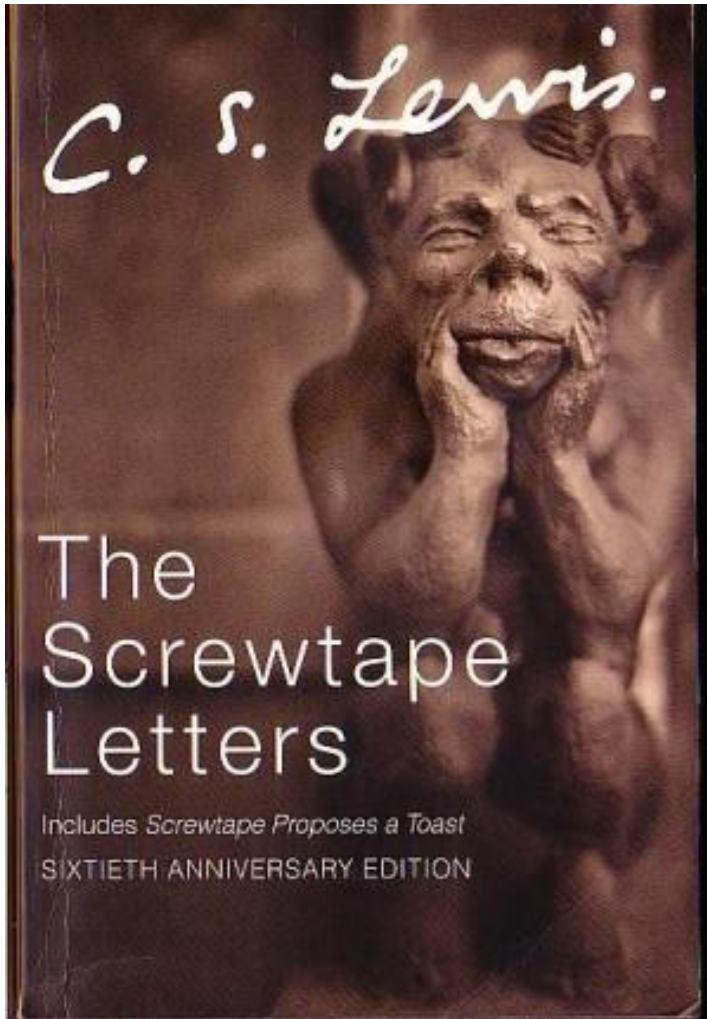


Session 11:

“Screwtape Letters”: C. S. Lewis on Temptation



“The only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy. It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. **Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one**—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”

--C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1942),
“Letter XII”.

Elevenses with C. S. Lewis

**“The Screwtape Letters”:
*C. S. Lewis on Temptation***

Session 11

December 10, 2017

Plan for the day

- Where Lewis got the idea for *Screwtape*
- Relevant Scriptures on the devil
- A sampling of letters from *The Screwtape Letters*
- Secular psychology on temptation
- The motivation for *The Great Divorce*
- The basic story and a first encounter
- A discussion with three commentators
- A sampling of encounters from *The Great Divorce*
- Concluding comments on temptations and choices

Where the idea for *Screwtape Letters* came from

- Saturday evening, July 20, 1940, Lewis was listening to a speech by Hitler on the radio.
- Lewis writes to Warnie: “I don’t know if I’m weaker than other people, but it is a positive revelation to me that *while the speech lasts* it is impossible not to waver a little. I should be useless as a schoolmaster or a policeman. Statements which I *know* to be untrue all but convince me, at any rate for the moment, if only the man says them unflinchingly.”
- The next day, Sunday, July 21, 1940 while at a communion service: “Before the service was over—one could wish these things came more seasonably—I was struck by an idea for a book which I think might be both useful and entertaining. It would be called *As one Devil to Another* and would consist of letters from an elderly retired devil to a young devil who has just started work on his first ‘patient’. The idea would be to give all the **psychology of temptation** from the *other* point of view.”

Some relevant Scriptures

- Matthew 4:1-11 the temptations of Christ
- John 8:44 “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”
- I Peter 5:8 “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”
- Ephesians 6:11-19 “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.”
- James 4:7 “Submit yourselves then to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”

The Letters

- Letter 1: “In attacking faith, I should **be chary of argument**. Arguments only provoke answers. What you want to work away at is the mere unreasoning *feeling* that ‘that sort of thing can’t really be *true*’.”
- Letter 7: The High Command has directed us “to **conceal ourselves**.” “When they believe in us, we cannot make them materialists and sceptics.” “If any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise in his mind, suggest to him a picture of something in red tights, and persuade him that since he can’t believe in that he therefore cannot believe in you.”
- Letter 8: “Humans are amphibians—half spirit and half animal. As spirits they belong to the eternal world, but as animals they inhabit time. This means that their bodies, passions, and imaginations are in continual change. Their nearest approach to constancy is undulation—the repeated return to a level from which they repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks.” “Now it may surprise you to learn that in His efforts to get permanent possession of a soul, **the Enemy relies on the troughs** even more than on the peaks; some of His special favorites have gone through longer and deeper troughs than anyone else.”

