



Thoughts from the Bible and Books

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The *Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis is a contemporary classic. It is a masterpiece of satire, creativity, and wisdom. In the book, Lewis pens an imaginary correspondence between an elder devil, Screwtape, and his apprentice nephew, Wormwood. Screwtape instructs his nephew in the finer points of deception and devilry in service to our Father Below (Satan) and in opposition to the Enemy (God). The *Screwtape Letters* isn't meant to give a biblical theology of demons, so much as insight into the human heart and why we are so easily deceived.

In February I spoke at SCF. My subject was why college students should be a part of a church. Rather than preaching a normal sermon I imagined what Screwtape might say to Wormwood to help him keep students away from church. The letter deals specifically with young people, but I trust it can be read with profit by any of us.

- Kevin DeYoung

My dear Wormwood,

It's been too long time since last I wrote. In my defense, however, it was dreadfully cold up above. How do humans endure such miserable conditions? But poor weather aside, please accept my insincerest apologies for the delay in finally putting pen to paper.

I trust that all is devious and devilish between you and your subject. You have a wicked reputation to keep up, you know. I am not an easy uncle to please, but my my, your efforts over the past several years have been, I must admit, rather impressive. True, high school is a particularly grand time for opportunistic spirits like ourselves—what with so many hormones and insecurities to work with. But these advantages do not detract from your work, which has been to date, exemplary.

Your teenage subject has all the usual paradoxes of American youth we like to see down here: rebellious, yet disinterested; slothful, yet impetuous; disrespectful to parents, yet a financially irresponsible drain on their resources; tolerant of religions he knows nothing about, yet fiercely intolerant of the one he knows best—that cursed religion of Jesus. All in all, a splendid few years my injurious Wormwood. Bravo!

And now your subject is enrolled in what the earth world calls college. I don't need to tell you what continuing advantages these universities afford us. Of course, our work is always in danger from the likes of evangelists and over zealous students. But thankfully, you'll encounter few humans in either of these two categories. No, on the whole, this college life is a wonderful opportunity for you Wormwood. You have always been a precocious evil one and now is the time to make good on your potential and finally earn your horns. As you are well aware, it is a graduation of sorts for us demons when we are awarded our horns (not unlike angels receiving their wings I suppose).

I am not one to gush, but your work heretofore has merited much applause from your affectionate uncle, and I dare say, from many other senior devils. We've heard of your human's foray into drinking and

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sex—just enough of both to feel good, but not too much to feel guilty. Remember what you learned in the tempter’s school: “the only good guilt is false guilt.” The last thing we want is real conviction and remorse. These will only provide a foothold for our Enemy Above.

Besides these obvious allurements, you’ve also managed, I hear, to entice quite an appreciation for the philosophy of Nietzsche, deconstructionism, and salacious video games. What a rare and excellent combination of vices.

It is because your work has proven so trustworthy over the last few years, that I now feel obliged to speak with you quite candidly about a matter of grave importance. It has come to my attention that your subject has attended on occasion, a Christian church. And to make matters worse, the rumor down here is that it’s been the same church nearly three weeks in a row. Have you forgotten our little rhyme? “If to church one must go, lead him to an empty show. And when all we can do is mettle, makes sure on one church he does not settle.”

Church attendance is bad enough, nephew, but consistent attendance at the same church spells almost certain doom for our cause. If your human persists in his church interest, you simply must devise some way to shuffle him around from congregation to congregation. See to it he never knows the people he is worshiping with. Keep reminding him of how rotten the music is over here, and how long the sermon is over there, and how bland the coffee at that other church.

College students are nothing if not critical. They are trained in it daily in their universities. Use this to your advantage, my dear boy. Above all else, if your human is positively determined to go to church, make sure he searches for naught but the perfect church, that way his search will end in vain and within a few weeks he will be fast asleep on Sunday morning, much to our Father’s delight.

Speaking of sleep, why, I must ask, is your patient retiring so early on Saturday evenings? You know how crucial it is to our Master’s plans that Saturday be a night of frolicking and carousing. And what is this I hear about your subject planning one of those dreadful Sabbaths for Sunday? You know

perfectly well how our Father Below insists on busyness at all costs and how terribly he depends on sleep deprivation for his work. It’s a well known fact among the higher ranks of devildom, that silly humans always look for us in the big things—death, accidents, spinning heads. They never expect that our work consists mainly in distraction and slumber. So why are you neglecting our demonic bread and butter? Your human absolutely must be awake late on Saturday, preferably into Sunday morning so that even if he manages to stumble into a church his senses will be so dull as to render the whole exercise pointless. And he must be positively lazy or otherwise occupied from noon on Friday through the entire next day so that all his work must be accomplished on Sunday, thus making church attendance next to impossible.

You will excuse me for my stern tone, but I cannot overstate the importance of this matter of church. Perhaps your youth prevents you from fully grasping the eternal significance of this issue. Heaven is at stake, my dear Wormwood. For hell’s sake, then, do something. Spirituality is one thing. God talk is allowable. Student “fellowships” as they call them are tolerable for a season. But church is absolutely out of the question.

Of course, it goes without saying some churches are our allies and not enemies. Dry, dusty churches. Entertainment churches. Social hall churches. Political party churches. Loveless, divisive churches. These are all wonderful. Our concern, and it is a deep concern, is with churches that act like churches, the ones that preach Christ and live out their blasphemous faith.

Such churches introduce many bad habits in our subjects. They become more thoughtful. They become more aware of our Enemy’s character and schemes. They become friends with each other—with people unlike them in situation and temperament. This can only bode ill for our work in the long run.

To be continued...