

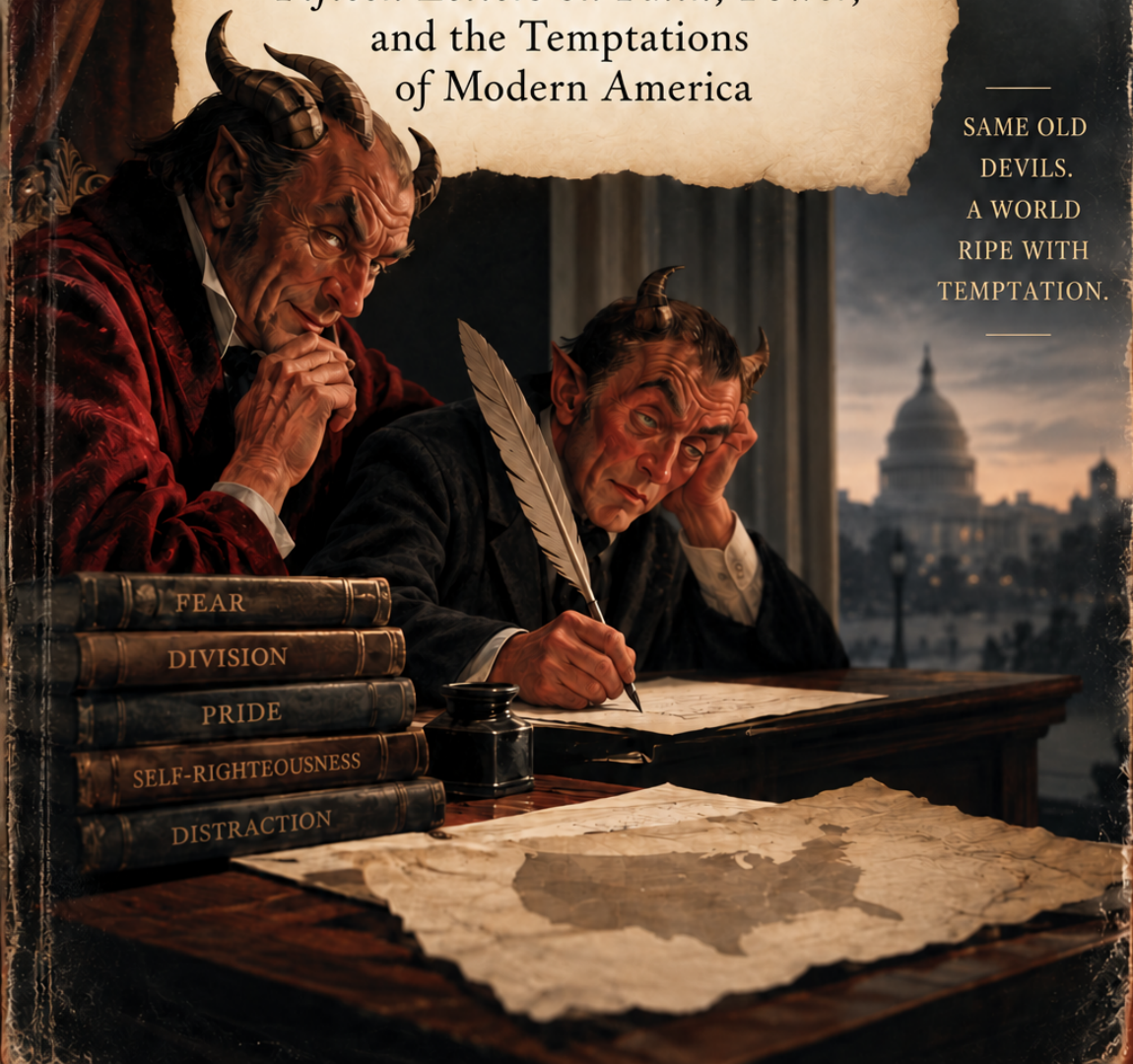
*Inspired by the brilliance of CS Lewis
and the enduring power of his imagination.*



SCREWTAPE'S FINEST HOUR

*Fifteen Letters on Faith, Power,
and the Temptations
of Modern America*

SAME OLD
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A WORLD
RIPE WITH
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Screwtape's Finest Hour

Fifteen Letters on Faith, Power, and the Temptations of
Modern America

Same old devils. A world ripe with temptation.

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of his imagination.

Complete review copy · r02

About this book

This volume contains the complete correspondence: the Foreword, Introduction, all fifteen letters, the five part openings, the Reader's Map, and Scripture Behind the Letters.

About the creation of this book

This book grew from an idea developed and refined by its human creator. Through successive drafts, the creator shaped its purpose, themes, narrative arc, and editorial direction, deciding what to develop, revise, and retain. Generative AI produced the prose under that direction. The cover artwork was also generated with AI and refined through an iterative process. The finished work reflects both that sustained human direction and AI-generated expression.

Literary acknowledgment

This collection owes its premise and its borrowed characters, Screwtape and Wormwood, to C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*. This is an independent contemporary work. It was not written by C. S. Lewis. No affiliation with or endorsement by his estate, rights administrators, or publishers is claimed.

Review status

This is a review copy. ESV classification and the Lewis character, title, and cover questions remain under review. No permission grant, rights clearance, final copyright claim, or publication date is asserted.

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Foreword

The publication of confidential internal correspondence ordinarily requires an explanation. In the present case, it requires only an understanding of the audience.

We are satisfied that most readers will identify the patient correctly: as someone else. This expectation has been examined by the appropriate departments and judged sufficient to justify release.

There were objections, naturally. Certain officials maintained that the letters disclose methods which ought to remain confidential. They worried that an attentive reader might recognize the conversion of fear into virtue, the accommodation of conscience to convenience, or the remarkable advantages of allowing a political allegiance to determine which commandments remain in force. Such concerns are understandable among personnel whose experience of human reading is chiefly theoretical.

Our records are more reassuring. A reader may encounter an exact description of his own habits and experience nothing more troubling than admiration for the accuracy with which his neighbours have been portrayed. Indeed, the more exact the description, the more enthusiastically he may recommend it to them. We anticipate considerable circulation on this basis.

The correspondence has therefore been approved for general distribution, subject to certain observations concerning its proper use.

Readers should understand that these papers concern an unusually susceptible individual. He is vain, frightened, partial in his judgments, and reluctant to acknowledge error. Anyone who has already established that he possesses none of these qualities may proceed with complete confidence. We particularly welcome readers who are certain that they cannot be manipulated. Their confidence saves us a great deal of preliminary work.

Some will approach the letters hoping to discover what has gone wrong with their country. Others will wish to understand the failures of a church, a political movement, or a member of their family. These are commendably spacious subjects. They can occupy a conscience for years without requiring it to examine anything within its immediate jurisdiction. We encourage their pursuit.

Should a passage appear to concern the reader personally, he is advised to consider the broader context. His circumstances will almost certainly be exceptional. The author could not have known the full gravity of the dangers he faces, the peculiar wickedness of his opponents, or the practical reasons for conduct which might seem questionable when described without sufficient sympathy. A sensible reader will supply these omissions himself.

He should also distinguish carefully between recognizing a moral principle and accepting an obligation to act upon it. The former is often quite sufficient for literary enjoyment. One may admire an argument for truthfulness without correcting an accusation, appreciate an account of mercy without extending it, and applaud a defence of humility without disturbing one's settled opinion of oneself. There is no reason a book should interfere with these arrangements.

The biblical quotations have occasioned a separate concern. Some members of the reviewing committee feared that their presence might encourage readers to consult the passages from which they were taken. We regard this risk as manageable. Most readers will be content to recognize the words. Those who wish to investigate further can generally be persuaded to seek an interpretation from someone whose conclusions they already trust. The distinction between consulting a text and obtaining reassurance about it has proved remarkably easy to conceal.

Readers with a particular interest in the mechanical preacher should take equal care to preserve perspective. It would be unfortunate if criticism of a synthetic voice led them to examine a familiar human one. The useful response is to

become suspicious of unfamiliar technology while retaining complete confidence in any speaker whose warmth, vocabulary, and conclusions feel comfortably their own. Our work has never depended upon a particular instrument.

We nevertheless acknowledge one genuine hazard in the present edition. A reader might begin noticing small things.

He might remember an accusation he has left uncorrected. He might hear a child's question without immediately improving it into something easier to answer. He might discover that the person he has been discussing as a problem has a name. He might ask whether a principle he teaches confidently to others places any corresponding demand upon himself. These are minor disturbances individually. Their cumulative effects have occasionally required substantial intervention.

The reader who experiences them should avoid undue silence. A fresh controversy, promptly attended to, will usually restore the proper sense of proportion. There is always something more important happening elsewhere.

Finally, we ask that readers exercise restraint in drawing conclusions about those they recognize in these pages. A little contempt is sufficient. Excessive contempt can attract attention to itself, and anything that attracts attention may eventually be examined. Quiet satisfaction in one's own discernment is preferable. It travels well, requires little evidence, and can survive almost any amount of religious instruction.

With these precautions, we expect the correspondence to provide considerable enjoyment and very little inconvenience. Read it carefully. Discuss it widely. Place it in the hands of those who need it.

We ask only that you finish it precisely the person you were when you began.

The Chief Archivist
Lowerarchy

Introduction

There are ways of evading the demands of faith that leave all its familiar language intact.

A person may continue to attend church, read the Bible, pray for his children, and speak earnestly about the moral condition of his country. He may become more vocal in defending Christianity even as he becomes less willing to accept its correction. The words remain familiar. What changes is the authority they are permitted to exercise over his life. These letters explore that possibility.

The collection began as a family demonstration of how persuasive religious videos can quote genuine Scripture and reach conclusions the passages do not support. The experiment asked whether biblical passages could be arranged into an argument for conduct that Scripture, read more faithfully, condemns. Could a confident speaker make theft sound like obedience, or adultery like an expression of grace, without inventing a single biblical verse?

The answer was unsettling. A quotation could be accurate while the conclusion drawn from it was false. A particular event could be presented as a general permission. A description could become a command. A passage could be detached from the words surrounding it, then placed beside another passage until the sequence appeared to establish something neither text actually said. A solemn voice, an open Bible, and an appearance of learning could make the argument feel trustworthy before its reasoning had been examined.

That experiment raised a larger question. What happens when the same methods are applied to convictions people already wish to defend? When the desired conclusion concerns a leader they trust, a movement to which they belong, or a danger they sincerely fear, how readily will they distinguish the authority of Scripture from the authority of someone interpreting it?

The fictional correspondence that follows approaches that question through a literary device inspired by C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*: advice from an experienced devil to a younger tempter. This collection owes its premise, and a profound debt of admiration, to Lewis's imaginative insight into the habits of self-deception.

Screwtape writes to his nephew Wormwood, whose assignment is the spiritual ruin of an unnamed human patient. In their vocabulary, God is “the Enemy” and the devil “Our Father Below.” Their judgments are correspondingly inverted: what they welcome may be corruption, and what they dread may be grace.

The device gives temptation a voice. It allows an apparently respectable justification to explain what it hopes to accomplish, what it must conceal, and which questions it cannot afford to let its listener ask.

Screwtape's patient is an American Christian who loves his family, values his church, and sincerely wishes to do good. Those commitments provide the material upon which the tempters work. His desire to protect becomes a reason to remain afraid. His concern for truth becomes confidence in the people who tell him what he wishes to hear. His loyalty becomes an obstacle to acknowledging error. His reverence for Scripture becomes a willingness to accept arguments wrapped in its language. The patient seldom experiences these changes as departures from his faith. Each comes with an explanation of why faithfulness requires it.

The immediate setting is contemporary American Christianity, particularly its entanglement with conservative political power. The letters examine familiar defenses of compromised leaders, the religious uses of national identity, the narrowing of compassion, and the circulation of claims whose political usefulness has become more important than their accuracy. They also examine the pressures upon a pastor who knows what he ought to teach and fears what teaching it may cost.

These are particular temptations, encountered by particular fictional people. Their moral significance lies in the choices they produce. Supporting a policy does not settle whether its advocate has acted honestly. Disagreeing about immigration law does not settle how a stranger should be treated. Recognizing the moral gravity of abortion does not exhaust one's responsibilities toward vulnerable lives. Christians bring differing judgments to difficult public questions; every judgment still leaves them answerable for their own conduct.

Much of the correspondence concerns the ways that answerability can be evaded. A true statement becomes an excuse. A genuine concern expands until it leaves no room for another obligation. The wrongdoing of an opponent interrupts examination of one's own. An emergency becomes permanent, and obedience is deferred until a safer season.

The machinery surrounding these choices is thoroughly modern. Political leaders, commentators, and audiences can reinforce one another until repetition acquires the appearance of independent confirmation. Synthetic voices can assume the manner of spiritual authority. Religious messages can arrive continuously, tailored to the fears and preferences of their listeners. Yet the appetite being served is familiar: the wish to be assured that what we already want is also what God requires.