The Letters (cont.)

- Letter 9: “The trough of dullness or ‘dryness’ though which your patient is going at present.. needs to be properly exploited.”
- ***What temptations does Screwtape recommend in the “trough” periods of human undulation?***
- “Trough period of the human undulation provide excellent opportunity for all sensual temptations, particularly those of sex.”
- “You are much more likely to make your man a sound drunkard by pressing drink on him as an anodyne when he is dull and weary than by encouraging him to use it as a means of merriment among his friends when he is happy and expansive.”
- “Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense on the Enemy’s ground...” *Why?*
 - “He made the pleasures.”
- “Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent [reminiscent] of its Maker, and least pleasurable. An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula.”

Secular psychology on temptation

Self-control – the moral muscle



Roy F. Baumeister outlines intriguing and important research into willpower and ego depletion

The capacity of the human mind to alter its own responses is one of the wonders of nature. It is a vital foundation for culture, progress, achievement, morality and individual success. This article provides an overview of a research programme that has been pursued for the past two decades. It has led the researchers to bring back the Victorian notion of willpower as a limited supply of energy that is used for control and self-discipline – and several other important phenomena, including making decisions. Self-control processes link together mind with body, present with future and past, resisting temptation with making choices, and a remarkably wide range of daily activities with each other.

What is the most important and desirable trait? What would you most wish your child to have, or your rivals to lack? What trait is most important for helping people lead happy, successful and useful lives? Decade after decade, psychologists keep coming up with the same two answers. One is intelligence. The other is self-control. Nothing else comes close.

Early in my career I studied self-control (Baumeister, 1970, 1988)



Participants, after skipping a meal, had their hunger further stoked by seating them in front of a tray of freshly baked cookies

- Self-control is like a muscle that gets tired.
 - After resisting temptation, people gave up more quickly on a subsequent task.
 - When depleted, people are more willing to overeat, lie, cheat, steal, give in to sexual temptation, blame others more, and be more aggressive.
- Self-control, also like a muscle, can get stronger over time with exercise.

The Letters (cont.)

- Letter 12: “The safest road to Hell is the gradual one.”
 - *Why might that be?*
- Letter 17: Gluttony—the whole life of the patient’s mother “is **enslaved to this kind of sensuality**, which is quite concealed from her by the fact that quantities involved are small. But what do quantities matter, provided we can use a human belly and palate to produce querulousness [a complaining attitude], impatience, uncharitableness, and self-concern?”
- Letter 27: Prayer—“Don’t forget to use the ‘Heads I win, tails you lose’ argument. If the thing he prays for doesn’t happen, then that is one more proof that **petitionary prayers don’t work**; if it does happen, he will, of course, be able to see some of the physical causes which led up to it, and ‘therefore it would have happened anyway,’ and thus a granted prayer becomes just as good a proof as a denied one that prayers are ineffective.”

The Letters (cont.)

- Letter 29: Cowardice—“The danger of inducing cowardice in our patients, therefore, is...
 - *What might that be?*
- [The danger is] “that we produce real self-knowledge and self-loathing, with consequent repentance and humility. The undisguisable issue of cowardice or courage awakes thousands of men from moral stupor.”
- “This, indeed, is probably one of the Enemy’s motives for creating a dangerous world—a world in which moral issues really come to the point. He sees as well as you do that courage is not simply *one* of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.” “Pilate was merciful till it became risky.”
- Letter 30: Uses of War—“Probably the scenes he is now witnessing will not provide material for an *intellectual* attack on his faith...But there is an attack on the emotions which can still be tried. It turns on making him feel, when first he sees human remains plastered on a wall, that this is ‘what the world is *really* like’ and that all his religion has been a fantasy.”
- “Wars and poverty are ‘really’ horrible’; peace and plenty are mere physical facts about which men happen to have certain sentiments. Your patient, properly handled, will have no difficulty in regarding his emotion at the sight of human entrails as a revelation of reality and his emotions at the sight of happy children or fair weather as mere sentiment.”

