



Introduction: Reading *The Screwtape Letters* for Spiritual Formation

by Robert Moore-Jumonville

After my freshman year of college, forty-one years ago, my summer reading list included *The Screwtape Letters*, *Perelandra*, and *The Great Divorce*—all in preparation for Janet Knedlik’s celebrated British Christian Literature course. Ever since, C. S. Lewis has shaped my spiritual formation and Christian worldview. Having entered college as a card-carrying pagan for the sole purpose of playing soccer, Lewis’s books helped transform the morally chaotic and philosophically confused thought I grew up with into a well-ordered Christian worldview. As I have continued to read, teach, and write on Lewis over the years, the heart of his work increasingly seems to me to revolve around spiritual formation. That is how I’d like us to approach *The Screwtape Letters*, as spiritual formation.

Richard Rohr suggests that how we see determines what we see. With that in mind, I’d like to propose a somewhat radical way of approaching Lewis’s classic book.

3 ... 2 ... 1, your life is over. That’s it. “That’s it?!” Yes, it happened! “Really?!” Yes, you’re sure it’s over, but you’re not sure how. Or maybe you know “the how” all too well. You’ve been counting long minutes. Or you’ve been flirting with destruction. Still, it’s too soon; too short. Like the epitaph on the grave reading, “I expected this, but not yet.” With this moment of recognition, you look back on your life, and you wonder how it might have been different. Okay, so knowing what you know now, what would you have done differently if you could do it over? That’s our human story, mostly. We often live lives of quiet desperation, underachieving spiritually. We feel a tug toward greatness, but we tease out the tawdry. The unexamined life, that’s what we mostly seek out.

It is precisely this vantage, this view, that C. S. Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters* offers—the vantage of eternity. It’s not how the book begins, but it is how it ends. It’s not how our lives begin, but it is how they will all end—peering into eternity. And being peered into.

Most of what C. S. Lewis wrote assumes eternity as its starting point. He wants nothing to do with a modern materialism that treats life as a meaningless stream of natural cause-and-effect. Instead, Lewis directs our lives toward a destiny, or terminus; toward, not just an end, but a purpose. Moment by moment, choice by choice, we are becoming something, assures Lewis, a creature either more heavenly or more hellish. Unfortunately, we’re mostly blind to the process. Lewis intends to wake us up.

Thus, I propose we read the last chapter first, if you don’t mind spoiling the plot: because everything within the book hopes to open our eyes to the eternity standing right in front of us. As Hamlet suggests: “There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy, Horatio.” Heaven intersects earth. In the last chapter, the Patient sees “them”—the angels who have been a part of his life since birth—and, finally, he understands that they have always been there. In the first chapter, the devils are trying to distract the Patient from spiritual reality through the flow of natural material events in the street right in front of him.

But everything Screwtape says has to be inverted, right? Did your mother ever caution you about the bad influence of one of your grade school friends (as Mrs. Cleaver warned Wally about Eddie Haskell)? That might be comparable to what I’m suggesting. Almost everything Eddie said you could



simply reverse, in order to know what was good and right to do. Similarly, no matter what Screwtape recommends, we can benefit by simply inserting before it: “Do not do this . . .”. Thus, as we read and reread the book we grow increasingly aware of our shadow side—the temptations and ill tempers we have grown accustomed to allowing within ourselves. Those of you who have grown through spiritual direction know that a good spiritual director has the ability to help us see things about ourselves that we are mostly blind to. As Screwtape counsels Wormwood: “*You must bring him to a condition in which he can practice self-examination for an hour without discovering any of those facts about himself which are perfectly clear to anyone who has ever lived in the same house with him or worked in the same office*” (12). Lewis prompts us to more honest spiritual self-examination. What do you do when your roommate irritates you, when someone in your social set snubs you, when you’re tempted to throw in the towel, or give in to lust, or to feel conceit about your own work?

A gifted spiritual director helps us discern the movements of God’s Spirit within our lives. So let me propose that we consider the words of Uncle Screwtape as providing a reverse spiritual direction; or a kind of Ignatian prayer of Examen—which asks us to review our behavior with God beside us. Like biblical wisdom literature *The Screwtape Letters* teaches us to imagine what sort of creatures we are becoming. Lewis often gave excellent spiritual direction—first, through his BBC talks, then through his books, and also through the thousands of letters he penned to those who wrote him with comments or questions. Interestingly, about the time Lewis was writing *Screwtape* he began visiting a spiritual director. In 1940 he wrote to a friend expressing his desire to meet with a confessor and director. Lewis then met regularly with Fr. Walter Adams until the latter’s death in 1952.

As we begin our study, let’s keep in mind themes in the book that relate to our spiritual formation: Where do we see spiritual reality intersecting with the earthly part of our lives—touching material reality? Where do we experience God through the good things of his creation? What does God intend through human pleasure? How honest are we when it comes to the state of our souls and our relationship with God and others?

Our Reading Schedule:

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| 1. March 12-17, 2018 | Chapters 31, + 1-4. |
| 2. March 19-24, 2018 | Chapters 5-9 |
| 3. March 26-31, 2018 | Holy Week—No new reading assignment |
| 4. April 2-7, 2018 | Chapters 10-14 |
| 5. April 9-14, 2018 | Chapters 15-19 |
| 6. April 16-21, 2018 | Chapters 20-23 |
| 7. April 23-28, 2018 | Chapters 24-27 |
| 8. April 30-May 5, 2018 | Chapters 28-31 |