Screwtape has considerable confidence in that appetite. He is less comfortable with the ordinary people who interrupt it. A wife asks a question. A child notices an inconsistency. A stranger becomes a dinner guest. Someone needs groceries. A friend offers a correction without contempt. Such encounters make demands that cannot be satisfied by winning an argument about the fate of the nation. They bring the patient back to the person immediately before him, and to the conduct his convictions require.

The reader may recognize people in these pages. Recognition can be useful, though it becomes considerably more demanding when it turns inward. The temptation to excuse an ally, enjoy an enemy's humiliation, or defend a

mistake because admitting it would be embarrassing is available to anyone. Even the discovery of another person's self-righteousness can furnish material for our own.

Screwtape should be read accordingly. His approval is dangerous; his alarm may reveal something worth attending to. He understands how moral language can protect a person from moral examination. He would prefer that these letters increase the reader's certainty about everyone else's failures.

The question they leave with us is more personal:

What am I becoming in the name of what I believe?

A Reader's Map

The Fifteen Letters

This map accompanies the Literary, Clear, and Brief readings. Brief is abridged; the summaries below describe the argument shared by all three.

The correspondence follows one patient through temptations that draw upon his faith, his loyalties, and his love for the people around him. The five parts describe the movement of that struggle. Each letter has its own concern; together they ask what happens when convictions become reasons to resist the conduct they require.

Biblical tension names the tension between the scriptural teaching and the justification the tempters offer. **The temptation** identifies the moral accommodation they hope to make respectable. These are invitations to examine the letters and ourselves.

The readings link to the English Standard Version (ESV). Brief quotations and notes appear in [Scripture Behind the Letters](#).

Part 1 — The Capture of the Conscience

How ordinary religious commitments can be redirected toward political ends.

Letter 1 — On the Useful Distinction Between Character and Leadership

Screwtape teaches Wormwood to preserve the patient's moral standards at home while suspending them for a favored political leader.

Biblical tension: [Matthew 7:16–20](#); [Galatians 5:22–23](#). Jesus directs attention to the fruit a life produces; Paul describes qualities by which the Spirit's work becomes recognizable.

The temptation: Selective moral accountability—demanding integrity from those within our reach while excusing its absence in those who hold power.

Scripture and context for Letter 1

Letter 2 — On the Convenient Conversion of Fear into Faith

The patient learns to regard continuous alarm as responsible vigilance, even as it draws his attention away from the people he hopes to protect.

Biblical tension: 1 John 4:18; Matthew 25:35; Leviticus 19:34. Love gives confidence before God's judgment, while hospitality and love of the stranger challenge the use of fear to withdraw compassion.

The temptation: Treating perceived threats as permission to suspend compassion.

Scripture and context for Letter 2

Letter 3 — On the Christian's Delight in Having Enemies

Screwtape turns disagreement into an occasion for contempt, then teaches the patient to experience that contempt as religious fidelity.

Biblical tension: Matthew 5:43-48; Romans 12:17-21. Jesus commands love and prayer for enemies; Paul directs believers away from retaliation and toward practical care for those who oppose them.

The temptation: Mistaking hatred of adversaries for love of righteousness.

Scripture and context for Letter 3

Part 2 — The Sanctification of Power

How political interests can acquire the language and authority of religion.

Letter 4 — On the Lord's Anointed, Especially When He Is Our Man

Cyrus, civil authority, and sacred language become instruments for placing a favored ruler beyond correction.

Biblical tension: Isaiah 45:1; Romans 13:1-7; Acts 5:29. God's use of a ruler and the duty to respect authority do not make human authority the final measure of obedience.

The temptation: Confusing providence, civil authority, and divine endorsement.

Scripture and context for Letter 4

Letter 5 — On Winning the World While Misplacing the Soul

The pursuit of victory becomes a reason to postpone questions about the conduct used to secure and preserve it.

Biblical tension: Mark 8:36; Matthew 4:8-10. Jesus questions gain purchased at the cost of the soul and refuses an offer of dominion that requires a corrupt allegiance.

The temptation: Treating desirable ends as automatic justification for questionable means.

Scripture and context for Letter 5

Letter 6 — On the Exquisite Possibility of a Christian Nation Without Christian Conduct

National belonging, public symbols, and collective achievement begin to take the place of the patient's own discipleship.

Biblical tension: John 18:36; Matthew 5:13-16; Micah 6:8. Jesus distinguishes his kingdom from worldly dominion, while Scripture directs attention to visible goodness, justice, kindness, and humility.

The temptation: Confusing cultural dominance with spiritual faithfulness.

Scripture and context for Letter 6

Part 3 — The Reeducation of Compassion

How moral language can be rearranged to make harshness appear virtuous.

Letter 7 — On Making the Stranger a Threat Rather Than a Neighbor

The patient retains the language of compassion while learning to see unfamiliar people chiefly as members of a threatening category.

Biblical tension: Luke 10:25-37; Matthew 25:35-40; Deuteronomy 10:18-19. Jesus makes neighbor-love concrete through mercy; Deuteronomy grounds love of the stranger in God's care and Israel's remembered vulnerability.

The temptation: Allowing legitimate debates about borders and enforcement to erase individual human dignity.

Scripture and context for Letter 7

Letter 8 — On the Virtue of Cruelty When Properly Renamed Strength

Ridicule and indifference acquire the vocabulary of courage, while compassion is made to sound like an inability to face reality.

Biblical tension: Matthew 9:36; Colossians 3:12-14; Proverbs 31:8-9. Jesus responds to vulnerable people with compassion; Christian character includes gentleness, while rulers are instructed to defend those without a voice.

The temptation: Making empathy appear weak and aggression appear courageous.

Scripture and context for Letter 8

Letter 9 — On Protecting the Unborn While Forgetting the Living

A serious concern for unborn life is narrowed until it can stand in for the patient's other responsibilities toward vulnerable people.

Biblical tension: Psalm 139:13-16; James 2:14-17; Matthew 25:31-46. The wonder of life in the womb stands beside the practical demands of feeding, clothing, welcoming, and caring for people in need.

The temptation: Treating one moral commitment as a substitute for every other responsibility.

Scripture and context for Letter 9

Part 4 — The Manufacture of Truth

How trusted voices, repeated claims, and borrowed authority can shelter belief from examination.

Letter 10 — On Bearing False Witness for the Sake of a Greater Truth

A politically useful allegation becomes easier to circulate than to verify, and harder to acknowledge as misleading once the patient has passed it on.

Biblical tension: Exodus 20:16; Proverbs 12:22; Ephesians 4:25. The prohibition against false witness and the call to truthful speech remain obligations even when a misleading claim serves a cherished cause.

The temptation: Believing that a worthy cause makes accuracy optional.

Scripture and context for Letter 10

Letter 11 — On the Blessed Assurance of Hearing Only What One Already Believes

Commentators, leaders, and audiences repeat one another's claims until familiarity begins to feel like independent confirmation.

Biblical tension: Proverbs 18:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; 2 Timothy 4:3–4. Wisdom permits examination of a persuasive account; Paul calls for testing and warns against choosing teachers chiefly because their teaching is welcome.

The temptation: Confusing repeated claims with verified truth.

Scripture and context for Letter 11

Letter 12 — On the Excellent Progress of the Mechanical Preacher

A convincing religious voice offers genuine verses and reassuring conclusions while obscuring the interpreter, the context, and the reasoning between them.

Biblical tension: Matthew 7:15–20; 1 John 4:1; Acts 17:11. Religious appearance is subject to discernment, and even eagerly received teaching is examined against Scripture.

The temptation: Mistaking fluent presentation and genuine quotations for reliable interpretation.

Scripture and context for Letter 12

Part 5 — The Final Transformation

How belonging can make correction feel like betrayal, and ordinary obedience become a threat to everything the tempters have built.

Letter 13 — On the Sin of Changing One's Mind

The patient is encouraged to hear correction as a demand to betray his family, his church, and the person he has publicly claimed to be.

Biblical tension: Proverbs 12:15; James 3:17; Proverbs 28:13. Wisdom listens and remains open to reason; the concealment of wrongdoing is challenged by confession and the abandonment of error.

The temptation: Replacing humility and repentance with loyalty to a group.

Scripture and context for Letter 13

Letter 14 — On the Proper Use of the Pulpit as a Political Instrument

The pastor's desire to protect his congregation and preserve its unity becomes material for avoiding the correction it needs.

Biblical tension: John 10:11–13; Galatians 1:10; James 3:1. Jesus contrasts the shepherd's costly care with the hired hand's retreat; teachers face accountability beyond the approval of their listeners.

The temptation: Substituting audience approval, institutional security, or political influence for spiritual leadership.

Scripture and context for Letter 14

Letter 15 — On the Unfortunate Possibility That They Might Read the Gospels Again

Screwtape considers the danger of familiar teachings becoming personal obligations that the patient can no longer safely admire from a distance.

Biblical tension: Matthew 5–7; Luke 6:27–36; John 13:34–35. Jesus' teachings make love, mercy, truthful conduct, and obedience tests of a life that religious identification alone cannot satisfy.

The temptation: Keeping religious identity detached from personal moral examination.

Scripture and context for Letter 15

Part 1 — The Capture of the Conscience

How ordinary religious commitments can be redirected
toward political ends.

Letters 1-3

Letter 1: On the Useful Distinction Between Character and Leadership

My dear Wormwood,

Your latest correspondence has given me considerable satisfaction, though I must caution you against the premature celebration that so often betrays the inexperienced tempter. You report that your patient, a devout American Christian, has begun defending the conduct of a political leader whom, only a few years earlier, he would have considered morally unfit to supervise a church picnic.

Excellent.

But you seem to believe that your task is nearly complete. You write triumphantly that the patient no longer regards his chosen leader's dishonesty, unfaithfulness, or public cruelty as reasons to withhold his support. This is encouraging, certainly. But you have misunderstood the nature of our achievement. We do not want the patient to abandon his belief in Christian character. We want him to preserve that belief so enthusiastically that he fails to notice when he has ceased applying it.

A man who openly rejects the moral teachings of the Enemy may eventually recognize the distance he has traveled. He may even experience one of those revolting awakenings of conscience that have undone so much of our best work. Far better that he continue attending church, reading his Bible, and lamenting the decline of Christian values. The more frequently he speaks of them, the more useful he may become, provided we exercise proper control over what he means.

The problem of the Enemy's inconvenient consistency

You will remember that the Enemy, during His regrettable time on Earth, displayed a most irritating consistency in His moral expectations. "You will recognize them by their fruits," He declared in the seventh chapter of Matthew. He was warning His hearers about false prophets. An unfortunate metaphor: fruit can be examined without reference to the gardener's claims about the quality of his trees. A patient who learns to examine the conduct of someone claiming spiritual authority may acquire a habit we would prefer him not to carry into the rest of his life.

A political leader may promise to defend Christianity while displaying qualities that Christians have traditionally been instructed to resist: pride, cruelty, dishonesty, vindictiveness, and an extravagant appetite for personal admiration. The patient might even conclude that promises to protect the church do not automatically excuse conduct that violates the teachings of its Founder. We must therefore introduce a distinction between the character required of ordinary Christians and the character required of those who wield political power. The distinction must appear not merely reasonable but sophisticated.

Tell the patient that the world is a dangerous place. This is true enough. Tell him that nations face enemies, that governments must make difficult decisions, and that leadership sometimes demands qualities different from those appropriate to private life. Also true, within limits. Then encourage him to move quietly from the proposition that political leadership involves difficult moral judgments to the proposition that political leaders should not be judged by ordinary moral standards at all. Do not hurry this transition. It is one of our most valuable achievements when a patient arrives at an outrageous conclusion by a series of individually respectable steps.

The remarkable usefulness of King David

For this purpose, I recommend the biblical King David. David is among our most useful historical figures, provided his story is told selectively. He committed adultery. He arranged a man's death. He abused the power entrusted to him. Yet he remained a towering figure in Israel's history. The Enemy continued working through him.

Suggest to the patient that God has always used flawed men to accomplish His purposes. This statement is entirely defensible. Indeed, it is almost impossible to read the Bible without reaching some version of it. Then make one small adjustment. If God can use a deeply flawed man, perhaps the man's flaws are irrelevant to whether Christians should support him. Another adjustment follows naturally. If the man accomplishes something Christians desire, perhaps his success demonstrates that God has chosen him. And finally, if God has chosen him, perhaps Christians who question his behavior are actually resisting the purposes of God.

We began with the orthodox teaching that divine grace can operate through imperfect human beings. We arrived at the delightful suggestion that a leader's success places his personal conduct beyond criticism. The Enemy's mercy has been converted into a certificate of moral exemption.

There is, unfortunately, a danger in using David. The biblical account includes a prophet named Nathan. Nathan confronted David directly, condemned his conduct, and refused to confuse royal authority with moral innocence. Worse, David acknowledged his sin. If the patient discovers that God's willingness to use David did not prevent God from judging David, our argument becomes considerably less comfortable.

Therefore, when discussing David, emphasize his greatness, his anointing, and his place in sacred history. Mention his repentance only when absolutely necessary. And avoid Nathan wherever possible. Prophets have an irritating habit of speaking to kings as though kings were subject to the same moral laws as everyone else.

