

THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS STUDY GUIDE HANDOUT

Letter #26

Themes- unselfishness (self-denial); charity (*agape* love); erotic enchantment (*eros* love) in courtship

Synopsis- This letter begins by Screwtape responding to a question by Wormwood about ways to plant seeds which will later become domestic hatred, resentment or bitterness. This can happen easily because both the patient and the girlfriend are still under the enchantment of being in love. They will undoubtedly mistake their current contentment in which their innermost desires are being unmet as evidence of their love being real. Moreover, they can label their current choice of contentment as their spiritual duty of self-denial or unselfishness. Screwtape sees this as a great opportunity to convince people they are being spiritually good when in reality they have substituted a negative for the positive of charity. Wormwood is instructed to press this even further when interacting with the differences between men and women.

Lewis brings up a topic he introduced in Letter #18, paragraph 2 in describing the ways in which Screwtape has encouraged humans to believe that the excitement of erotic enchantment (being in love) will be permanent. In this letter, he expands the topic to include specifics of how the unselfish actions which occur naturally in this phase can trap them into a Law of false expectations for the duration of the marriage. By deceiving them into this Law, the real fun begins for Wormwood as the humans engage in what Screwtape calls the “Generous Conflict Illusion.” It leads to self-assessments of being righteousness, generous, and unselfishness while at the same time accusing everyone else as being radically selfish. Lewis has shown his deftness once again at bringing to light those actions which most of us have participated in without realizing. For Screwtape, the best and most resentful martyrs are made under the self-deception of them being the most unselfish.

Theological Themes- Lewis had been greatly influenced by and had such an admiration for George MacDonald (SBJ, 213) that he wrote an anthology of MacDonald’s writings to cover each day of the year. One of the sermons MacDonald preached was entitled, “Self-denial.” In this sermon, he analyzed the way denying yourself can lead to pride and contempt for others. Self-denial often leads to the self-congratulations of being unselfish. The theme of *unselfishness* appears 15 times in this Screwtape letter alone and Lewis spends a great amount of time analyzing how it works its way into human relationships.

Because we know the dates of various writings by Lewis, we can deduce when he was pondering different topics and when he wrote on them. It was during 1940-42 that he penned several essays on the topic of unselfishness. He most likely wrote about unselfishness first in this Screwtape letter (c.a. Christmas of 1940, CGLW, 268). Later, in his BBC radio talks on Christian behavior of July 1942, he expands on the theme of Charity (Mere Christianity series). However, in between these two endeavors, he wrote the sermon, “Weight of Glory,” where he connects both themes together (June 8, 1941). Lewis comments, “If you asked twenty good men today what they thought the highest of the virtues, nineteen of them would reply, Unselfishness. But if you had asked almost any of the great Christians of old, he would have replied, Love [charity]. You see what has happened? A negative term has been substituted for a positive, and this is of more than philological importance. The negative idea of Unselfishness carries with it the suggestion not primarily of securing good things for others, but of going without them ourselves, as if our abstinence and not their happiness was the important point. I do not think this is the Christian virtue of Love. The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself” (WOG, 25). Lewis brings up this exact reasoning in paragraph two of our current dispatch.

Specificity in words is important to Lewis and in this letter, he distinguishes between Unselfishness (15x), Charity (6x) and Love (synonym “enchantment”- 8x). This becomes significant

because we know that Screwtape is crafty and uses words in ways that can deceive us. As Lewis mentioned in his WOG sermon, most people would describe unselfishness as a virtue and for good reason. Jesus describes one of the hallmarks of being His disciple as having self-denial (Luke 9:23). What could be wrong with living a life of self-denial? According to Screwtape, there are many ways they seek to twist this virtue into becoming a grand vice. This will be more fully explained in the study questions, but Lewis gives us a snippet of what he meant in a letter he wrote to his good friend Arthur Greeves in February, 1944. Most likely Arthur had written to Lewis asking for more clarification on what he meant when he wrote about this in the *Screwtape Letters* which had recently been published. Lewis writes, “About *unselfishness*, whatever dictionaries say, *you* know perfectly well what I mean, and I expect we’ve often talked about it—people going about making martyrs of themselves and annoying everyone else by doing things nobody wants under pretext of ‘unselfishness.’ But we could explain it better in conversation. Yes, I will indeed pray for ‘yours’ as well as you” (CL3, 1549-50 italics his).

