

The Screwtape Letters. Lesson 1.

Letter 1: On Best Keeping a Nonbeliever a Nonbeliever

In this letter, Screwtape speaks to the question of how best to keep Wormwood's "patient" from belief in God. We learn that Wormwood has been taking care that the patient spends plenty of time with "his materialist friend," presumably in the conviction that his arguments against the existence of God and/or of the reality of spiritual things will keep him safely far from conversion. But Screwtape disagrees concerning the wisdom of this course. "It sounds as if you supposed that *argument* was the way to keep him out of the Enemy's clutches," he writes.

Read the first paragraph.

What is Screwtape's reasoning on why Wormwood should avoid reliance on "argument"?

What was, and ought to be, the connection between "thinking and doing" and what does he say has become of this linkage in the lives of modern people?

Why is it good, from Screwtape's point of view, for people's "having a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing together inside their head"? How could this be so? Why is it important for Christians to cultivate a unified, rooted, and all-embracing worldview?

"Don't waste time trying to make him think that materialism is *true!*" he writes. "Make him think that it is strong or stark or courageous – that it is the philosophy of the future." What is his point? What is the insight given here about why people so often believe what they believe? Discuss the role of feelings in people's everyday beliefs.

Read the second paragraph.

"The trouble with argument is that it moves the whole struggle onto the Enemy's own ground." Why? How? In its place, he says, Wormwood should fix the patient on "practical propaganda" and "the stream of immediate sense experiences." Why?

Read the third paragraph.

Here, Screwtape provides a funny, but at the same time chilling example, of how one fellow on the threshold of some true spiritual insight was drawn away from it by the pleasant distraction of thinking of lunch, followed by a stream of other tangible events, which he then identifies gratefully as "real life." Eternity lost by a whim of distraction, in the thought of a ham sandwich! Does this ring true to you? How might our Enemy use distraction to undermine us in the course of our life?

Read the fourth paragraph.

"Keep pressing him on him the *ordinariness* of things," Screwtape advises. Why? How might it be harmful to our lives always to keep the familiar before our eyes, crowding out the unfamiliar and unseen?

Screwtape gives the following advice: "Above all, do not attempt to use science (I mean, the real sciences) as a defense against Christianity." Why? "If he must dabble in science, keep him on economics and sociology." Ouch! Why? Finally, what "general idea" is it best of all for Wormwood to keep cultivating in the mind of the patient, which will serve as a powerful barrier to any conversion? Why is this so?