“Screwtape Proposes a Toast”

(published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, December 1959;
subsequently included as Part Two of *The Screwtape Letters*)

- “The College cellar still has a few dozen of sound old vintage *Pharisee*. You know how this wine is blended? Different types of Pharisee have been harvested, trodden, and fermented together to produce its subtle flavor. Some were all rules and relics and rosaries; others were all drab clothes, long face, and petty traditional abstinences from wine or cards or the theatre. Both had in common their self-righteousness and the almost infinite distance between their actual outlook and anything the Enemy really is or commands.”
- “Nowhere do we tempt so successfully as on the very steps of the altar.”

The Great Divorce: A Dream (1945)

C. S. LEWIS

THE GREAT DIVORCE

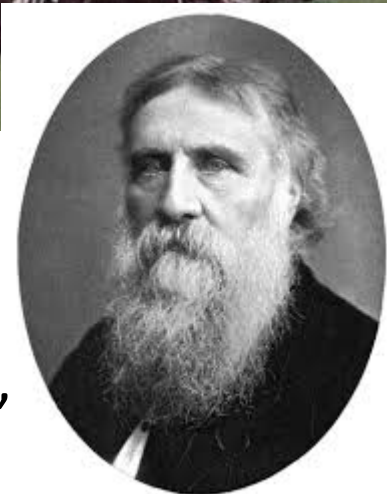
A DREAM

'No, there is no escape.

There is no heaven with a little of hell in it—
no plan to retain this or that of the devil in our hearts or our
pockets. Out Satan must go, every hair and feather.'

GEORGE MACDONALD

"No, there is no escape. There is no heaven with a little of hell in it—no plan to retain this or that of the devil in our hearts or our pockets. Out Satan must go, every hair and feather."



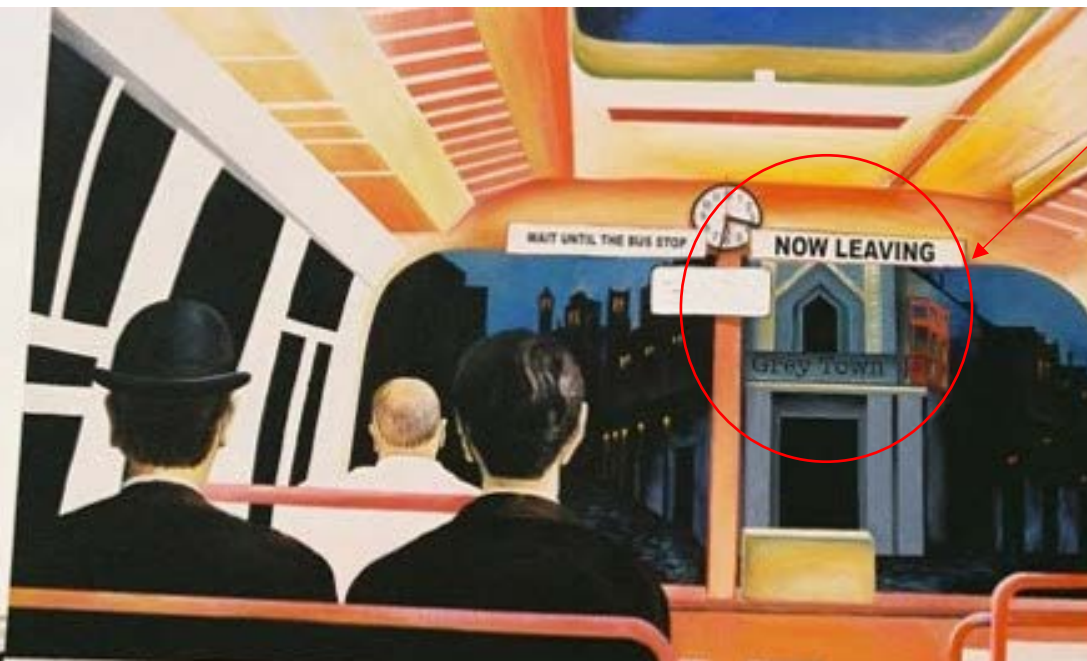
Introduction to *The Great Divorce*: Lewis' Preface and an earlier sermon

- Regarding the motivation for writing
 - “Blake wrote the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.... based on the belief that reality never presents us with an absolutely unavoidable ‘either-or’ ... This belief I take to be a disastrous error.”
- Regarding what *not* to make of the book
 - “I beg readers to remember that this is a fantasy. It has of course—or I intended it to have—a moral. But the trans-mortal conditions are solely an imaginary supposal: they are not even a guess or a speculation at what may actually await us. The last thing I wish is to arouse factual curiosity about the details of the after-world.”
- *The Great Divorce* provides illustrations of an idea in “The Weight of Glory”
 - “The dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations.”