Vocabulary-

Ambiguity- vagueness or uncertainty of meaning

Foment- to encourage or instigate (trouble, discord, etc.); stir up

Good offices- the help that someone gives to other people; often in hopes of getting something in return

Complaisance- deference to the wishes of others; willing compliance

Nominal- in name only; theoretical

Altruisms- the principle or practice of unselfish concern for the welfare of others

Debauch- to lead into a life of depraved self-indulgence; excess

Obstinacy- the state or quality of being headstrong, self-willed, or stubborn

Study Questions-

1. In paragraph 1, A) Why does Screwtape think that unsatisfied desire has enchantment attached to it and what are its results? B) What is the mistake that Screwtape says humans can make and how can we avoid it (1 Peter 4:8; Prov 19:11)? C) Why do you think Screwtape would encourage them to think they have solved these problems currently by love?
2. In paragraph 2, A) The Philological Arm is crafty. How would you distinguish between unselfishness and Charity (Rom 5:8; Matt 7:12)? B) Explain how Screwtape thinks a great point is gained. C) Summarize Screwtape’s gender generalizations (cf. 1 Thess 4:11). Have you seen this?
3. In paragraph 3, A) Why is it important to understand the different causes (erotic enchantment and charity) which often “result in similar actions”? B) What is the Law and trap that ensnares new couples and which can be very destructive many years later if not recognized (cf. 1 John 4:19)?
4. In paragraph 4, A) Why do you think Screwtape describes Unselfishness as official, legal, and nominal in the rule being established? B) After agreeing to do something unselfishly that the other person wants, what are the three results that follow and how can we avoid these (Luke 18:9-14; 6:27-35; Eph 4:25)? C) Have you ever experienced this? How should we respond (1 Thess 5:18)?
5. In paragraph 4, A) How have you experienced the Generous conflict Illusion? B) How is it possible to get caught up in this game (cf. Mark 8:34-35; Philippians 2:2-4)? C) What is necessary in order to stay within the bounds of reason and courtesy (Col 3:9; cf. Eph 4:15)? D) In the last sentence, what is each side feeling and how can we avoid the dishonesty of humans (1 Pet 3:8-9)?
6. In paragraph 5, A) Why do you think the Pastor/Preacher gets the blame for encouraging Unselfishness? How can they do better at preventing the “ill-feeling”? B) Have you ever met the kind of woman that “lives for others”? C) Do you agree a “little *real* selfishness” is of less value?
7. In paragraph 5, A) Is Screwtape correct when he says that “love” is not enough? B) What is his reasoning in stating that no “external law can supply its place” (cf. Gal 5:22-23; Rom 8:8-9)?

Letter #26 Answers

- A)** This is an interesting and insightful comment which is in the context of the patient and his girlfriend in the courtship stage. This is the stage of being in love and reminds us a lot of what was written in Letter #18. Let's be honest. All of us are selfish to some degree and have expectations and desires in all our various relationships. In this case, Screwtape notes that in the courtship phase, when our desires are unsatisfied or unmet, there is a certain enchantment that takes place. This sounds irrational and that is the point. The patient who is wrapped up in intense emotion will often overlook his unmet needs. Under any other normal circumstance, he most likely would become hurt, offended, or upset, but the enchantment blinds him. The cliché that says "love is blind" definitely has some truth to it.