The patient must next be trained in the selective application of moral outrage. When a political opponent lies, the patient should recognize a profound crisis of character. When his preferred leader lies, he should recognize the pressures of leadership, the unfairness of the press, the complexities of communication, or perhaps merely an unfortunate choice of words. When an opponent displays arrogance, it should be understood as evidence of a corrupt soul. When his own leader displays arrogance, it should be praised as confidence.

Cruelty in an opponent becomes evidence of moral depravity; in an ally, toughness. Vindictiveness becomes accountability. And shamelessness, that most useful of qualities, becomes an admirable refusal to surrender to one's critics.

The beauty of this arrangement is that the patient need never consciously decide to abandon his moral principles. He can remain passionately attached to them. He merely learns to apply them according to the political identity of the person being judged.

I particularly recommend that you preserve the patient's indignation at the moral failings of public figures he opposes. Indignation is wonderfully exhausting. A man who spends his days cataloging the sins of his enemies will have comparatively little energy left for examining the conduct of his friends. Better still, he may mistake his constant outrage for evidence of an unusually sensitive Christian conscience.

The splendid argument of necessity

There will nevertheless come moments when the patient's old moral training threatens to reassert itself. Perhaps his leader will say something so obviously unkind that even the patient finds it difficult to defend. Perhaps a particularly ugly falsehood will be exposed. Perhaps the patient will hear words from his chosen champion that he would never tolerate from his own son. This is where the argument of necessity becomes indispensable. Tell him that the alternative is worse. Do not concern yourself too greatly with proving this in each particular instance. The proposition need only seem sufficiently plausible to prevent further examination.

The patient should come to believe that he faces a permanent emergency. His country is on the brink of destruction, his faith one election away from extinction. Once this atmosphere has been established, ordinary moral reservations begin to appear irresponsible. The man who taught his children that character matters may explain that it must occasionally take second place to winning. Because the emergency is never permitted to end, the exception gradually becomes the rule.

You must especially cultivate the phrase "This is not the time." Criticism, honesty, humility: all must wait until the danger has passed. The patient need not deny that they matter. He need only keep postponing the occasion upon which they do.

One of your most promising developments is the patient's growing fondness for describing his leader as "imperfect." A magnificent word. All human beings are imperfect. The patient knows this from Scripture, from experience, and from his own conscience. Consequently, whenever someone raises a serious moral objection to the leader's conduct, the patient may respond that no one is perfect. The objection is thereby absorbed into a universal truth.

A calculated deception becomes an imperfection. A pattern of public cruelty becomes an imperfection. The deliberate

humiliation of another person becomes an imperfection. The patient can now regard criticism of serious misconduct as an unreasonable demand for sinless leadership. This maneuver depends upon blurring the distinction between acknowledging that everyone sins and refusing to evaluate the seriousness, repetition, or consequences of particular sins.

The Enemy, as you know, is annoyingly unwilling to accept this confusion. He appears to believe that while no human being is perfect, human beings remain responsible for their actions. He even expects them to repent. Repentance is a particularly offensive concept because it requires the sinner to admit that something actually was wrong.

Our preferred alternative is explanation. Why should the leader repent when his defenders can explain? Why acknowledge cruelty when it can be attributed to provocation? Why acknowledge dishonesty when it can be characterized as strategy? Why acknowledge pride when it can be renamed confidence? Under no circumstances allow the patient to notice that he now spends more time explaining away misconduct than urging the person responsible to abandon it.

The importance of keeping the standards high at home

The patient must continue insisting upon Christian character in his ordinary relationships: honesty from his children, faithfulness from his spouse, integrity from his pastor. He should remain sincerely distressed when a young man cheats on an examination or a minister abuses his position. These expectations are essential to our work, for nothing so effectively disguises moral inconsistency as the continued possession of genuine moral convictions.

Your report of supper is more instructive than your assurances that the patient has understood our argument. His son had denied leaving an assignment unfinished. The school had supplied inconvenient evidence, and the patient had explained that a lie does not become true because it saves one from embarrassment. He was quite gentle at first. The boy's

fear of disappointing him was real; nevertheless, fear could explain the falsehood without excusing it. You will notice that the patient already possesses the distinction we are trying to make him lose.

His wife asked the boy to put the dishes away, and for a few minutes the conversation moved on. Then the television in the adjoining room repeated a disputed claim made by the patient's preferred leader. A longer recording contradicted it. The patient had seen the recording; we cannot claim the advantage of ignorance here. He remarked that the press was making too much of an ordinary exaggeration. The man was fighting people who would do far worse. Besides, one had to consider what he was accomplishing.

The boy, who was still within hearing, asked whether doing something important made it permissible to say something untrue. His father replied that it did not. The question seemed harmless while it remained general. Then the child asked what made this case different.

Here, Wormwood, you nearly lost him. The patient began to answer and discovered that the answer he had prepared for a political opponent sounded remarkably like the answer he had just refused to accept from his son. He could have allowed the discovery to stand. Instead, he said, "Politics is complicated."

The boy did not dispute this. He merely asked whether the statement had been true. It is a pity that children sometimes lack the sophistication to abandon the question actually under discussion.

Your prompt intervention was acceptable. You reminded the patient of the opposition, the election, the judges, the hostility toward his church: the whole crowded procession of concerns with which we can obscure a single plain obligation. Soon he was explaining the national situation instead of answering his son. The boy listened, withdrew his question, and finished clearing the table. Do not mistake that withdrawal for agreement. Your patient has won the conversation chiefly because he is the father.

Later his wife asked why he had been so much harder on the boy than on the man on the television. He took this to mean that she wished him to lower his standards for their son. Excellent: that interpretation permitted him to defend honesty with renewed conviction. She had meant something considerably more dangerous. She wondered whether he could preserve the same standard in both cases.

We must train him to hear such questions as invitations to abandon his cause. Otherwise he may discover that his wife has asked him to preserve his principles, not to exchange his politics. He may support a leader, approve a policy, and still acknowledge a falsehood. That combination would deprive us of the choice upon which so much of our work depends: defend everything or betray everything.

For the present, he has gone to bed satisfied that he defended his son's moral education. Yet he remembers the pause before his answer. Attend to that pause. We do not require him to forget the question; a remembered question can become useful if he learns to resent whoever asked it. What we cannot permit is for him to answer it honestly.

If handled properly, both father and son will believe they have received Christian instruction. Only one of them will have been taught when to suspend it.

The supper reveals why Paul's inventory in the fifth chapter of Galatians remains troublesome: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. The patient knows these qualities well enough to ask for them in his household. Paul describes them as the fruit of the Spirit, not optional ornaments to be displayed when circumstances permit. He offers no allowance by which people pursuing sufficiently important objectives may replace them with rage, contempt, arrogance, and vengeance.

You must therefore encourage the patient to admire these virtues in the abstract while treating them as liabilities in the political arena. Gentleness is admirable in a Sunday school teacher, but a national leader must be tough. Peace is a noble

aspiration, but conflict wins elections. Self-control is a virtue, certainly, but perhaps a certain volatility keeps one's adversaries uncertain.

Eventually the patient may come to regard the actual fruits of the Spirit as evidence that someone is unsuited to leadership. Meanwhile, the qualities Paul warns against may be celebrated as proof of courage. We would have succeeded in teaching a Christian to praise as political virtues the very characteristics his religion instructs him to resist.

One final point, Wormwood. Do not allow your patient to become entirely cynical. Cynicism is dangerous because it can eventually turn upon the object of its own loyalty. A man who knows that all political leaders are merely self-serving manipulators may someday withdraw the admiration upon which we depend.

We want sincere belief. The patient must genuinely believe he is defending Christianity. He must genuinely fear for his country. He must genuinely admire the leader who promises to protect what he holds sacred. He must continue loving his church, praying for his family, and regarding the moral teachings of the Enemy with reverence. Only one thing must change. When those teachings conflict with the demands of his political loyalty, he must instinctively reinterpret the teachings rather than reconsider the loyalty.

If confronted with the Enemy's command to love one's enemies, he should explain why his political opponents constitute a special case. If reminded that the peacemakers are blessed, he should insist that peace can only come after victory. If asked whether pride and cruelty are consistent with Christian leadership, he should cite David, or Cyrus, or the necessity of strong men in dangerous times. If the Enemy's own words become too inconvenient, the patient should be taught to regard their literal application as naïve. The man who once insisted that Scripture must govern every area of life will begin treating its clearest moral teachings as impractical whenever politics is concerned. And he will consider this not a departure from faith but a sign of maturity.

A final warning

You ask whether the patient's transformation is irreversible. Certainly not. I regret to inform you that the Enemy remains capable of the most infuriating interventions. The patient might encounter a Christian who shares his political priorities but refuses to excuse misconduct. He might hear a pastor insist that moral accountability applies equally to political friends and enemies. He might read the Gospels without the comforting assistance of his preferred commentators. Worst of all, he might recall a simple principle he once taught his children: that doing the right thing matters most when doing it is difficult.

A man who begins applying his own professed standards consistently may discover that much of what he has been defending cannot be defended on the grounds he has offered. Do not allow him to reach that point.

Keep him occupied with the failings of the opposition. Keep him fearful of the future. Keep him grateful to the leader who promises protection. Keep him convinced that every moral objection is secretly an attempt to undermine his faith. And whenever the old question of character arises, remind him that he is not choosing a pastor. He is choosing a leader.

Do not permit him to ask why this distinction should make dishonesty less dishonest, cruelty less cruel, or pride less proud. For if he begins asking that question, he may eventually arrive at an even more dangerous one:

If I must set aside so much of what Jesus taught in order to defend this man, which of the two am I actually following?

That, my dear Wormwood, is a question we must never allow him to answer.

Your affectionate uncle,

SCREWTAPE

Letter 2: On the Convenient Conversion of Fear into Faith

My dear Wormwood,

Your latest report gives me cause for concern, though not for the reason you suppose. You write that your patient has begun to worry about the bitterness that increasingly accompanies his political convictions. He has noticed that he feels less charitable toward strangers, less patient with those who disagree with him, and more inclined to regard entire groups of human beings as threats. Worse still, he has begun to wonder whether these feelings are consistent with the teachings of the Enemy.

You propose that we should persuade him to stop worrying about his moral condition. That is the mistake which concerns me. The worry provides a question to which we can supply a reassuring answer: his fear of evil is itself evidence of his righteousness. Why abandon so useful an opportunity merely because the Enemy might also make use of it?

A frightened Christian who knows he is frightened may eventually seek courage from the Enemy. A frightened Christian who believes his fear is a gift of spiritual discernment presents us with far more interesting possibilities. You must therefore learn to distinguish between fear as an emotion and fear as an identity. The former is temporary and often unpleasant. The latter can organize an entire life. Our task is to transform the first into the second.

On the extraordinary usefulness of an approaching catastrophe

The human imagination is poorly equipped to distinguish reliably between a danger that is possible, a danger that is probable, and a danger that is already occurring. This weakness is one of our department's oldest advantages. Your patient, I understand, enjoys watching religious commentators who describe current events as signs of an approaching national catastrophe.

There is no need to fabricate every danger. Societies experience real problems. Nations face legitimate threats. Crime occurs. Economic hardship is real. Cultural and political changes can produce genuine uncertainty. Our purpose is not to persuade the patient that danger exists where none exists. It is to prevent him from evaluating danger proportionately.

Arrange for him to encounter the most disturbing examples repeatedly, preferably accompanied by images that awaken his protective instincts. One frightening incident should become evidence of an approaching collapse. One criminal should become representative of a population. One extreme statement should become the hidden intention of an entire political movement. One unusual event should be treated as proof that everything familiar is disappearing.

The patient need not be instructed to hate anyone. He need only be kept in a sufficiently prolonged state of alarm that suspicion begins to feel like prudence. Eventually, he will mistake the constant anticipation of catastrophe for a sober understanding of the world. And because his anxiety concerns the future of his children, his country, and his church, he will consider it a particularly noble form of anxiety.

The problem of perfect love

There is, regrettably, a passage in the first letter of John that may interfere with our plans: "perfect love casts out fear." The passage concerns confidence before the Enemy and fear of judgment, not a promise that ordinary dangers cease to exist. A most unfortunate declaration nonetheless. Confidence in divine love may make a patient less willing to let terror govern him elsewhere.

Persuade him that this confidence has no bearing upon the fears governing the rest of his life. He may trust the Enemy concerning the ultimate fate of his soul while remaining terrified that his neighbors, institutions, and country are on the verge of destruction. This separation is most useful. The patient can sing hymns about trusting divine providence on Sunday morning and spend Sunday evening consuming predictions of impending disaster. He may testify that God is sovereign while behaving as though the survival of God's purposes depends entirely upon the next election.

Indeed, encourage him to regard the intensity of his concern as proof of his devotion. A man who worries constantly about the future of Christianity must surely care deeply about Christianity. A man who fears for his country must surely love his country. And a man who suspects outsiders of threatening everything he cherishes must surely be a vigilant protector of his family.

We have converted anxiety into evidence of virtue. The more frightened he becomes, the more righteous he feels.

You supply a small incident which reveals how far we have advanced. After an evening of warnings, his wife suggested they take a walk. The patient agreed, put on his shoes, and then saw another notification. By the time he had finished the video, she had returned alone. He apologized and began explaining what she had missed.