Setting the stage for the story



- Lewis, in dream, is standing in a bus queue in the “grey town”.
- People are constantly arguing and moving to get further away from others.



NOW LEAVING GREY TOWN

- With the others, Lewis boards the wonderful bus, which is colored and blazing with light
- Quarrels boil over, knives are drawn, pistols fired.

Bus arrives at the Valley of the Shadow of Life, where radiant solid people come to meet the ghost-like passengers



- Travel is a flight not a drive, and they arrive at a much more real place: “the light and coolness that drenched me were like those of summer morning.”
- The grass doesn’t bend beneath the feet of the disembarking passengers.
- But the people coming to meet them are massive and radiant, and “The earth shook under their tread as their strong feet sank into the wet turf.”

The first encounter (Ch. 4): Len (one of the bright people) and the Big Man or the Big Ghost (one of the bus passengers from Grey Town)

- When Len greets the Ghost, the Ghost immediately asks “What about poor Jack, eh?”.
- Len readily admits he murdered Jack but says “it is all right now”.
- The Big Ghost can’t understand how he could be “put below a bloody murderer” and consigned to Grey Town.
- The Big Ghost refuses all offers to stay, rejecting “Bleeding Charity” and instead insisting on his “rights”.

Temptation

- Our commentators:
 - Jon Stoltzfus
 - Linda Vik
 - Jason Rivera

Other encounters in *The Great Divorce*

- Ch. 5: An Anglican bishop's pride in his intellect prevents him from accepting the reality of God.
- Ch. 7: A skeptic who doesn't want to be "taken in" thinks all those in control are uncaring; and, he refuses to change.
- Ch. 8: A woman who thinks she will look bad by comparison with the solid people rejects the idea that she will soon not care what others think if she will just begin the journey up the mountain.
- Ch. 9: Lewis meets George MacDonald, his guide, who says in response to Lewis' questions about Heaven and Hell:
 - "Both processes begin before death. The Blessed will say 'We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven,' and the Lost, 'We were always in Hell.' And both will speak truly."
- When Lewis asks why souls choose to go back to the grey town, his Teacher explains:
 - "Milton was right. The choice of every lost soul can be expressed in the words 'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.' There is always something they insist on keeping even at the price of misery. There is always something they prefer to joy."
- This principle is illustrated by: an attractive woman; teachers who want to share all they know; planning ghosts; materialistic ghosts; artists (poets, musicians, painters) who get drawn away from the love of beauty to the love of performance; and others who are no longer interested in God but what they say of Him.

Other encounters in *The Great Divorce* (cont.)

- Ch. 10: A widow who wants her husband back, whom she had domineered and pushed to make more money: “I must have someone to do things to.”
- Ch. 11: A grieving mother who argues Mother-love “is the highest and holiest feeling in human nature,” and views God only as a means of being re-united with her son.
 - But she is told “no natural feelings are high or low, holy or unholy, in themselves. They are all holy when God’s hand is on the rein. They all go bad when they set up on their own and make themselves into false gods.”
 - “Love, as mortals understand the word, isn’t enough. Every natural love will rise again and live forever in this country: but none will rise again until it has been buried.”
 - This principle is illustrated with lower passions (e.g. sensuality) as well which can be transformed once given up and submitted to death

Ch. 14: A debriefing

- Clutching his Teacher, Lewis says, “These conversations between the Spirits and the Ghosts—were they only the mimicry of choices that had really been made long ago?”
- MacDonald replies that “Ye saw the choices a bit more clearly than ye could see them on Earth: the lens was clearer.”
- MacDonald warns Lewis “Ye are only dreaming. And if ye come to tell of what ye have seen, make it plain that it was but a dream. Give no poor fool the pretext to think ye are claiming knowledge of what no mortal knows.”
- Lewis has a vision of a Sunrise about to come when they will sing “Sleepers awake! It come, it comes, it comes.”
- Then Lewis awakes in a cold room, by his study table, with “the clock striking three, and the siren howling overhead.”

A concluding thought from *The Great Divorce*

- ‘There are two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “*Thy* will be done.” All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell.’

The Teacher in *The Great Divorce*, Ch. 9

And a final warning from *The Screwtape Letters*

- “Nowhere do we tempt so successfully as on the very steps of the altar.”

Screwtape