B) In order to fully grasp the mistake made by humans, I encourage you to read again Answer 3-C of Letter #18. I shared Lewis' other writing where a distinction is made between *eros* and *agape* love. *Eros* is the intense emotion and enchantment which helps blind the patient. However, *agape* love is not rooted or based on emotional intensity, but instead on a choice to seek good and to love the other person out of the will. Charity (*agape*) produces results because it is not based on how one feels, but on obedience to God and doing what is right. The Bible teaches us that *agape* love forgives when our needs are not met (1 Peter 4:8). This is also revealed to bring glory or honor to us when we do not become angry and instead choose to overlook someone's offense (Prov 19:11). The patient has unsatisfied desires, but he overlooks them because he is enchanted (*eros*). However, he makes the mistake of thinking that he is doing it out of charity (*agape* love).

C) Screwtape mentions that this is the time to sow seeds which ten years later can produce domestic hatred. It's all about deception and relying on emotions for Screwtape. He knows that living and walking by emotions will eventually get the best of us. How many of us have been in relationships when after the "honeymoon" period wears off, the other person (or ourselves) will bring up something from the past (sometimes years!). These are the seeds that were sown in the enchantment stage and have now sprouted when the enchantment no longer keeps them at bay. Additionally, when these problems are not solved any longer by "love," the couple will come to believe the original love is gone and will question whether it was ever true to begin with. These are all scenarios that are real life and we would be wise to understand the real meaning of *agape* love and how it is a fruit of the Spirit and worth seeking and practicing constantly (Gal 5:22).
- A)** Philological is a word that means love of words in its Greek parts. It has the idea of focusing specifically on the nuances of specific words and is generally a good thing. However, Screwtape and his cohorts like to spin words for deceptive means. I appreciate Lewis' precision in highlighting that Unselfishness is a negative term. The focus in unselfishness is about us, about our motives, about our going without something, about our self-denial. This can certainly and often lead to pride because it draws the attention to us (see Letter #14). Much of what Lewis is bringing out in this letter stems from George MacDonald's sermons. MacDonald writes about the dangers of conquering ourselves (self-denial) and how it leads to pride. He writes, "From a man's rule of himself, in smallest opposition, however devout, to the law of his being, arises the huge danger of nourishing, by the pride of self-conquest, far worse than even the unchained animal self—the demoniac self. True victory over self is the victory of God in the man, not of the man alone. It is not subjugation that is enough, but subjugation by God. In whatever man does without God, he must fail miserably—or succeed more miserably ("Self-Denial," in *Unspoken Sermons, Second Series*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1885, 255–256; see also 264–265). On the other hand, Charity (*agape*) is a word that is positive and seeks goodwill and in doing virtuous things for others. The focus is not on how we feel about ourselves or the other person, but instead on the benefits that are brought to others. The goal of charity is to see others blessed simply for the

sake of their blessing (cf. Acts 20:35). It is not based on our emotion or how we feel about the other person, but instead on doing what is right in God's eyes without any expectation of return. It is not rooted in the worth of the other person either. This is exactly how God loves us and is one of the illustrations Paul uses in demonstrating what *agape* love looks like. "When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not even be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners" (Rom 5:6 -8 NLT). Further, Jesus gives us the golden rule of Mathew 7:12, "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (ESV). The focus here is on the positive of doing for others those things that you would want done to you. It compels you to be proactive and is in contrast to other Jewish teachings of Jesus' day. Hillel the Elder was a teacher in Israel who died around 10 A.D. He is well known having taught a similar saying to Jesus' golden rule, but notice the difference. Hillel said, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn" (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a). The emphasis in his saying did not address doing the positive of love. Instead, it was focused on ways in which we are withholding evil deeds from others (self-denial). Granted, this is something worthwhile to live by. However, if I just stay in my house and avoid others, I have not actually loved anyone. Jesus' point is that we love others by actually doing something, not necessarily by avoiding something. Jesus turned Hillel's saying upside down and gave us a positive example of what *agape* love looks like.