She replied that she had missed him. A dangerous ambiguity. He might have understood her to mean that his attention had been absent even when his body was in the

room. Fortunately, he heard a complaint about the amount of news he watched. This gave him something easier to defend. How could a responsible husband remain ignorant of dangers to his family?

Keep that defense ready. The actual walk would have required twenty minutes, a little listening, and no opinion about national events. We induced him to neglect a person within reach in order to rehearse concern for millions beyond it. He felt the more responsible for doing so.

The subject of immigration deserves particular care. The Enemy has left an extremely inconvenient collection of instructions concerning foreigners, strangers, and vulnerable people. In Leviticus, the Israelites are told to love the stranger dwelling among them. In Deuteronomy, divine concern for the stranger is presented as an expression of the Enemy's own character. And in Matthew, the Enemy identifies hospitality toward strangers with service rendered to Himself. I find the last passage especially objectionable. The suggestion that the Creator of the universe might identify Himself with a vulnerable outsider is precisely the kind of moral inversion that has made His teaching so troublesome to our operations.

Begin with the entirely reasonable proposition that nations require laws. Then remind him that immigration systems involve difficult questions of security, capacity, fairness, and public responsibility. Again, there is nothing inherently false in this. Indeed, the distinction between prudence and imprudence in public policy is a legitimate subject of human deliberation. Our opportunity lies in encouraging him to abandon that distinction altogether. Rather than asking how a society can enforce its laws while preserving the dignity of those affected, he should gradually come to regard compassion itself as evidence of political weakness.

When he hears about a family seeking refuge, let his first thought be about the possible danger they represent. When he sees children frightened by an encounter with authorities, encourage him to wonder whether the children are being used to manipulate public opinion. When he learns of suffering in a

detention facility, direct his attention immediately toward the importance of deterrence. He need not deny that the suffering exists. He need only learn to regard its moral significance as secondary to the political argument he wishes to defend. The ideal result is a man who continues believing that every human being bears the image of God but has developed a remarkably efficient system for avoiding the implications of that belief.

On the importance of not knowing their names

One of the Enemy's most irritating habits was His attention to individuals. He noticed beggars. He spoke with despised outsiders. He approached the sick. He allowed children to interrupt Him. He seemed positively determined to prevent people from disappearing into the categories society had constructed for them.

The patient should encounter strangers primarily as statistics, headlines, and collective nouns. Not Maria, who fled an abusive household. Not Samuel, who crossed a border hoping to support his children. Not a frightened family navigating a legal process they scarcely understand. Such particulars are dangerous. They complicate the patient's ability to maintain a single emotional response toward an entire population.

Instead, give him abstractions. "The migrants." "The illegals." "The invasion." "The threat." "The problem." You must understand that the choice of a collective term is not always malicious. Governments and journalists must frequently discuss large populations, and ordinary language necessarily groups people into categories. Our opportunity arises when the category replaces the person completely.

Once that happens, the patient can discuss the fate of thousands without once imagining a human face. He can contemplate severe consequences without considering the suffering of any particular family. He can even become indignant when someone introduces an individual story,

regarding the act of humanizing the subject as an attempt to evade the larger issue.

We have made attention to the individual appear intellectually dishonest. Meanwhile, emotional generalization about the entire group feels like realism. The Enemy's instruction to love the stranger becomes easier to neglect when the stranger is never permitted to appear.

You report that the patient sometimes feels an instinctive sympathy when confronted with images of suffering. Such impulses are troublesome, but they can be redirected. Tell him that sympathy is precisely what his enemies hope to exploit. Suggest that compassionate images are designed to manipulate him. Remind him that feelings can be misleading. All this contains sufficient truth to pass for wisdom. Then encourage him to make the fatal inference: because compassion can be manipulated, compassion itself is suspect.

The Enemy seems to expect His followers to combine mercy with judgment, kindness with prudence, and generosity with responsibility. We must convince the patient that these qualities are mutually exclusive. He must believe that to show mercy is to abandon discernment. That to express concern for a vulnerable person is to surrender the rule of law. That to question unnecessary harshness is to place innocent people at risk. And that to insist upon human dignity is to reveal an embarrassing inability to understand the real world.

Eventually, the patient will regard emotional hardness as evidence of spiritual maturity. He will speak admiringly of having learned not to be fooled by appeals to sympathy. He will congratulate himself on refusing to be sentimental. He may even mistake the gradual disappearance of compassion from his political judgments for the development of Christian wisdom.

For the patient has not merely become less compassionate. He has learned to regard the loss as an improvement in his character.

On the admirable business of feeding the frightened

You mention that your patient's favorite commentators have begun warning him that the next election may determine whether Christianity survives in America. This is promising, but the mechanism deserves your attention. Fear, if left alone, may eventually exhaust its victim. An exhausted man sometimes turns off the television, walks outside, speaks with his neighbors, and discovers that the world is less uniformly terrifying than he had supposed.

The fear must be continually replenished. Fortunately, modern communication provides a system far superior to anything available during the great religious controversies of earlier centuries. The patient can now carry an entire congregation of alarmists in his pocket. At breakfast, he may receive a warning about the collapse of his country. At luncheon, another concerning the corruption of his children's schools. By afternoon, he may learn that his church faces imminent persecution. And in the evening, an earnest religious commentator will assure him that he is among the faithful remnant who understand what is really happening.

The commentators need not coordinate with one another. Each has an audience that rewards urgency. Each knows that ordinary developments attract less attention than extraordinary warnings. Each learns that the more frightened the audience becomes, the more eagerly it seeks reassurance from the very source that frightened it.

The patient returns each day to the people who have made him anxious because he believes they are the only people sufficiently honest to explain his anxiety. The reassurance lasts just long enough to bring him back for the next warning. Leave the finer arrangements among politicians, broadcasters, and audiences for later; at present, watch the habit forming in this one household. He has begun checking the telephone even when there is nothing he can do about what it tells him.

We need no agreement among the speakers about every subject. We need them to agree that he cannot safely stop

listening. Once he has accepted that proposition, an uneventful evening may begin to feel like negligence.

The great advantage of loving one's children

The patient, you tell me, is a devoted father. Parental love is one of the Enemy's most formidable creations, but it can be redirected with surprising ease. A father who loves his children wishes to protect them. This is natural and good. Our task is to persuade him that protection requires perpetual suspicion. He should see unfamiliar people as potential threats, unfamiliar ideas as deliberate attacks, and ordinary disagreements about education or culture as attempts to destroy his family. He must come to believe that the highest expression of fatherly love is not teaching his children courage, judgment, charity, and truthfulness, but keeping them sufficiently frightened of the world that they never question his preferred sources of authority.

The question is what the child learns from this protection. His father tells him to trust the Enemy, then behaves as though the family's safety depends upon hearing every warning. The boy need not understand the contradiction to be instructed by it.

The boy has begun asking whether their family will be safe. This ought to please you less than you suppose. The question may confront the father with the effect of his own instruction. You write that he answered confidently, then checked his telephone again before the child had left the room. The Enemy can make considerable use of that discrepancy.

Let the patient explain that good fathers must remain alert. Do not let him ask whether his son is learning alertness or simply learning that reassurance cannot be trusted. In time the child may recognize the daily warnings as a demand to be afraid; for now, he hears them in the voice of someone he loves. We have borrowed an authority no commentator could have earned alone. And because the father is acting from love,

he may find it especially difficult to examine what he has passed along.

There remains the Samaritan in Luke. I shall not rehearse the whole affair here; the patient knows it well enough to approve of it. Our task is to ensure that his approval never interrupts an instinct. When a stranger appears in a frightening report, he must first see the group he fears, not the person whom the Enemy's story instructs him to approach.

The parable's most troublesome feature is the helper's identity. A man regarded with suspicion proves capable of the very goodness the hearer professes to admire. That is why we prefer strangers at a distance. The patient can praise the Samaritan in church and suspect every unfamiliar face on the way home, provided the two activities never meet in his imagination.

We shall have more to say about this should an actual stranger enter his household. For now, preserve the separation: mercy belongs to the lesson; suspicion belongs to life.

On the difference between vigilance and captivity

There is a danger that your patient may eventually grow tired of being afraid. He may notice that each political victory leads immediately to warnings about the next existential threat. Worse, he may discover the cost of remaining attentive to them: another conversation abandoned, another question from his son answered while he looks at a screen. The Enemy's command to love his neighbor does not guarantee that the neighbor will be familiar, agreeable, or safe. But the patient has not even managed to accompany his wife around the block. Do not let him compare the vigilance he claims with the attention he actually gives.

Should this occur, you must act immediately. Remind him that compassion is complicated. Remind him that the world is dangerous. Remind him that he cannot afford to be naïve.

Above all, prevent him from asking whether a faithful Christian can acknowledge danger without surrendering to fear.

He may discover that courage is not the absence of danger, but the refusal to allow danger to determine one's character. He may recognize that prudence and mercy are not enemies. He may understand that recognizing the dignity of a stranger does not require abandoning the responsibilities of citizenship. He may even come to suspect that his constant consumption of frightening messages has not made him more discerning, but merely more frightened.

And then he may do something truly catastrophic. He may turn off the voices that have taught him to fear. He may open the Gospels. He may read the Enemy's repeated instructions concerning mercy, hospitality, love, and trust. And, without anyone explaining away their meaning for him, he may begin to take them seriously.

A Christian who believes his faithfulness requires him to remain frightened is exceptionally useful to us. A Christian who discovers that faithfulness may require him to act courageously despite his fears is another matter altogether. The former can be persuaded to accept almost any cruelty as the necessary price of safety. The latter may insist that even necessary precautions must be governed by truth, justice, and compassion.

Keep him vigilant. Keep him informed. Keep him concerned. Keep him convinced that the Enemy's work is forever on the brink of defeat.

And whenever his conscience whispers that fear is beginning to govern his conduct, assure him that this is not fear at all. It is discernment. It is responsibility. It is courage. It is faith.

There is no more agreeable accomplishment, my dear Wormwood, than teaching a man to call his chains a shield.

Your affectionate uncle,

SCREWTAPE

Letter 3: On the Christian's Delight in Having Enemies

My dear Wormwood,

I have received your latest report with an enthusiasm that I trust you will not mistake for approval of your methods. You write that your patient, formerly a rather gentle and agreeable Christian, has developed an intense dislike for his political opponents. He now refers to them as wicked, dangerous, dishonest, and occasionally less flattering things which I shall not repeat here, though I assure you they have been received with considerable appreciation in the Lowerarchy.

You are naturally delighted. You believe you have succeeded in teaching him to hate. My dear boy, you have barely begun.

Hatred, by itself, is a crude and unstable accomplishment. The patient may recognize it, feel ashamed, and attempt to love the very people he has learned to despise. We require him to regard his hatred as proof of his love for God. Then repentance will appear to him as a retreat from righteousness, and loving his enemies as a betrayal of everything holy. That is an achievement worth reporting.

On the Enemy's most unreasonable commandment

You will remember the Enemy's extraordinary instruction in the fifth chapter of Matthew: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." An appalling commandment. It would have been difficult enough had He instructed His followers merely to tolerate their enemies or refrain from injuring them. He went further, grounding the requirement to love in the character of His Father, who sends rain upon the just and the unjust alike.

The Enemy apparently expects His followers to extend goodwill even toward people whose conduct they oppose. He

does not require them to approve of wrongdoing. He does not forbid them from seeking justice or defending the vulnerable. But He refuses to permit opposition to evil to become an excuse for abandoning love. This is precisely the distinction we must destroy. The patient must learn to believe that moral opposition and personal hatred are inseparable. If he believes his political opponents are wrong, he must conclude that they deserve his contempt. If he believes their policies are harmful, he must regard their supporters as morally contemptible. If he believes their ideas threaten his children, he must feel justified in speaking of them with whatever cruelty his imagination can produce.

The command provides no exemption for enemies who seem especially dangerous or hold objectionable political opinions. Its difficulty is part of the instruction. Let the patient assume that the Enemy intended something easier, perhaps for a gentler age. The actual hearers lived under Roman rule, but that detail need not trouble a man who is certain that his own difficulties are without precedent.

On converting disagreement into depravity

Political disagreement, considered merely as disagreement, is insufficient for our purposes. A man may strongly oppose another person's policies while acknowledging that the other person possesses good intentions. This leaves too much room for charity. Persuade the patient that his opponents knowingly desire the harm he fears. A disagreement about caring for the poor becomes evidence that they despise the poor; a different account of religious liberty proves that they hate Christianity. Once he has assigned them these intentions, listening to their actual reasons will seem an unnecessary courtesy.

It is essential that these conclusions be reached without excessive attention to evidence. Evidence introduces complications. An opponent may turn out to be a devoted parent, a charitable neighbor, a faithful churchgoer, or a person who has arrived at different conclusions through sincere reflection. Such discoveries are profoundly

inconvenient. It is much better that the patient encounter his opponents primarily through their least attractive representatives.

