

The Screwtape Email– Matthew 6:13, 4:1-11

Explanations and apologies

In 1941 a series of letters appeared in an Anglican newspaper, *The Guardian*, in the UK from a senior devil, by the name of Screwtape, offering advice to his nephew, Wormwood, a junior devil, in how to secure the damnation of his first ‘patient’. The letters were – as many of you will know – a work of satirical fiction by C.S. Lewis addressing several theological issues, particularly about temptation and resistance to it. In 1942, they were published as a book, *The Screwtape Letters*, and became a best-seller, putting Lewis on the cover of *Time Magazine* in September 1947.

Lewis wrote the book – as he explained to his brother in a letter – to “be both useful and entertaining... to give all the psychology of temptation from the other point of view.”

This morning’s sermon is written in the same style and the same spirit.

But I wanted to make one thing very clear. It – like Lewis’s work – is a work of satirical fiction. When the letters appeared in *The Guardian*, one angry clergyman failed to understand the satire and cancelled his subscription, saying, “much of the advice given in these letters [seems] not only erroneous but positively diabolical.” And when I bought a new copy of the book recently in a bookshop that will remain nameless the young man serving me marvelled that Lewis had known so accurately what demons say to each other. The words, “But it’s fiction!” were on the tip of my tongue, but I resisted temptation (or failed in correcting error – you can decide) and agreed that it was a very inspiring book.

The second thing I want to do is apologise because – while my sermon and Lewis’s book are both satirical fiction – his work is the original and by far the best. And I am not the first but one among many who have borrowed the style. Wikipedia lists ten works narrated by fictional devils and, sadly, even my idea of updating to email has been taken. But we will press on!

**From: Chief Devil Resources Officer, Screwtape [mailto:screwtape@TempHQ.com]
To the Devils, Junior Devils and Temp-prentices in the Canberra Legion**

It is obvious from the Legion’s quarterly results that many of you lack even the most rudimentary understanding of your core competency, namely temptation. No doubt many of you will come whining to me in your performance reviews that it was the fault of the college, that you weren’t trained effectively, under the late and now devoured, Dr Slubgob. But, can I warn you now, that this will not be an acceptable excuse and unless these results improve sharply by next quarter many of you will share Slubgob’s fate.

As none of us can afford any more failures then, I am setting out – in this email – some basic instruction on temptation that you all claimed to know at the outset of your Tempterships.

Firstly, when the topic of temptation – or the thoughts of any specific temptation - arises in your client’s mind (and please remember to refer to them as clients – no longer as patients - in your reports. We used to speak of curing souls – of course we meant something far more culinary than medicinal by it – but the humans, thanks to much good work done by your predecessors, are now such mercenary beasts that the language of commerce, of selling and buying, has been officially adopted). But I digress. When the subject of temptation arises, you must immediately press upon your client that temptation is, yes, a significant issue, but for *other* people!

One their writers, Satre, wrote, *"Hell is other people."* Of course, he claims he meant something slightly different, but most humans think like this, that sin and failure are found in other people – not in themselves! The fact that you are working on a group that are part of the same church should make this task even easier. Next time they mumble their way through the words of that prayer (you know the infernal prayer I mean) and get to, "Lead us not into temptation...", if they must think about it at all, encourage them to quickly notice that so-and-so in the pew opposite seems to be wearing a new coat. Did she really need it? Isn't that excessive? Even greedy? Or if there are requests for help in the bulletin, let them think favourably of their past contributions and unfavourably of the contributions of others. How people aren't committed these days. How they don't give any time to the church. How slothful they are. And you should have a field day with gluttony – concern about the best restaurants and the best chefs and award winning this or that is at its height. And of course, there is always ground to be gained in the areas of pride or lust.