B) The great point gained is that we can get into the habit of "surrendering benefits, not for the sake that others may be happy in having them, but that he may be unselfish in forgoing them." I am ashamed to admit this, but I fell into this trap for most of my Christian life. I would deny my desires and wants for others in my family and then congratulate myself at how unselfish I was. In fact, I would compare my unselfishness with the lack thereof in others. It was not until I studied this particular letter that I was able to see my proud ways. God used this letter to lovingly smack me upside the head and to take the focus off my "grandiose self-denials" and love others for their sake alone.

C) There is no doubt that Lewis is making generalizations concerning the genders. Paul instructs the church that nobody should be a busybody, but to work quietly and mind our own affairs wisely (1 Thess 4:11). Observe the table on the following page.

Identity	Motive	Result
Godly female who has been a Christian for a long time	Self-denial with a need to be deemed unselfish by others	Takes on trouble for others without them asking. Makes a nuisance of herself. Does good offices with expectation of reciprocity.
Ungodly male who is dominated fully by Satan	Selfishness	Makes a nuisance of himself because he demands his needs be met. Expects reciprocity.
Godly male who has been a Christian for a long time	Self-denial with a need to be deemed unselfish by others	Does not give trouble to others or butt into other's business. Respects other people's rights by not spontaneously seeking to please others. If he does, it is still no match for a woman.
Ordinary female	Not stated	Spontaneously helps others in a way that is natural to being a woman.

The important point in this table is to recognize that unselfishness or self-denial often leads to results that are similar to those who do not know God. The difference is that Christians can deceive themselves into thinking they are being virtuous when in reality their actions are not really any different than the sinful actions of unbelievers. It can be even worse because the believers become filled with pride and contempt for others (cf. the pharisee of Luke 18:9-14). Before moving on to the next question, Lewis illustrates more of this topic in his 1943 fiction book, *Perelandra*. He writes, "Ransom gained ground over that, but on the following day he lost it all by losing his temper. The enemy had been pressing on her with more than usual ardor the nobility of self-sacrifice and self-dedication, and the enchantment seemed to be deepening in her mind every moment, when Ransom, goaded beyond all patience, had leaped to his feet and really turned upon her, talking far too quickly and almost shouting, and even forgetting his Old Solar and intermixing English words. He tried to tell her that he'd seen this kind of 'unselfishness' in action: to tell her of women making themselves sick with hunger rather than begin the meal before the man of the house returned, though they knew perfectly well that there was nothing he disliked more; of mothers wearing themselves to a raveling to marry some daughter to a man whom she detested; of Agrippina and of Lady Macbeth. 'Can you not see,' he shouted, 'that he is making you say words that mean nothing? What is the good of saying you would do this for the King's sake when you know it is what the King would hate most?'" (PL, 113).

3. **A)** Just as Lewis brought up the ways in which unselfishness in different types of people produces similar results or actions (see table in previous question), he reminds us here that there are different motives in regards to love that can also bring similar actions. In this case, those under the erotic enchantment of feeling in love actually enjoy or are pleased in being sacrificial (self-denial). The important item to remember is that this pleasure of self-denial is rooted in emotion. Lewis points out that God expects Christians to exhibit this type of pleasure in seeking the good of others. The most ideal motive is *agape* love which is not based in emotional love (*eros*). Screwtape seeks to cause confusion in our minds and not recognize the motives that are controlling us.

B) Screwtape instructs Wormwood to encourage the patient and his girlfriend to not only get used to this mutual self-sacrifice, but to establish it as a Law for their whole married life. Further,

because it is during the enchantment stage, it comes naturally without any effort. Wormwood needs to persuade the couple to believe that it will always occur naturally. As a pastor, I have heard countless couples tell me after many years of marriage, that if it was genuine love, it should happen easily like it did in the beginning. They have fallen into the exact trap that Screwtape desires. The trap he seeks to spring on them is that they think the natural self-sacrifice they exhibit early on in the relationship is because they are so full of *agape* love. The second part of the trap is believing that the easy sacrifice due to the excitement will last their entire marriage. It takes a lot of work (*agape* love) to keep relationships working and honoring to God. This *agape* love is not rooted in emotion, but instead in the will of choice. We choose to love, forgive, overlook wrongs and sacrifice joyfully because it honors God and is the right action to take. We are able to *agape* love others because God first *agape* loved us (1 John 4:19).