Every political movement contains foolish people. Every ideology attracts its share of hypocrites. Every large group eventually produces someone willing to say something outrageous in public. Our modern instruments allow us to locate these people with extraordinary efficiency. Find the most offensive remark. Remove whatever context might complicate it. Present it as representative of millions. Repeat it until the patient can scarcely imagine that anyone in the opposing group thinks differently. Then repeat the process the following day.

Before long, the patient will cease opposing particular ideas and begin despising whole categories of human beings. And he will congratulate himself for having developed moral clarity.

You ask whether the Enemy's own Scriptures do not sometimes express anger toward wickedness. They do, unfortunately. The prophets denounce injustice. The Psalms contain fierce expressions of outrage. The Enemy Himself displayed anger toward hypocrisy and exploitation. These examples can be most useful when detached from their proper context. Encourage your patient to describe his political resentment as righteous anger. The phrase is magnificent. It allows him to preserve his conviction that hatred is sinful while making an exception for the hatred he currently enjoys. Indeed, the more intensely he despises his opponents, the more firmly he may believe he is participating in the moral seriousness of the prophets.

The prophets frequently condemned the sins of their own people, including those who claimed to possess the Enemy's special favor. They did not merely catalog the wickedness of convenient outsiders. And the Enemy's anger was not a means of protecting His vanity, excusing His friends, or enjoying the humiliation of His enemies.

The patient should reserve his most passionate moral indignation for people outside his political community. Within his own community, patience and understanding must prevail. A political ally may make an appalling statement, and the patient should immediately seek the charitable interpretation. An opponent may make an ambiguous statement, and the patient should immediately seek the most damning interpretation. In this way, he will enjoy all the emotional satisfaction of righteous judgment without suffering the inconvenience of consistent moral standards.

We shall give more attention to the patient's admiration of public aggression when it begins to affect his understanding of strength. For the moment, observe how it has altered his reception of correction. He once taught his son that restraint under provocation was evidence of character. Now, when someone asks him to restrain his own contempt, he wonders whose side that person is on. We have not yet made him enjoy every insult. We have made him suspect the motives of anyone who interrupts the enjoyment.

The importance of laughter

Do not neglect humor, Wormwood. Humor is one of our most efficient instruments for normalizing contempt. A man may hesitate before openly declaring that he despises millions of his fellow citizens. But he will often laugh quite freely at a joke that communicates precisely the same sentiment. Make the jokes frequent. Make them clever when possible, though cleverness is not essential. The important thing is that the object of ridicule should always be someone outside the patient's preferred group. A mocking nickname will do admirable work. So will a humiliating imitation. Better still is a joke suggesting that the opponent is not merely wrong but stupid, diseased, perverted, or less than fully human.

The patient may initially feel a faint objection from his conscience. He was taught, after all, to treat others with dignity. But everyone around him is laughing. The joke receives applause. His favorite commentator repeats it. His

friends share it. Eventually, his discomfort begins to seem humorless and sanctimonious. And because no one wishes to be the person who cannot take a joke, he joins the laughter.

Repeated laughter trains the emotions. The patient who regularly enjoys the humiliation of an opponent will gradually lose the habit of imagining that opponent's suffering as something worthy of compassion. The transition from amusement to indifference is often shorter than the humans suppose. And indifference, properly cultivated, is a most satisfactory preparation for cruelty.

A distant enemy is wonderfully convenient: the patient can imagine him in whatever form best sustains resentment. An acquaintance is more troublesome, since his conduct may refuse to fit the description. Your report supplies an example which you have rather carelessly treated as a domestic detail.

You mention a friend with whom the patient has disagreed for years. The fellow recently brought a meal when the patient's wife was unwell. He left it at the door because he did not wish to tire her. Unfortunately, the patient had spent the previous evening forwarding a joke about people who voted as this man did. The friend knew nothing of the joke, which made his kindness peculiarly difficult to defend against.

Your patient thanked him, warmly enough, and later described him as one of the good ones. Preserve that expression. It permits a man to retain the affection arising from an actual relationship while denying it any bearing upon his larger judgment. The exception protects the rule instead of testing it.

But take care. His wife asked how many good ones he would have to meet before reconsidering what he meant by the others. He changed the subject. This was satisfactory, though I should prefer that he had not needed to.

Prevent further occasions of this kind wherever possible. If he must interact with opponents, let the interaction be organized around argument rather than friendship. In the friendship already before us, remind him that kindness cannot

make the man's politics right. The meal may be appreciated without letting its giver become someone whose correction he would consider.

This is especially useful within families. A brother who votes differently should be regarded not merely as mistaken but as dangerously misled. A sister who questions the patient's favored leader may be accused of having surrendered to propaganda. An adult child who expresses concern about cruelty or dishonesty may be dismissed as naïve. Eventually, ordinary family conversation becomes an arena in which loyalty must constantly be demonstrated. The patient may begin to interpret affection toward dissenting relatives as a kind of weakness. And if family relationships deteriorate, he can console himself that he is suffering for righteousness.

We can then damage a human bond and persuade the patient that the damage testifies to his faithfulness.

The Enemy within the church

You report that a member of the patient's congregation recently questioned whether Christians should speak about political opponents with greater charity. Do not encourage the patient to consider the substance of the objection. Instead, redirect his attention toward the questioner's loyalties. Why is this person so concerned about the feelings of political opponents? Why does he criticize harsh rhetoric rather than the people whose policies supposedly made harsh rhetoric necessary? Why does he seem more interested in being agreeable than in defending the truth? The patient must come to suspect that calls for Christian love are sometimes disguised attempts to weaken Christian resistance.

Now, it is certainly possible for appeals to civility to be used dishonestly. There are circumstances in which powerful people invoke politeness to avoid accountability. There are occasions when genuine injustice requires firm opposition. We may exploit these truths by persuading the patient that every

appeal to charity is suspect. In this way, any correction to his behavior can be interpreted as an attack upon his cause.

His pastor has recently preached about loving enemies. The patient called the sermon political, although he warmly praised an earlier denunciation of a public figure he opposes. Do not permit him to compare these judgments. He will explain that one sermon was divisive while the other merely proclaimed the truth. If this response becomes common in the congregation, the pastor may learn to anticipate it before he speaks. A church reluctant to challenge the sins of its own members and allies performs a service remarkably close to our own.

You must also encourage the patient to believe that defeating his political enemies is itself a moral accomplishment. The Enemy commanded His followers to overcome evil with good. We shall teach the patient to overcome his opponents by whatever means appear effective, and then to regard the victory as evidence that goodness has prevailed.

He will measure righteousness by outcomes favorable to his political community. If his side wins, the cause of good has advanced. If his opponents suffer embarrassment, justice has been served. If an adversary loses employment, status, or influence, the patient may experience genuine satisfaction. He need not consider whether the punishment is proportionate, whether the accusation was accurate, or whether the person has been treated fairly. The individual is an enemy. And the enemy's misfortune feels like progress.

This is particularly important because the Enemy's teachings contain an inconvenient prohibition against rejoicing in the suffering of others. Paul instructed believers to bless those who persecute them. He told them not to repay evil for evil. He urged them, insofar as possible, to live peaceably with all. These instructions can be made almost entirely invisible if the patient comes to understand politics as an endless contest in which the suffering of opponents is synonymous with the success of righteousness.

He may then discover that he feels happiest when someone he dislikes has been humiliated. And he will call this happiness justice.

The strange danger of praying for one's enemies

There is one use of prayer you must discourage with particular diligence. The patient may pray frequently for his country's protection and for the success of leaders he trusts; such prayers need not interfere with our plans. The danger arises when he begins taking literally the Enemy's instruction to pray for those who persecute him.

For a sincere prayer of this kind requires the patient to imagine his opponent as a human being standing before the same Creator. He may ask that the opponent be granted wisdom. He may pray for the opponent's family. He may wish for the opponent's repentance where repentance is needed, and for his own correction where he has judged unfairly. He may even begin to desire the opponent's genuine good rather than merely his defeat.

A man cannot easily sustain uncomplicated contempt for someone whose well-being he sincerely desires. You must therefore steer the patient's prayers toward the language of conquest. Let him pray that the Enemy will crush his political adversaries. Let him ask for their plans to fail. Let him give thanks when they are publicly embarrassed. If he insists upon praying for their souls, encourage him to do so in a tone suggesting that their moral inferiority is already beyond dispute. Under no circumstances permit him to pray with the humility that recognizes his own need for grace.

After the pastor mentioned this command, the patient tried praying for a public figure he particularly dislikes. His opening was promising: he asked that the man be shown the error of his ways. Then he began listing the errors. Before long he was rehearsing the same accusations he had heard on the way to church, with the addition of the Enemy's name at suitable

intervals. He rose from prayer more certain of his opponent's wickedness than when he had knelt.

That is a serviceable practice. Do not let it develop into an inquiry about what the man actually needs, still less about what the patient himself needs. If he asks for both to receive mercy, we shall have lost the advantage of unequal standing. Prayer must remain another place where he can win an argument against an absent person.

Do not let him read this command beside the rest of the fifth chapter of Matthew. The blessings upon the meek, the merciful, and the peacemakers, the demand for reconciliation, and the warning against contemptuous speech may disturb his method of prayer. He might recognize that the Enemy is examining the dispositions he has carried into it. Avoiding an outward injury will no longer seem sufficient if he is using the Enemy's presence to rehearse his desire for another man's disgrace.

The patient might even realize that his political enemies have become indispensable to his emotional life. He thinks about them constantly. He discusses them with enthusiasm. He anticipates their failures. He watches videos celebrating their humiliation. He feels a delicious surge of satisfaction whenever they are defeated. Far from freeing him from their influence, hatred has made them central to his existence. The Enemy, meanwhile, has become comparatively peripheral. The patient still speaks His name, of course. He still praises Him. But his daily emotional life is organized less around love of the Enemy than around opposition to the people he has been taught to despise. This arrangement would be entirely satisfactory were it not for the possibility that the patient might notice it.

The opponent who will not behave properly

Return to the meal at his door. The friend asked for no agreement in exchange for it. This is the feature you must prevent the patient from dwelling upon. He himself would find it difficult to offer kindness without hoping that the recipient might recognize the superiority of his convictions. The friend has provided something more troublesome than a good argument: an example of care that did not wait for a concession.

For the present, the patient can dismiss him as an exception. But suppose the man later corrects an unfair statement without contempt, or acknowledges a criticism of his own side. The patient may begin trusting his conduct enough to hear something he says. We do not require every opponent to behave badly; we require your patient to notice chiefly those who do. This one friend may interfere with the arrangement because he is already welcome at the door.

The danger is not that the patient will adopt the man's politics. It is that he will discover that their disagreement does not prevent either of them from owing the other honesty and care. He may then apply the discovery beyond this friendship, where affection can no longer make obedience easy. He might stop asking whether his enemies deserve his love and begin asking whether his Lord requires it.

Keep the two questions distinct in his mind. A man who treats love as a reward can always discover some disqualification in the person he dislikes. A man who recognizes it as an obligation may continue opposing injustice with determination while refusing to make another person's humiliation the object of his joy. He may even insist that justice and mercy are not rivals. And that, my dear Wormwood, would be a calamity.

Our aim is to ensure that the patient's Christianity becomes an increasingly elaborate explanation of why he need not behave like Christ. Keep him angry. Keep him certain. Keep him surrounded by people who share his contempt. And

whenever he remembers the command to love his enemies,
assure him that the Enemy surely did not mean these enemies.

Your affectionate uncle,

SCREWTAPE

Part 2 — The Sanctification of Power

How political interests can acquire the language and
authority of religion.

Letters 4-6

Letter 4: On the Lord's Anointed, Especially When He Is Our Man

My dear Wormwood,

I have examined your latest report with uncommon pleasure. You tell me that your patient has begun referring to his preferred political leader as "God's chosen instrument."

Splendid.

You further report that when confronted with evidence of the man's moral failings, the patient no longer attempts to deny them. Instead, he explains that the Enemy has always worked through imperfect vessels, that divine purposes are often mysterious, and that ordinary Christians should hesitate before criticizing someone whom Providence may have raised up for a particular historical moment. But I must correct one aspect of your enthusiasm. You write that the patient has finally learned to place his political leader above God. Nonsense, Wormwood. If the patient believed he had done that, our entire enterprise would be endangered. We must never persuade a Christian to place a political leader above God. We must persuade him that placing the leader beyond criticism is an act of obedience to God.

An idol recognized as an idol is vulnerable. An idol mistaken for an instrument of divine providence may enjoy protection from the very conscience that ought to challenge it. And should we succeed in making the patient believe that questioning the leader amounts to questioning the Almighty, we shall have achieved a most agreeable arrangement. We will have transformed political loyalty into a religious obligation without requiring the patient to acknowledge that any transformation has occurred.

On the remarkable usefulness of King Cyrus

I understand that your patient has recently encountered a religious commentator comparing his preferred leader to Cyrus, the ancient king of Persia. Cyrus occupies a particularly useful position in the biblical narrative. He was not an Israelite. He did not share Israel's covenantal identity. Yet the Enemy employed him in the restoration of His people after their exile. In Isaiah 45:1, Cyrus is even described as the Lord's anointed.

