Study Guide to The Screwtape Letters* was published. ScrewtapeCompanion.com is a website to support the book.

In C.S. Lewis’s masterful work *The Screwtape Letters*, the reader is given a peek into the perspective of how the devils work at interfering in a person’s life. It is Wormwood’s first assignment and he is receiving guidance from his uncle Screwtape on how to make life miserable for his patient. While the book is very short and lighthearted, much can be learned about understanding how the enemy of one’s soul might work to hinder our own life. What follows is an examination of what Screwtape calls their most effective method in their toolbox of diabolical techniques. This material is adapted from and an expansion of content from my book *C.S. Lewis Goes to Hell: A Companion and Study Guide to The Screwtape Letters*.

Conventional wisdom is that devils interfere in our life by whispering in our ears. That is, they try to put bad thoughts into our minds. However, when you read the fourth letter from Screwtape, he proclaims their preferred method is “keeping things out”¹ of a person’s mind. This comment is found when Wormwood is told that humans fail to recall that “bodily position”² in prayers actually make a difference. Thus, Screwtape warns that the patient should not think about this, such truth must be kept out of his thoughts.

This is not an isolated confession about what might be considered an overlooked weapon. Twenty-four of the letters, plus the follow-up essay, “Screwtape Proposes a Toast” makes some reference, or at least suggests this preferred method. However, this does not mean they never try to put thoughts in a person’s mind, it’s just they focus more on preventing a person from thinking about something that would be spiritually helpful.

1 Letter 4, second paragraph.

2 Letter 4, second paragraph.

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Previously I gave a talk where the first twelve letters were examined. It was recorded and posted on the All About Jack Podcast.³ The following material picks up where that address ended and examines the next five letters.

LETTER 13

In the twelfth letter Wormwood's "patient" had slowly drifted from his faith and was mostly unaware of what was occurring. However, in the thirteenth the patient experienced "a repentance and renewal"⁴ and this upset Screwtape. He tells Wormwood to "prevent his [patient from] doing anything" and to "keep it out of his will."⁵ The reference to "will" is a call back to an illustration described in the sixth letter that I elaborate on in the Topical Glossary section of my book *C.S. Lewis Goes to Hell*.⁶

LETTER 14

In the fourteenth letter the patient's growing faith is a major concern and Wormwood must do as much as possible to control the damage. Near the end of the letter he is advised to "conceal from the patient the true end of Humility."⁷ However, it is revealed that God also uses "keeping things out" as well. Wormwood is told that one of God's aims is to "get the man's mind off the subject of his own value altogether."⁸ Screwtape admits a person can keep on improving their abilities and not consider where they might land "in the temple of Fame."⁹ But he counters this by telling Wormwood that he must endeavor to "try to exclude this reminder from the patient's consciousness at all costs."¹⁰

3 That program can be heard at <http://tinyurl.com/hgg8o3v> or <http://allaboutjack.podbean.com/e/shining-light-on-screwtape%e2%80%99s-darkest-secret-william-oflaherty>.

4 Letter 13, first paragraph.

5 Letter 13, fifth paragraph.

6 This part of *C.S. Lewis Goes to Hell* lists words used in various places in *The Screwtape Letters* and in addition to provide all the letters they are in, also a short summary of what is shared in the various places is included. A free 20 page PDF of the book is available at ScrewtapeCompanion.com.

7 Letter 14, fourth paragraph.

8 Letter 14, fifth paragraph.

9 Letter 14, fifth paragraph.

10 Letter 14, fifth paragraph.

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However, the situation is so desperate for Wormwood that Screwtape advises using the “putting in” method to regain the advantage. Because humility is such a problem, Screwtape asks “have you drawn his attention to the fact”¹¹ that he is being humble? Also in the letter he brings up a mindset the devils have used to lessen the impact of humility, which is by advocating a false notion about it. His example reminds Wormwood that “humans have been brought to think that humility means pretty women trying to believe they are ugly and clever men trying to believe they are fools.”¹² Also, in the final paragraph of this letter, Screwtape underscores the fact that while God wants people to not wonder about their own value (and risk being prideful), the devils want us to focus our minds on questions of what our value is.