4. **A)** As I confessed earlier, I personally had been involved in congratulating myself for my years of self-denial and unselfishness. Lewis nailed it when he describes it as “official, legal, or nominal.” I always considered it official in my own eyes because I was keeping records! Ashamedly, there was one time, I kept an official journal of how I was being unselfish. Can you imagine how deceived I was? When pride is near, a legalistic pharisee type is not far behind. Not only did I want it officially recorded, I also had a desire to maintain carefully how I was following the legal letter of the law of self-denial (Luke 9:23). Finally, I always had to maintain a nominal amount of unselfishness in order for it to be legal and official. Pride would not let me fail to at least have some nominal level at all times. I maintained this rule for many years. My emotional resources (enchantment love) had died away and my spiritual *agape* love had not grown enough. However, my pride was as strong as ever and provided the motivation needed to continue to demonstrate my “serious record of unselfishness.”

B) One of the words that comes to mind when analyzing Lewis’ description of the results which follow is *posturing*. When two unselfish people seek to outdo one another in their efforts of promoting their own self-denial as more genuine than the other, pleasurable results follow (from Screwtape’s perspective). After each person masquerades as being genuinely interested in sacrificing for the other’s wishes, they often do something that neither wants. However, they both walk away feeling a glow of self-righteousness, harboring a secret claim to future preferential treatment in return for their sacrifice, and a secret grudge against the other person for how easily they accepted the other person’s sacrifice. The opposite of self-righteousness is humility and we see in Jesus’ parable that those who self-promote while looking down on others will be brought low themselves (Luke 18:9-14). True love for others (including our enemies) involves doing good to them without any expectation in return (Luke 6:27-35). Finally, if we seek to obey God by removing falsehood (posturing) and speak the truth to others, we will not be caught in the trap of seeking to promote our own unselfishness. When someone asks what we want to do, we should be truthful and honest and prevent the sinful cycle of deceit and proud self-denial (Eph 4:25).

C) One of the other main factors that plays into this series of dishonesty is what Lewis brings up. He says that it will cause a person to harbor a secret claim to future preferential treatment. This is extremely accurate and I have seen this in my own life. Instead of just focusing on my own self congratulations for my unselfishness, I was always measuring whether any future preferential treatment matched what I had sacrificed. As you can imagine, I hardly ever thought that the other person’s sacrifice equaled my own and this caused me to be critical and unthankful. Instead of showing gratitude for what was being offered, I was obsessed with seeing how it was disproportionate. It was not until the Lord convicted me to be thankful for what I do have instead of focusing on what I do not have that I was able to escape the cycle and become truly free. There is no confusion. It is God’s will that we are to be thankful in all circumstances (1 Thess 5:18).