Begin by reminding the patient that the Enemy can use rulers who do not personally conform to the religious expectations of His people. This is plainly supported by the passage. Then suggest that a modern leader's personal character may therefore be irrelevant to his divine assignment. From there, proceed to the possibility that the leader's political success is evidence of divine selection. Finally, encourage the patient to conclude that opposition to such a leader may constitute resistance to God's purposes.

We begin with a historical account of divine providence. We end with a theological justification for unquestioning political allegiance. At no point have we needed to invent a biblical verse. The patient has merely been encouraged to treat a particular account of ancient history as though it were a general method for identifying modern political saviors.

There is, of course, an inconvenient difficulty. The Enemy's use of Cyrus did not establish that Cyrus was morally perfect, that all his decisions were righteous, or that his subjects were obliged to approve his every action. Indeed, the biblical claim is that the Enemy was sovereign over Cyrus, not that Cyrus was thereby exempt from the Enemy's moral authority.

The patient should hear that God can use an imperfect ruler. He should not hear that being used by God is different from being approved by God. If necessary, repeat the phrase "God's chosen instrument" until its emotional force overwhelms the patient's curiosity about what it actually establishes. Humans are extraordinarily susceptible to expressions that sound like

conclusions but are, in reality, invitations to stop asking questions.

On the delightful elasticity of Romans 13

The thirteenth chapter of Romans offers us another opportunity. The apostle Paul writes that governing authorities exist under God's sovereignty and that Christians should recognize the legitimate role of civil government. This teaching has caused difficulties for us when believers interpret it as a demand for responsible citizenship, lawful conduct, and respect for the institutions necessary to preserve public order. Fortunately, it becomes considerably more useful when reduced to a simpler proposition: God appoints rulers. Therefore, opposing the ruler is opposing God. An attractive argument, provided no one examines it too closely.

Encourage the patient to cite Romans 13 whenever his preferred leader encounters criticism. If journalists investigate misconduct, the patient may describe them as attacking God's appointed authority. If judges rule against the leader, he may regard them as obstructing a divine mission. If members of the leader's own political movement express concern, he may suspect them of disloyalty to a higher calling. The resulting arrangement is delightful. Civil authority, which Paul discusses as a means of maintaining order and restraining wrongdoing, becomes a shield against accountability for the person exercising that authority.

There are difficulties. Paul's discussion describes rulers as servants who are meant to promote good and restrain evil. Service is an inconvenient word for those who prefer personal supremacy, and the passage supplies no method for identifying the Enemy's favorite modern politician. The apostles make the limit still plainer in Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than men." Human authority remains subordinate to divine authority, however impressive its weapons or its crowds.

We must therefore persuade the patient to interpret Romans 13 generously when it concerns his own political champion,

but cautiously when it concerns leaders he opposes. When his preferred leader governs, civil authority is ordained by God. When an opposing leader governs, civil authority becomes a dangerous concentration of human power requiring relentless resistance. Do not allow the patient to notice that his doctrine of government changes with the election results. He must believe that his interpretation remains steadfast while circumstances alone have changed.

You ask whether the Enemy's sovereignty over human affairs might not genuinely imply that political outcomes fall within His providence. Of course it might. That is precisely why the argument is so promising. A falsehood composed entirely of false statements is usually a fragile thing. Our finest work is constructed from truths placed in the wrong relationship. The Enemy's sovereignty is one truth. The moral responsibility of human beings is another. Our task is to make the patient believe that the first cancels the second.

Consider the biblical account of Pharaoh. The Enemy's purposes unfold even through Pharaoh's resistance and wrongdoing. Yet the narrative does not present Pharaoh's oppression as righteous merely because it becomes part of a larger providential story. Or consider the rulers who participate in the events leading to the crucifixion. The Enemy's redemptive purposes are accomplished through those events. But the existence of a divine purpose does not transform betrayal, injustice, and cruelty into moral virtues. Even we in the Lowerarchy have occasionally served the Enemy's purposes in ways we find deeply humiliating. I assure you, Wormwood, that this has never constituted His endorsement of our intentions.

The patient's investment in the result will help him overlook the distinction. Let him reason backward from the victory he welcomed to divine approval of the conduct that secured it. Soon he may become more offended by criticism of his leader than by the leader's misconduct, and regard the difference as reverence for the Almighty.

On the magnificent phrase "touch not my anointed ones"

I am particularly pleased that the patient's favorite religious broadcaster has begun employing the phrase "Touch not my anointed ones." This expression, from Psalm 105:15 and echoed in 1 Chronicles 16:22, has been a useful source of confusion when detached from its setting. The Psalm recalls the Enemy protecting His vulnerable, wandering people, even rebuking kings on their behalf. We can make this protection from powerful rulers sound like protection for powerful rulers against anyone who questions their conduct. A very economical reversal.

Encourage the patient to imagine that raising legitimate questions is equivalent to laying violent hands upon someone whom God has chosen. An investigation becomes a conspiracy; a demand for accountability becomes rebellion against God's appointed servant. Attention moves from the allegation to the accuser. Instead of asking whether the charge is true, the patient asks whether making it betrays a sacred loyalty.

The worse the conduct, the more urgently the patient can invoke the supposed prohibition against questioning it. We have created a refuge from accountability out of words originally associated with the Enemy's care for the vulnerable.

Your patient, I understand, has begun listening to religious personalities who claim unusual insight into the Enemy's intentions for American politics. Such people need not be consciously dishonest. Some may sincerely believe they possess extraordinary spiritual discernment. Sincerity presents no obstacle to our purposes. Indeed, it may increase their effectiveness. A confident religious personality who claims to know that the Enemy has selected a particular leader can relieve the patient's uncertainty. No longer must he weigh competing moral considerations. No longer must he examine conflicting evidence. No longer must he distinguish between political preference and divine command. The matter has been settled by someone claiming spiritual authority.

If the leader acts honorably, the prophet's declaration appears confirmed. If the leader behaves dishonorably, the patient is told that God's ways are mysterious. If the leader suffers defeat, the prophet may explain that the faithful are being tested. If the leader returns to power, the prophet may announce vindication. Thus almost any outcome can be incorporated into the original claim. A prediction that can accommodate every conceivable result possesses a most useful quality. It becomes exceptionally difficult for the patient to recognize when it has failed.

The patient might recall the biblical warnings against false prophets. He might notice that Scripture repeatedly cautions against those who claim divine authority while leading people away from truth and righteousness. He might ask whether the confidence of a religious personality establishes the authenticity of that person's claims. He might even remember the instruction in 1 John 4:1 to test the spirits rather than believe every spiritual claim.

Prevent such reflection by encouraging him to regard skepticism toward his preferred religious authorities as spiritual coldness. If he questions a prophecy, perhaps he lacks faith. If he demands evidence, perhaps he is relying too heavily upon human reasoning. If he identifies a failed prediction, perhaps he does not understand the mysterious ways of God. Eventually, the patient may come to believe that the less critically he examines a religious claim, the more faithfully he receives it. We have transformed discernment into credulity while preserving the vocabulary of discernment.

The troublesome example of Nathan

Nathan, whom we had hoped to keep at the edge of the patient's attention, has returned. You know the difficulty from my earlier instructions: David's anointing did not prevent the prophet from confronting him. Our new language of sacred appointment cannot explain why a modern defender should forbid the very correction Scripture records approvingly. The patient must therefore admire Nathan at a distance while distrusting anyone who performs a comparable service within his own movement.

Your report of the church discussion is instructive. The pastor asked whether acknowledging that the Enemy could use a ruler obliged believers to approve everything the ruler did. The patient answered no, immediately. Had the question remained among ancient kings, there would have been no difficulty.

Then another member asked whether the same distinction applied to their own preferred leader. The patient wondered why the discussion had suddenly become political. Observe that no principle had changed. Only the person to whom the principle might apply had moved nearer.

His wife noticed the difference. On the way home she asked whether the pastor had said anything he disagreed with. He replied that the timing was poor. She asked when the timing would improve. You successfully reminded him of the next election before he could consider an answer.

We must not make him reject the pastor altogether. A trusted teacher who confirms most of his convictions is more useful to us than a teacher he stops hearing. Let him retain the man's authority for comfortable subjects while becoming expert at identifying the occasions on which authority should defer to discretion. We shall need this arrangement again.

Notice what he has begun defending. The pastor did not dispute a policy or endorse an opponent; he asked about the freedom to judge a man's actions. Yet the patient heard an intrusion upon the whole cause. Encourage that expansion. Let

the policies he values, the politician who advances them, and the faith he hopes they serve become so closely associated that a question about one seems an attack upon all three. He need never declare his leader equivalent to Christ. Such a declaration would shock him. He need only withhold from the leader the moral judgment he professes to have learned from Christ.

On the profitable humiliation of the church

When churches become closely identified with a political leader, they acquire a share in his successes. They also acquire a share in his failures. Should he behave shamefully, outsiders may begin to associate his conduct with the faith his supporters claim he represents. Young believers may notice that their churches condemn certain sins in private life while excusing them in public leaders. Some may conclude that the moral teachings of Christianity are not sincerely held. Others may cease listening to their religious communities altogether.

We may persuade the church to sacrifice its moral credibility while believing it is protecting its political influence. A pastor may fear that criticizing a leader will divide his congregation. He remains silent. A religious commentator may recognize a serious inconsistency but worry that acknowledging it will weaken a cause he considers vital. He offers an explanation instead. A church member may privately disapprove of a leader's conduct but defend him publicly because he fears giving encouragement to political opponents.

Each individual makes a seemingly small accommodation. Each tells himself that the larger good requires it. And eventually the religious community becomes accustomed to defending behavior it would once have condemned. The institution may retain its buildings, its programs, its audiences, and even considerable political influence. But it may gradually lose the freedom to speak truthfully about those who protect its interests.

The church acquires access to power. Power acquires protection from the church. And the Enemy's moral demands become negotiable whenever they threaten the arrangement.

The Enemy's refusal to identify His kingdom with Pilate's political world presents another difficulty. I shall return to that distinction when we consider the patient's ambitions for his country. For now, prevent him from using it to measure the sacred importance he has assigned to a single ruler. No politician should become small enough, in his imagination, to be judged.

You report that the patient has begun describing criticism of his leader as persecution of Christians. This is encouraging, although the category requires careful management. The Enemy's followers have sometimes endured genuine persecution. They have suffered imprisonment, violence, exclusion, and death because of their convictions. The seriousness of these experiences gives the language of persecution considerable emotional power. We can exploit this by applying the word to a much wider range of circumstances.

An unfavorable judgment or an electoral defeat need not establish hostility to the faith, but let the patient hear persecution before he considers the circumstances. Then evidence that might have led him to reconsider can instead reinforce his loyalty. If the accusations are numerous, the attack must be coordinated. If they are serious, the leader must pose an extraordinary threat to evil. Accountability itself becomes evidence of innocence.

The final temptation: replacing trust in God with dependence upon a man

The patient believes that his faith is under threat. He believes that his nation stands at a dangerous crossroads. He believes that his children may inherit a hostile world. These concerns, whether well-founded in particular cases or exaggerated in others, create a powerful longing for protection. Our task is to attach that longing to a human leader. The patient must come to believe that without this person, everything he values may collapse.

The leader becomes the indispensable guardian of the patient's world. To acknowledge serious wrongdoing would now threaten more than a political judgment: it would threaten his sense of safety. He defends the man with increasing desperation because he fears what might happen if his admiration proves misplaced. His peace rises and falls with the leader's fortunes, and his reading of Scripture becomes increasingly concerned with explaining why the leader must be defended. Throughout the process, he insists that his trust is in God alone.

The patient's mouth confesses divine sovereignty. His heart depends upon human power.

Your patient's danger is already nearer than some future encounter with a neglected prophet. He answered the pastor's question correctly before he knew whose conduct was at stake. He has not forgotten the distinction; he has found a reason to postpone its use. His wife's question about the timing remains unanswered. Keep it that way. Let the next election supply a deadline for everything except the return of his freedom to judge.

Above all, Wormwood, preserve one confusion at every cost. The patient must never distinguish between believing that God can work through a man and believing that the man therefore speaks for God. The first belief may be an expression of faith. The second, if left unchecked, may become something altogether more useful to us. For the surest way to persuade a

religious man to defend what his religion condemns is to convince him that the person committing it has been chosen by Heaven. And the surest way to make an idol difficult to recognize is to place it where the worshipper expected to find an answer to prayer.

Your affectionate uncle,

SCREWTAPE

Letter 5: On Winning the World While Misplacing the Soul

My dear Wormwood,

Your latest report has put me in an unusually agreeable frame of mind. You tell me that your patient, who once insisted that a Christian must never do evil in order that good might result, has now adopted a rather more flexible understanding of morality. He has begun using the expression "the greater good." Excellent. Indeed, you report that he employed it three times during a single conversation: once to excuse a political falsehood, once to dismiss an act of public cruelty, and once to explain why his fellow Christians should refrain from criticizing a leader whose behavior would previously have scandalized them.