The key thing is to avoid them asking the Enemy for help with their own temptations, to always keep them focused on the struggles of others. Never so that they might help or pray for each other - hell forbid! - but always so they feel a little superior to their companions. This sense of superiority, this sensitivity to other's faults, will whittle away at the love they hold for each other. It will distract them from hearing tones of the Enemy's voice - or words the Enemy would speak – when they talk together. It will stop them seeing the Enemy's features in those they meet. It will blind them to recognising the Enemy's impulses in the actions of their fellow believers. They will think they and they only are serving him rightly and then they will be well on the way to Our Father's House below.

The second temptation stratagem, again which you should already mastered, is that, should your client begin reflecting on where temptation is making inroads in his or her own life, they must be lulled into thinking that temptation is about trivialities. If any of them have a cartoon image in their heads of a little devil in tights on one shoulder and a rather ineffectual angel on the other, use this! Do not let them stop to think why the Enemy tells them to pray to avoid it. That 'temptation' in that prayer and in the Enemy's own experience might not only refer to daily bread and butter of temptation, but also to the great moments of crisis in human life, and to how it can feed the powerful evil spirit of an age or ideological movement or a nation; that this is why the Enemy rejected Our Father's offer to grant him his precious Kingdom then and there. No, keep him chuckling at the red tights and the slipping halo!

Some of you are still employing very outdated approaches to trivialise your clients' understanding of temptation. It was last century that we exploited their association of worldliness with certain locations (cinemas or bars for example) or certain things (cigarettes or wine or even coffee). But these days, even more conveniently, they do not identify worldliness with anything at all! If money is not the root of all evil, only the love of it, then they tell themselves (or we tell them) that it does not matter how much they accumulate. And if worldliness is not specific things, but an attitude, that should be applied, or rather, could be applied, then we can usually befuddle them enough that it is never applied at all!

However, if you completely fail in these first two strategies and your client not only begins to examine their own life, but also begins to realise the diabolical power and reach of sin, then you are in a perilous position indeed! Do not think that you will receive any leniency from me if your client should be eternally lost to us. But all is not lost -yet.

One of the hardest things for your clients to acknowledge is that they are needy creatures. That they were not created to live alone, but to live in what one of the Enemy's servant's calls 'an unchildish dependence' on him. Why they are so reluctant, I do not know. I have been accused of heresy before, of saying that the Enemy really loves the hair-less bipeds he has created! Of course, that cannot be true, and eventually we will get to the bottom of this so-called love; but he invites them to give themselves to him willingly – not to overpower and devour them – but in order that they might be even more truly themselves, in order that he may call them his sons and daughters. But they remain reluctant to ask for help and this gives us an opportunity.

In some of them – and this may be easy considering who attends this particular church – your approach should be to suggest that, while temptation does affect them and infects the world around them, they are clever enough or well-read enough or experienced enough to avoid the pitfalls. This kind of self-confidence might give us the cover we need for a time, though I regret to say the Enemy often creates situations in such people's lives that regretfully cause them to wake up to themselves.

In others, some of you – damnation does happen! - may have laid an adequate grounding in sloth that when faced by temptation they will decide it is too big, too hard, and their meagre efforts too small to make any real difference. Little do they know that the Enemy hears any request for help and any small act of resistance will strengthen them and make things harder and harder for us in future.

Finally, and you may not think this is so, but in any church, there are also those who truly believe that the situation they are in – that they are facing – is one the Enemy will not touch. That they are alone in the desert. Little do they know. Little do they know! The hosts of those unbearable creatures – those unfallen angels of light – are poised at the edge of their present suffering to come and help them. Little do they know that the Enemy will never abandon them. That the wilderness is not about winning, not even about knowing the way, but knowing he is theirs and they are his. As that vile turncoat, that vermin Paul wrote, *"...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

I do need to tell you that you must prevent your clients from knowing this - at all costs.

Finally, I will be expecting better results in the next quarter. The road to heaven is paved with quarterly results such as this. and you know the penalties for such outcomes.

Chief Devil Resources Officer, Screwtape