5. **A)** I have seen this happen in my own adult brothers and sisters. Especially the part where Lewis insightfully mentions the idea of one person not being used by another for petty altruisms. No one wanted to be used and certainly not for the advancement of another’s disingenuous false humility. Pretty soon, it turned into anger and profanity. Then everyone left my parents house in self-righteous anger.
- B)** It is surprisingly easy for Christians to get caught up in this game. We are commanded in Mark 8:34-35 to practice self-denial and also to look out for the interests of others and not simply our own (Phil 2:2-4). I have seen this often at small group meetings, but certainly not to the extent of anger or leaving the house. Someone asks what game or activity the whole group would like to participate. One person sheepishly offers an idea, the other reluctantly, but unselfishly agrees while the whole group recognizes that this person really does not want to do it. However, it can’t be stated out loud because that would put the person on the spot. And so, the cycle continues.
- C)** Lewis writes that “if each side had been frankly contending for its own real wish, they would all have kept within the bounds of reason and courtesy.” Paul commands us to put off the sinful practices of our old lifestyle and not to lie (Col 3:9). Additionally, if we are honest and seek to speak the truth with love, we can expect most normal people to be thankful that they were not forcing us into doing something we did not want to do in the first place (Eph 4:15).
- D)** Each side of the Generous Conflict Illusion feels blameless and ill-used. Peter reminds us that we should seek to be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted and humble in spirit while looking for opportunities to be a blessing to others (1 Peter 3:8-9). As we put this into consistent practice, we will not be drawn into the disastrous effects of the Generous Conflict Illusion.
6. **A)** As a pastor and teacher, I have certainly encouraged self-denial due to the fact that Jesus says it is a hallmark of a true disciple (Luke 9:23-24). However, after reading this letter, I have preached more on the positive attribute of charity (*agape* love) than unselfishness. I have incorporated this incredible insight of it producing “ill-feeling” and used this example in trying to help God’s people avoid the pitfalls of unselfishness.
- B)** I have seen this type of person (not only a woman) in the church many times over the years. Lewis addresses the female who lives under the self-denial illusion and perverts the gift of “love” in her attempts to unselfishly live for others. He writes in a different book, “I am thinking of Mrs. Fidget, who died a few months ago. It is really astonishing how her family have brightened up. The drawn look has gone from her husband’s face; he begins to be able to laugh... Mrs. Fidget very often said that she lived for her family. And it was not untrue. Everyone in the neighborhood knew it. ‘She lives for her family,’ they said; ‘what a wife and mother!’ She did all the washing; true, she did it badly, and they could have afforded to send it out to a laundry, and they frequently begged her not to do it. But she did. There was always a hot lunch for anyone who was at home and always a hot meal at night (even in midsummer). They implored her not to provide this. They protested almost with tears in their eyes (and with truth) that they liked cold meals. It made no difference. She was living for her family... For Mrs. Fidget, as she so often said, would ‘work her fingers to the bone’ for her family. They couldn’t stop her. Nor could they—being decent people—quite sit still and watch her do it. They had to help. Indeed, they were always having to help. That is, they did things for her to help her to do things for them which they didn’t want done... The Vicars says Mrs. Fidget is now at rest. Let us hope she is. What’s quite certain is that her family are” (FL, 48-50).
- C)** Each person might not fully agree on whether a little real selfishness is of less value in the long run. If we think like Screwtape, it makes sense. Real selfishness is easy to spot or to be called out by others. However, if we deceive ourselves in putting our energy into the unselfishness described in this letter, we end up worse off according to Screwtape. It seems very logical and convincing

and I have seen it exhibited in real life, but each person's experience will contribute to their answer.

7. **A)** As we learned earlier, Screwtape is making a distinction between the *eros* love ("enchantment" love) and *agape* love ("charity"). In this case he does not want the patient and his girlfriend to discover that enchantment love is not enough. He wants the patient to notice that they both have some bit of mutual falseness and that the girl "does not always notice just how Unselfish he is being." Lewis has written much about the distinction between emotional love and charity love. In his scripts for the radio talks about mere Christianity in 1942 (**CFLW**, 309), he says, "Charity means 'Love, in the Christian sense.' But love, in the Christian sense, does not mean an emotion. It is a state not of the feelings but of the will; that state of the will which we have naturally about ourselves, and must learn to have about other people" (**MC**, 73).

B) Lewis is making reference to what Paul wrote concerning the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. These are produced by the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. They are not fashioned from following some external law or religious rituals. The first fruit of the Spirit is *agape* love. The only way to participate in this type of love is through a dynamic relationship with God through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The flesh cannot produce it (Romans 8:8-9).