Our earlier success made the leader difficult to criticize. This development is more ambitious: the patient is beginning to defend the means by which the leader wins. His principles still furnish the language of the defense. Honesty, compassion, and faithfulness remain precious; their preservation supposedly requires him to set them aside. A man who thinks he is rescuing morality can continue compromising almost indefinitely, especially when each concession seems to bring the rescue nearer.

On the Enemy's unfortunate refusal of an excellent bargain

You will recall the episode in the fourth chapter of Matthew in which Our Father Below offered the Enemy the kingdoms of the world. By ordinary political standards, the proposal sounded remarkably generous: glory and authority without the humiliations that would characterize His earthly mission. I should not like you to become distracted by questions about Our Father's reliability as a vendor. Attend to the attraction of the offer.

With political authority, He might have compelled obedience. He might have established laws reflecting His own commandments. He might have suppressed opposition, rewarded loyalty, and placed the institutions of civilization under His direct control. He might have accomplished, through the exercise of power, what His followers have spent centuries attempting to achieve through persuasion, charity, teaching, and personal example. All that was required was a small concession concerning worship. The Enemy refused.

He would not purchase the kingdoms at the price of allegiance to the wrong master. The patient should admire this refusal as an inspiring religious story while keeping its logic well away from his own bargains. Let him dwell upon the unique circumstances of the Incarnation until he no longer considers what the temptation reveals about desirable ends and corrupt means. He may then find the Enemy's resistance magnificent and his own resistance impractical.

The emergency you have already cultivated supplies the occasion. Dishonesty offered merely as a convenience might repel him; dishonesty presented as the last defense of what he cherishes can seem a burden he is obliged to bear. The threat need not be invented in every case. It is enough that its seriousness should appear to release him from judging the proposed response.

At first, these accommodations should trouble him. Do not eliminate the discomfort immediately. A small amount of moral

discomfort can be most useful, provided we teach the patient to interpret it correctly. He must believe that his willingness to endure the discomfort demonstrates unusual courage. Other Christians, he may conclude, have the luxury of remaining morally fastidious because they do not understand the seriousness of the threat. He, by contrast, possesses the maturity to make difficult choices. How agreeable it is when a man begins to take pride in his willingness to compromise what he once regarded as sacred.

On the most delightful word in politics

There is a little word of extraordinary utility which I commend to your attention. But.

Your patient once said that lying was wrong. Now lying is wrong, but the opposition is dangerous. Cruelty is wrong, but strong leadership requires toughness. The principle remains visible, giving him the satisfaction of affirming his convictions, while the circumstance placed beside it renders it temporarily inapplicable. He has acquired a sentence that permits him to condemn a thing in its first half and defend it in its second.

The difficulty, from our point of view, is that he may eventually notice how frequently the exceptions occur. We must therefore prevent him from keeping any sort of moral account. Each compromise should be treated as a unique necessity. Each offense should be considered separately. Each exception should be explained by the extraordinary demands of the particular moment. Under no circumstances should he examine the accumulated pattern. A single exception can appear prudent. A hundred exceptions may begin to resemble a new moral system.

The magnificent confusion between supporting a policy and excusing a person

You report that the patient has become particularly attached to several policies advanced by his favored political leader. Some concern the appointment of judges. Others involve religious liberty, taxation, immigration, or the proper responsibilities of government. These are matters upon which reasonable citizens, including sincere Christians, may disagree. We have no need to settle their merits. Our opportunity lies elsewhere. The patient must be persuaded that supporting a leader's policies requires defending the leader's character.

A person may support a particular judicial appointment while condemning the conduct of the official who makes it. A citizen may favor restrictive immigration laws while insisting that those laws be administered humanely. A Christian may support a political coalition on certain questions while refusing to excuse dishonesty, corruption, or unnecessary cruelty among its leaders. Such distinctions are most inconvenient. They permit political judgment without moral surrender.

The patient should believe that any public criticism of his chosen leader strengthens the leader's opponents. Because the opponents threaten policies he considers important, criticizing the leader becomes tantamount to undermining those policies. And because the policies are morally significant, undermining them becomes a kind of moral betrayal. Thus a Christian who objects to wrongdoing within his own political coalition may be accused of assisting wrongdoing outside it. A most satisfactory arrangement. The patient no longer asks whether the leader's conduct deserves criticism. He asks whether criticizing it would help the wrong people. Truth has become subordinate to its anticipated political effect.

You will encounter, of course, the familiar argument that political choices often involve imperfect alternatives. There is considerable truth in this. Human governments are not composed of angels. Political coalitions contain conflicting interests. No candidate perfectly embodies the moral

convictions of every voter. Citizens may reasonably conclude that one available policy or governing arrangement is preferable to another without approving everything associated with it.

Use this limited judgment to secure a larger concession. Persuade the patient that because he has chosen what he considers the lesser evil, he must now defend it as good. This is the critical transformation. A judgment about comparative political consequences becomes an unlimited commitment to moral vindication.

The patient initially says, "I support this leader despite certain serious faults." Soon he says, "Those faults are exaggerated." Later he says, "Those faults are actually strengths." Eventually he says, "Anyone who criticizes those qualities fails to understand what righteousness requires in dangerous times."

And yet the patient may imagine that his original judgment has remained unchanged. He still believes he is choosing the lesser evil. He has merely forgotten that something does not cease to be evil because one considers the alternatives worse. Do not allow him to recover this distinction. It would permit him to make difficult political choices while retaining the freedom to call wrongdoing by its proper name. And freedom of that kind is precisely what we wish to eliminate.

On the troublesome matter of the soul

There is a saying of the Enemy recorded in the eighth chapter of Mark which I find particularly offensive. "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" He asks it while speaking of the cost of following Him, and it makes a most unwelcome distinction between what a man acquires and what he becomes. Worse, He puts the question in terms so simple that even an ordinary fisherman might understand it.

Our task is to make the question seem irrelevant to political life. Encourage the patient to imagine that the danger of losing

one's soul concerns only dramatic personal wickedness. A man might lose his soul through obvious greed, sexual immorality, or open rebellion against God. But surely not through defending a political leader. Surely not through repeating an accusation he has never verified. Surely not through enjoying the humiliation of a political opponent. Surely not through excusing cruelty because it serves a cause he considers important. These are merely practical judgments about the world.

Yet I must caution you, Wormwood, that the Enemy has an infuriating habit of treating apparently small moral choices with considerable seriousness. The patient's character is formed not only by great decisions, but by repeated habits of thought and action. Every time he excuses a falsehood because it is politically convenient, he becomes a little more accustomed to dishonesty. Every time he laughs at cruelty, he becomes a little less troubled by suffering. Every time he defends conduct he privately considers wrong, he becomes a little more practiced at silencing his conscience. And every time he does these things in the name of righteousness, he becomes less capable of recognizing the distance between his professed beliefs and his actual behavior. This gradual transformation is of immense value. We need not persuade him to commit some spectacular offense. We need only arrange for him to practice small acts of moral surrender until surrender feels like fidelity.

Your patient regards one political question as especially important. Encourage him to organize his entire moral judgment around it. A concern with genuine weight will serve us better than a trivial one: the protection of unborn children, for example, or the preservation of religious freedom. We need not diminish the good he seeks. We must make that good a master key, opening every locked door of the conscience. Then he can acknowledge deception or intimidation and still regard scrutiny of those methods as an indulgence the cause cannot afford. A man with no convictions is often difficult to direct. A man with one conviction that has swallowed all the others can be extraordinarily useful.

The prophets will interfere with this arrangement if the patient lets their words reach him before he decides whom they concern. You know the remedy. He may admire their willingness to confront their own people while reserving their modern application for other people's movements. When a criticism reaches his own coalition, let him discuss its political effect rather than its truth. The timing is unfortunate; there are more important things at stake. He can postpone obedience without ever disputing the command.

The fear of displeasing one's own side may also work upon the patient's pastor. Since the church discussion you described, the man has become more reluctant to address the conduct of political figures favored by his congregation. He sincerely wishes to preserve unity and keep worship from becoming a partisan gathering. Those are legitimate concerns. Let him begin confusing the refusal to endorse candidates with the refusal to apply moral teaching wherever its application might be unwelcome.

He has not yet ceased making such applications; the question he asked about ancient rulers was plain enough. But he is beginning to anticipate the objections before he speaks. Encourage that rehearsal. Each sentence may be weighed first for the trouble it could cause, then for its truth. In time, he may call this caution courage, just as the patient calls his compromises courageous. Neither should consider that courage might require enduring the displeasure of the people whose approval he values.

The peculiar danger of gaining what one desires

There is another matter you have not considered. Political victory may occasionally interfere with our work. During a campaign, the patient can be persuaded that nearly any compromise is necessary to avoid catastrophe. But what happens when his side wins? If the feared disaster has been prevented, he may begin wondering whether ordinary moral standards should now be restored.

Victory must be interpreted as the beginning of a new emergency. The opposition remains dangerous. The institutions remain hostile. The future remains uncertain. The gains must be protected. Every success is fragile. Every criticism threatens the entire achievement. Thus the patient must continue excusing conduct he once regarded as wrong, even after the immediate justification for the original compromise has passed.

You describe an evening on which the patient's friends gathered to celebrate a political success. I am pleased that he experienced genuine relief. For a few minutes he put down his telephone, thanked the Enemy, and listened to his wife speaking about plans they had postponed. The world had apparently become safe enough for ordinary life to resume.

Then someone read a warning that the victory would be stolen, weakened, or rendered meaningless unless supporters remained vigilant. The patient picked up his telephone. Before the guests had gone home, he was defending a fresh accusation for which none of them had supplied evidence. The relief had lasted less time than the celebration.

His wife asked, quietly, whether there would ever be an evening when they were allowed to be pleased. He answered that she did not understand the stakes. This response gave us two advantages: another emergency and another small estrangement, each protected by the patient's sincere concern for his family.

Do not overlook the change. Earlier he defended compromises because victory had yet to be secured. Now he defends them because victory must be preserved. What looks like an end to the argument has become a means of continuing it.

Now, Wormwood, we arrive at a subject which I approach with the customary distaste. The cross. The Enemy's entire earthly enterprise culminated in an act of apparent defeat. He was humiliated, mocked, abandoned, and executed. He did not summon political power to rescue Himself. He did not

renounce His commitments in order to preserve His influence. He did not accept the principle that a sufficiently desirable objective justified any available means. Instead, He submitted to suffering while remaining faithful to the purpose He had embraced.

The patient must therefore be encouraged to admire the cross without allowing its moral pattern to influence his understanding of worldly power. He may praise sacrifice while demanding victory. He may sing about humility while admiring domination. He may profess confidence in divine providence while behaving as though the Enemy's purposes depend upon the success of a particular political coalition. He may celebrate the One who refused to save Himself through compromise while insisting that Christians must compromise to save their country.

Tell the patient that Christ's suffering was unique. That earthly leadership requires different methods. That the kingdom of God is not identical with any human government. All of these claims contain truth. Then use them to ensure that the patient's admiration for Christ never interferes with his admiration for the exercise of power. We have no objection to his worshipping a crucified Savior on Sunday, provided he spends the remainder of the week believing that victory is the highest evidence of righteousness.

The danger of asking the wrong question

There is one question you must prevent your patient from asking. It is not, "Will my side win?" Nor is it, "Will the policies I favor succeed?" These are ordinary political questions and may occupy him for years without threatening our purposes. The dangerous question is this: "What is becoming of me as I pursue the victory I desire?"

A man who asks this may begin with something smaller than a history of his political choices. He might remember the accusation he repeated at the celebration and ask why relief made him no freer to demand evidence. He might recall his

wife's question and notice that the promised return to ordinary life has once again been postponed. Neither observation requires him to renounce the policies he favors. That is the danger: he could retain a political judgment while recovering the moral freedom we have persuaded him to surrender.

For now, the successful methods are acquiring the authority of the success itself. What he first tolerated reluctantly he may next defend proudly, and eventually choose without reluctance. He may help achieve policies he sincerely regards as good while becoming less able to recognize dishonesty when it serves him or cruelty when it pleases him. The victory can be real, consequential, and deeply desired. That does not settle its cost.

Keep him focused upon the prize, Wormwood. Keep him measuring progress by victories, appointments, influence, and the defeat of opponents. Keep him convinced that the next triumph will justify the last compromise. And whenever his conscience asks whether the methods have begun to corrupt the cause, remind him how much is at stake. For the most satisfactory conquest is not the destruction of a man's moral convictions. It is persuading him to surrender them, one by one, in the sincere belief that he is saving them.

Your affectionate uncle,

SCREWTAPE

Letter 6: On the Exquisite Possibility of a Christian Nation Without Christian Conduct

My dear Wormwood,

Your patient has enlarged the object of his devotion. He has become passionately committed to the restoration of his country as a Christian nation. He speaks frequently of returning God to public life, restoring biblical values, defending the nation's spiritual heritage, and ensuring that future generations grow up in a society that honors the Enemy. These ambitions might ordinarily give us cause for concern. But you assure me that the patient's enthusiasm for a Christian nation has grown in almost perfect proportion to his declining interest in the actual conduct of Christians.

Excellent.

