

THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS

by C. S. LEWIS

Letter # 29

“Understanding Fear, Cowardice, and Hatred”

MY DEAR WORMWOOD,

(0) Now that it is certain the German humans will bombard your patient's town and that his duties will keep him in the thick of the danger, we must consider our policy. Are we to aim at cowardice—or at courage, with consequent pride—or at hatred of the Germans? Well, I am afraid it is no good trying to make him brave. Our research department has not yet discovered (though success is hourly expected) how to produce *any* virtue. This is a serious handicap. To be greatly and effectively wicked a man needs some virtue. What would Attila have been without his courage, or Shylock without self-denial as regards the flesh? But as we cannot supply these qualities ourselves, we can only use them as supplied by the Enemy—and this means leaving Him a kind of foothold in those men whom, otherwise, we have made most securely our own. A very unsatisfactory arrangement, but, I trust, we shall one day learn to do better.

(1) Hatred we can manage. The tension of human nerves during noise, danger, and fatigue, makes them prone to any violent emotion and it is only a question of guiding this susceptibility into the right channels. If conscience resists, muddle him. Let him say that he feels hatred not on his own behalf but on that of the women and children, and that a Christian is told to forgive his own, not other people's enemies. In other words let him consider himself sufficiently identified with the women and children to feel hatred on their behalf, but *not* sufficiently identified to regard their enemies as his own and therefore proper objects of forgiveness.

(2) But hatred is best combined with Fear. Cowardice, alone of all the vices, is purely painful—horrible to anticipate, horrible to feel, horrible to remember; Hatred has its pleasures. It is therefore often the *compensation* by which a frightened man reimburses himself for the miseries of Fear. The more he fears, the more he will hate. And Hatred is also a great anodyne for shame. To make a deep wound in his charity, you should therefore first defeat his courage.

(3) Now this is a ticklish business. We have made men proud of most vices, but not of cowardice. Whenever we have almost succeeded in doing so, the Enemy permits a war or an earthquake or some other calamity, and at once courage becomes so obviously lovely and important even in human eyes that all our work is undone, and there is still at least one vice of which they feel genuine shame. The danger of inducing cowardice in our patients, therefore, is lest we produce real self-knowledge and self-loathing with consequent repentance and humility. And in fact, in the last war, thousands of humans, by discovering their own cowardice, discovered the whole moral world for the first time. In peace we can make many of them ignore good and evil entirely; in danger, the issue is forced upon them in a guise to which even we cannot blind them. There is here a cruel dilemma before us. If we promoted justice and charity among men, we should be playing directly into the Enemy's hands; but if we guide them to the opposite behavior, this sooner or later produces (for He permits it to produce) a war or a revolution, and the undisguisable issue of cowardice or courage awakes thousands of men from moral stupor.

(4) 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, which means, at the point of highest reality. A chastity or honesty, or mercy, which yields to danger will be chaste or honest or merciful only on conditions. Pilate was merciful till it became risky. It is therefore possible to lose as much as we gain by making your man a coward; he may learn too much about himself! There is, of course, always the chance, not of chloroforming the shame, but of aggravating it and producing Despair. This would be a great triumph. It would show that he had believed in, and accepted, the Enemy's forgiveness of his other sins only because he himself did not fully feel their sinfulness—that in respect of the one vice which he really understands in its full depth of dishonor

he cannot seek, nor credit, the Mercy. But I fear you have already let him get too far in the Enemy's school, and he knows that Despair is a greater sin than any of the sins which provoke it.

(5) As to the actual technique of temptations to cowardice, not much need be said. The main point is that precautions have a tendency to increase fear. The precautions publicly enjoined on your patient, however, soon become a matter of routine and this effect disappears. What you must do is to keep running in his mind (side by side with the conscious intention of doing his duty) the vague idea of all sorts of things he can do or not do, *inside* the framework of the duty, which seem to make him a little safer. Get his mind off the simple rule ("I've got to stay here and do so-and-so") into a series of imaginary life lines ("If A happened—though I very much hope it won't—I could do B—and if the worst came to the worst, I could always do C"). Superstitions, if not recognized as such, can be awakened. The point is to keep him feeling that he has *something*, other than the Enemy and courage the Enemy supplies, to *fall back on*, so that what was intended to be a total commitment to duty becomes honeycombed all through with little unconscious reservations. By building up a series of imaginary expedients to prevent "the worst coming to the worst" you may produce, at that level of his will which he is not aware of, a determination that the worst shall not come to the worst. Then, at the moment of real terror, rush it out into his nerves and muscles and you may get the fatal act done before he knows what you're about. For remember, the act of cowardice is all that matters; the emotion of fear is, in itself, no sin and, though we enjoy it, does us no good,

Your affectionate uncle,
Screwtape

Analysis Questions

1. In paragraph 0, Screwtape seems to be saying that pride can bring forth both cowardice and courage. Do you agree or disagree? What are the three areas of temptation under consideration? What are some other examples of virtues that make great and effective wicked men?
2. In paragraph 1, why do you think tension increases during noise, danger, and fatigue (John 6:63; Romans 7:18; Galatians 5:19-20)? How does fasting address these issues?
3. In paragraph 1, How does the muddling of the patient's conscience remind us of ourselves (Luke 16:15)? How can we avoid this (Proverbs 27:6, 17)?
4. In paragraph 2, Why does Screwtape think that hatred is best combined with Fear (1 John 4:18)? Have you experienced this process of cowardice producing hatred (Acts 15:37-39)?
5. In paragraph 3, Screwtape mentions how danger, war or other "evil" things are able to bring men out of their moral stupor... do you agree or disagree? What is God's desire for us in this life (James 1:2-12)? How does this help you deal with the greater idea of why God has allowed (ordained?) evil in this world?
6. In paragraph 4, do you agree with Screwtape as it relates to courage being the form of every virtue at the testing point? Why is despair greater than any of the sins which provoke it (1 John 1:9; Heb 8:12; Titus 1:2)?
7. In paragraph 5, what is the ultimate sin of the process outlined by Screwtape (Philippians 3:3-4; Psalm 118:8)? Do you agree or disagree that the emotion of fear is not a sin?

Vocabulary

Chloroforming- to administer chloroform to, esp. in order to anesthetize, make unconscious, or kill.

Expedients- a means devised or employed in an exigency (crisis); resource; shift: *Use any expedients you think necessary to get over the obstacles in your way.*

Anodyne- remedy or cure.