

The Screwtape Letters

Letter 4 – Sincere Prayer

Summary

Screwtape is insulted by Wormwood's last letter to him on the topic of prayer in which Wormwood attempts to assign blame for his mistakes on Screwtape. As a result, Screwtape provides a more in depth discussion on the subject of prayer telling Wormwood that he should keep his patient from seriously intending to pray at all. If that fails, Wormwood should misdirect the focus of the patient's prayers so they are only about himself or an object rather than another person.

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. - Screwtape

Discussion Questions

1. Screwtape encourages Wormwood to keep his patient from praying altogether. How does this contrast with God's direction in the following verses: Luke 18:1; Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18? (¶2)
2. What is Lewis referring to in the comment about the "parrot-like nature" of prayers? (¶2)
3. Read Matthew 6:5-9. How does Jesus respond to this same question?
4. What is the difference between producing in ourselves "a vaguely devotional mood in which real concentration of will and intelligence have no part" as opposed to what Screwtape refers to as a "prayer of silence" that is used by those very advanced in the Enemy's service? (¶2)
5. Read John 4:24. What sort of balance must take place between our emotions (or spontaneous prayer) and more formal prayers like what we find in the Disciple's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-15?
6. How does 1 John 1:9 relate to praying for forgiveness and our desire to feel forgiven?
7. What does Screwtape mean when he writes that humans don't "start from a direct perception of Him"? (¶4)
8. Screwtape likes imaginary pictures of God as a focus for prayer. What mental images of God do we create in our mind?
9. Why does Screwtape say that we do not desire the "real nakedness of the soul" as much as we suppose? (¶4)
10. What does God say in Ecclesiastes 5:4 about making bold claims in our prayer life?

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Letter 5 – War

Summary

Screwtape begins this letter by once again reprimanding Wormwood for his naivety and his excitement about a “new war” in Europe. Screwtape explains that war can be very entertaining in so much as it brings about hatred and violence, but it can also drive masses of people to God. Screwtape warns his nephew not to get caught up in the enjoyment only to lose his patient to God.

When I see the temporal suffering of humans who finally escape us, I feel as if I had been allowed to taste the first course of a rich banquet and then denied the rest. It is worse than not to have tasted at all. - Screwtape

Discussion Questions

1. Screwtape warns Wormwood not to be overly confident in “terror-pictures of the future” and “self-pitying glances” of the past that Wormwood has used to scare the “patient”. Read Luke 9:61-62. How does Jesus use the plow to illustrate our attention to our past and future? (¶1)
2. What is Screwtape’s attitude toward war? Does it surprise you? (¶1)
3. What is the “real business” that Wormwood is to be about? Provide examples of how our faith is diabolically assaulted and the development of virtues are hindered? (¶1)
4. Why does Screwtape say it does not make any difference whether Wormwood’s patient is “an extreme patriot or an ardent pacifist”? (¶1)
5. What is the “blockade” that God is imposing on Screwtape and the other demons? (¶2)
6. Read Romans 5:3-5; 1 Peter 5:10; and James 1:2-4. How does God use suffering in the life of a Christian?
7. U.S. Military Chaplain William Thomas Cummings in a field sermon during the Battle of Bataan in 1942 is quoted as saying, “There are no atheists in foxholes.” What does this saying mean? Would Screwtape agree or disagree and why? (¶2)
8. From Screwtape’s perspective, why is it better if humans died in a nursing home rather than a war? (¶2)
9. What does Screwtape mean by “a faith which is destroyed by a war or a pestilence cannot really have been worth the trouble of destroying”? (¶3)

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Letter 6 – Focus

Summary

Military service seems inevitable for Wormwood's patient, and Screwtape affirms the decision to cultivate anxiety and fear about the future. Wormwood's first goal for the patient is to divert his attention away from God and the good he should be doing. Secondly, Wormwood should seek to transfer the patient's hatred for the war on to his everyday neighbors.

He wants men to be concerned with what they do; our business is to keep them thinking about what will happen to them. - Screwtape

Discussion Questions

1. Read Mark 4:18-19. How can suspense and anxiety "barricade" a person's mind against God? How does Satan benefit by keeping us anxious about things that may never happen? According to Philippians 4:6, what should be our approach to anxiety? (¶1)
2. What does Screwtape mean when he writes, "It is your business to see that the patient never thinks of the present fear as his appointed cross, but only of the things he is afraid of"? Read Luke 9:23. What does it mean to pick up your cross daily and follow Christ? What insight can we gain from this about the nature of anxiety and the way it misleads us? (¶2)
3. "We have nothing to fear, but fear itself." This famous line used in the inaugural address of Franklin D. Roosevelt was given during the depths of the depression in 1933. Why does Screwtape encourage Wormwood to divert the patient's mind "from the thing feared to fear itself"? (¶3)
4. What is this "general rule" Screwtape is referring to? How can Satan use this strategy in our prayer life? (¶3)
5. Why does Screwtape write that getting the people to hate distant enemies is disappointing? Why is it easier to hate those who are close and to be charitable toward those who are far away? (¶4)
6. How does Screwtape suggest getting the patient to the point where his malice is real and his benevolence is imaginary? (¶5)
7. Draw and explain below the concentric circles that Screwtape says are the three levels to a human being. At what point in the circle does Lewis say that a person is authentically living the Christian life? (¶5)
8. What does Screwtape mean when he insists that Wormwood "must keep on shoving all the virtues outward till they are finally located in the circle of fantasy, and all the desirable qualities inward toward the Will"? (¶5)