LETTER 15

In the fifteenth letter Wormwood is instructed on the nature of time for humans and how understanding it can help him be a more effective tempter. The “keeping out” is found in the third paragraph where Screwtape proclaims “our business is to get them [humans] away from the eternal, and from the Present.”¹³ This is in direct opposition to what God stated as wanting people to “attend chiefly to.”¹⁴ Thus, Wormwood needs to keep out of his patient’s mind anything dealing with eternity or present things. Additionally, to help achieve this objective, the devils can make people ponder the Future. This is an effective method because it “inflames hope and fear” and is “least like eternity.”¹⁵ Wormwood is reminded of the usefulness of this because “nearly all vices are rooted in the future.”¹⁶ As noted earlier with the word “will,” the terms related to time are explained in the Topical Glossary of my book.

LETTER 16

In the sixteenth letter Screwtape warns his nephew that it is a concern that his patient is faithfully attending a single church. Then

11 Letter 14, second paragraph.

12 Letter 14, fourth paragraph.

13 Letter 15, third paragraph.

14 Letter 15, second paragraph.

15 Letter 15, third paragraph.

16 Letter 15, third paragraph.

after elaborating on a couple of churches Wormwood should get him to visit, Screwtape mentions something other tempters have been successful with regarding their patients. That is, removing “from men’s minds what that pestilent fellow Paul used to teach about food and other unessentials.”¹⁷

LETTER 17

Finally in the seventeenth letter Wormwood is told about a unique form of gluttony. He learns that Glucose is in charge of his patient’s mother and that she is a slave (but doesn’t know it) to “gluttony of Delicacy.”¹⁸ The initial “keeping out” is in the first paragraph and has to do with hiding this fact from her. Screwtape explains, “She would be astonished...to learn that her whole life is enslaved to this kind of sensuality, which is quite concealed from her.”¹⁹ Then a few sentences later he notes that “she never recognises as gluttony her determination to get what she wants”²⁰ because the amount of what she wants is so small and costs less than the serving already given to her.

Wormwood is given another example of how effective Glucose is at his work. Screwtape points out that when God tries to make his patient’s mother aware of her obsession with food, “Glucose counters it by suggesting”²¹ something else to get her mind off the point their Enemy (God) is making. It’s interesting to note that here God is trying to put something into someone’s mind and the demon is putting something else in as a means to keep something out!

Screwtape then informs Wormwood that his patient, because he is a male, is less likely to be tempted to his mother’s type of gluttony. Instead, food can be used secondarily as a means for “attacks on chastity.”²² Specific to chastity, Wormwood is told to “never let him notice the medical”²³ benefits of it. Not noticing is the “keeping things out” method.

17 Letter 16, fifth paragraph.

18 Letter 17, first paragraph.

19 Letter 17, first paragraph.

20 Letter 17, first paragraph.

21 Letter 17, second paragraph.

22 Letter 17, fourth paragraph.

23 Letter 17, fourth paragraph.

CONCLUSION

What I've done in this paper is to support my thesis that the preferred method the devils use is not "putting things in" to a person's mind, but "keeping things out." Screwtape clearly states this favored approach in the fourth letter. In fact, nearly all the letters have some direct or indirect mention of this tool in the battlefield for the mind.

Because a previous talk dealt with the occurrences for the first dozen letters, this paper focused on letters thirteen through seventeen. Each had at least one example of "keeping things out." Additionally, it was pointed out that Screwtape isn't against Wormwood whispering into the ear of his patient to suggest or "put in" a thought. In fact, sometimes in order to keep something out another thought might have to be put in, as noted in the last letter explored.

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