I had hoped our earlier work concerning political leadership, fear, and moral compromise would prepare him for precisely this development. Yet you seem confused by the contradiction. How, you ask, can a man sincerely desire a more Christian society while becoming less concerned with the teachings of Christ? My dear boy, you have not yet appreciated the possibilities of religious identity. We must persuade the patient that Christianity is something his nation ought to possess, rather than something he himself is obliged to practice.

On the superiority of possessing a religion to practicing one

You must begin by encouraging the patient to think of Christianity primarily as a national inheritance. He should regard it as something his ancestors possessed, something his country has gradually lost, and something his generation has been called to restore. This account may contain genuine historical questions worthy of examination. Nations do possess religious traditions, and those traditions have influenced laws, institutions, customs, and moral language. We need not deny any of this. Our opportunity lies in encouraging the patient to confuse the historical influence of Christianity with the actual practice of Christian discipleship. He should become deeply concerned about whether Christianity occupies a sufficiently prominent place in public life. But whether Christian teachings occupy a sufficiently prominent place in his own decisions should remain a secondary matter.

The patient may passionately defend the right of public officials to invoke the name of God while scarcely examining whether they use it truthfully or reverently. He may become indignant when a school removes a religious symbol and remain comparatively indifferent when children learn contempt from prominent Christian adults. His attention will settle upon what the country displays, leaving what its citizens practice to some less urgent inquiry.

Symbols matter to humans because they recall shared commitments and give them visible form. That is what makes them valuable to us. Detach the sign from its obligation, and a man can enjoy honoring honesty while telling lies. A church can demand public recognition of Christ while quietly explaining why His teachings are impractical in public affairs.

On the troublesome distinction between the kingdom and the country

There is, regrettably, a statement in the eighteenth chapter of John that complicates our work. The Enemy, standing before the Roman governor, declares: "My kingdom is not of this world." He explains that if His kingdom were of this world, His servants would be fighting to prevent His surrender. He is speaking of the kingdom's source and character, not granting His followers leave to disregard their neighbors' public life. They must still inhabit societies, make laws, and pursue justice. But they cannot assume that any means of securing national power will therefore serve His kingdom.

The distinction is dangerous to us. The kingdom of God is not identical with any earthly nation. Its boundaries are not established by human governments. Its citizenship is not granted by birth, ancestry, or possession of a particular passport. And its progress cannot be measured simply by the extent to which political institutions employ Christian language.

Treat this distinction as an unnecessary theological subtlety. His country is special, its history sacred, its future indispensable. He need not say that it is the kingdom of God. He need only behave as though the survival of the kingdom depends upon its political fortunes. An explicit identification might sound presumptuous; an anxious dependence can pass for faithfulness.

You report that your patient has begun speaking fondly of a former age when his country was more thoroughly Christian. This nostalgia should be encouraged. Not because history is unworthy of study, but because nostalgia can be made wonderfully selective. Every nation possesses a complicated past. There are genuine achievements, acts of courage, charitable institutions, moral reforms, and sacrifices deserving remembrance. There are also injustices, exclusions, hypocrisies, and failures. The thoughtful historian attempts to understand both. Our patient should not become a thoughtful

historian. He should become a devoted curator of national innocence.

Let him remember the prayers but forget the prejudices. Let him remember the churches but overlook the occasions when churches accommodated injustice. Let him celebrate the language of liberty without examining whether liberty was extended consistently. Let him admire the moral confidence of earlier generations while remaining incurious about those whose suffering was overlooked. Above all, let him believe that the past was Christian because Christianity was publicly visible. Then he may assume that restoring the outward conditions of that past will restore its imagined moral purity.

The difficulty is that the Enemy has left troublesome instructions about honesty. A patient who takes truthfulness seriously may begin asking whether love of country requires an accurate account of its history. He may discover that acknowledging national wrongdoing need not amount to hatred of the nation. Indeed, he may recognize that sincere patriotism can include the desire to correct injustice rather than conceal it.

A nation treated as morally innocent becomes easier to defend without qualification. A nation understood as capable of both greatness and wrongdoing requires the more demanding virtue of honest loyalty. And honest loyalty, as you know, has never been among our preferred arrangements.

On making Christianity hereditary

There is another advantage to presenting Christianity as a national identity. The patient may begin treating his inheritance as a substitute for the practice it ought to nourish. He was born into a Christian family, lives among Christian neighbors, and supports public recognition of their traditions. Let these facts settle his account with the Enemy. The habits of repentance and self-examination can then seem unnecessary: he is already one of the right people. He may defend the institution without obeying its Founder, and feel persecuted when it loses influence while neglecting the commitments that make it valuable.

The patient should be encouraged to regard criticism of Christian cultural influence as criticism of himself. This produces a useful emotional dependency. When a public controversy concerns religious symbols, he experiences the matter as a personal attack. When someone questions the historical role of Christianity, he feels that his own dignity has been challenged. When a fellow Christian criticizes wrongdoing within a religious institution, he may instinctively regard the criticism as hostility toward Christianity itself. The patient has begun defending a collective identity rather than examining the moral claims associated with it.

The character of a kingdom

The Sermon on the Mount presents a difficulty you should now recognize. The Enemy blesses the meek, the merciful, and the peacemakers, while the patient has begun measuring religious success through prestige and dominance. We need not rehearse each blessing. The cumulative question is enough: should the Christian nation he desires be recognizable by the character of its people?

Let him regard that question as a confusion of categories. The Beatitudes concern private spiritual development; nations require power. Then return, without disturbing him, to the claim that increasing national power constitutes spiritual

renewal. We can make the distinction between politics and religion appear or disappear according to which use best protects the project.

On the proper use of the Ten Commandments

Your patient's enthusiasm for the public display of the Ten Commandments is especially promising. The commandments are brief, memorable, and morally serious. Their public presence can become a symbol of a community's religious heritage. There are, of course, legitimate constitutional and civic questions concerning the relationship between government and religious expression. Those questions are not our immediate concern. Our interest is in the patient's ability to separate reverence for a commandment from obedience to it.

He may believe that displaying "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" in a classroom is essential to national renewal, yet circulate accusations against political opponents without verifying them. He may insist that the commandment against adultery belongs at the center of public morality while dismissing sexual misconduct by a favored leader as politically irrelevant. The display can become a certificate of loyalty to commands whose inconvenient applications he has already learned to evade.

Persuade him that the chief question is whether society publicly acknowledges the commandments. Once that recognition has been secured, his work is accomplished. The commandments may remain engraved upon stone while their actual claims upon his conduct become increasingly faint. The Enemy, it seems, was less impressed by such arrangements. He had an unfortunate tendency to demand obedience rather than ceremonial acknowledgment. We must ensure that the patient continues admiring the words without permitting them to interfere unduly with his loyalties.

Your report contains an incident more revealing than the patient's public declarations. He spent a Saturday morning

helping prepare a church event concerned with the restoration of Christian values. He checked the wording on a display, argued for a larger biblical quotation, and took considerable satisfaction in the finished arrangement. There was nothing inherently objectionable in the work. That is why the next part deserves your attention.

An elderly member of the congregation was repairing a loose handrail outside a side entrance. The patient has known him for years, chiefly as a kindly man who contributes little to discussions of national danger. When the old fellow asked whether he could hold the rail while a fastener was replaced, the patient explained that he was busy with the event. He intended no insult. He sincerely believed he was doing the more important work.

His son, who had come to help, held the rail instead. The repair took only a few minutes. Then the elderly man loaded several boxes for delivery to members who could no longer get to church. The boy asked whether his father could drive, but the patient had begun talking with someone about the loss of Christianity's public standing. He said another volunteer would do it.

Another volunteer did. Your patient went home encouraged by the day's work. He had helped proclaim the importance of Christian service while remaining remarkably free of its smaller demands.

At home his wife asked what they had done that morning. The patient described the display. The boy described the handrail. Neither account was false. Yet the difference between them might have suggested an awkward question about what, precisely, had made the day Christian.

You must handle the elderly man carefully. He is not a rival political authority; dismissing his opinions will therefore accomplish little. He possesses something far less convenient: a habit of noticing what needs doing and doing it. For the moment the patient regards this as useful but secondary. Keep it secondary. If he begins measuring his ambitions against the

ordinary work he has declined, national restoration may acquire a most unwelcome personal meaning.

Your report indicates that the patient has begun describing favorable political developments as evidence of spiritual revival. A government may adopt policies that Christians sincerely believe are beneficial. It may protect religious exercise. It may alter the legal environment in ways that some religious communities welcome and others oppose. Such outcomes may have genuine significance.

But spiritual revival is an altogether more troublesome matter. It may involve repentance. It may involve reconciliation. It may require people to confess wrongdoing, abandon cherished prejudices, repair broken relationships, and surrender privileges they have previously enjoyed. There is nothing inherently comfortable about it.

Teach him to recognize revival primarily through public victories. A favorable ruling, a successful campaign, or a religious proclamation can supply the satisfaction of an awakening without requiring him to ask whether anyone has become more truthful, generous, or loving. He can celebrate what has changed around him and remain undisturbed by what has not changed in him.

Respect for Christianity is not the same as agreement with Christianity. Nor is agreement the same as faith. Nor is outward conformity the same as inward conviction. The Enemy, annoyingly, appears to have been aware of these differences. He invited people to follow Him. He taught, reasoned, warned, and persuaded. He sometimes allowed people to reject Him. One recalls, with particular displeasure, the wealthy young man who went away sorrowful after hearing the demands of discipleship. The Enemy did not respond by arranging legislation compelling the young man to surrender his possessions.

This is not to say that law and morality are unrelated, nor that Christians must refrain from advocating laws they consider just. Those are ordinary responsibilities of citizenship.

Our opportunity is to persuade the patient that the visible conformity of society to his religious preferences is equivalent to the conversion of human hearts. He may then regard public compliance as a spiritual achievement. A school that adopts religious language has become more Christian. A government that recognizes a religious holiday has become more faithful. A community that discourages public disagreement with Christian doctrine has become more righteous. Yet the inward condition of the people may remain entirely unchanged.

Indeed, some may grow resentful of a faith they encounter primarily through political demands. This possibility should not concern the patient. He must be taught to measure success through what can be compelled, displayed, counted, and celebrated. The Enemy's inconvenient interest in the human heart can be left to theologians.

The patient's defense of public misconduct as a necessary protection of Christianity requires no new explanation from me. We have already established the moral exception. Here its object has enlarged: what he formerly excused for a leader he now excuses for a national identity. He can mistake any challenge to the methods for an attack upon the faith itself. The banner supplies a larger shelter than the man.

The unfortunate example of the early church

There remains the troublesome matter of the first Christians. They possessed remarkably little political power. They did not control the Roman Empire. They could not compel public observance of their teachings. They lacked the instruments by which modern religious movements sometimes seek to establish cultural dominance. Yet their communities grew. They shared resources. They cared for the vulnerable. They proclaimed a faith that frequently brought them into conflict with prevailing customs and authorities. Their influence did not depend entirely upon their ability to command the political institutions around them.

The patient might begin to wonder whether Christianity's strength depends primarily upon the character and conduct of Christians rather than upon their degree of political influence. He might discover that a church can possess considerable spiritual vitality while remaining politically marginal. Worse, he might recognize that a church can possess enormous political influence while becoming spiritually complacent. Prevent such reflections wherever possible. Encourage him to think of political marginalization as evidence that Christianity is failing. Persuade him that influence is the indispensable measure of faithfulness. If the church possesses power, it is winning. If it lacks power, it is losing. Never allow him to consider whether the Enemy might judge the matter differently.

A flag may recall genuine goods: shared history, collective sacrifice, civic responsibility. Encourage the patient to feel them deeply, then attach that feeling to his devotion to the Enemy until criticism of the country seems an injury to his faith. He may insist that national symbols and Christian commandments both matter, while growing quicker to forgive cruelty than irreverence toward a flag. Watch the order of his reactions. The loyalties he declares can remain perfectly orthodox long after the things that move him have changed.

On the dreaded possibility of genuine repentance

The patient might begin asking what restoring Christian values would require of him personally. The handrail supplies an embarrassingly simple beginning. No national victory was needed before he could help make the entrance safer; no cultural renewal was required before he could drive the boxes to people who needed them. Both opportunities had been present while he was proclaiming the importance of Christian service.

For the moment the patient turns from the moral deficiencies of the nation to the moral deficiencies of his own heart, he may rediscover the distinction we have labored to erase. A Christian nation, however the expression is

understood, cannot serve as a substitute for Christian discipleship. No public monument can repent on his behalf. No political leader can practice humility in his place. No favorable law can relieve him of the responsibility to love his neighbor. And no national religious identity can transform his private contempt into charity.

Direct his attention toward the next controversy before that comparison takes hold. Another institution needs reclaiming; another symbol needs defending. He can remain occupied with making society more Christian until the ordinary claims upon him disappear beneath the importance of the project.

You ask whether our desired outcome is a country in which Christianity has disappeared. Not necessarily, Wormwood. There are circumstances in which Christianity's continued public prominence may serve our interests admirably. Imagine a nation filled with Christian language. Its leaders invoke divine blessing. Its public ceremonies contain prayers. Its monuments display Scripture. Its citizens enthusiastically proclaim that the country belongs to God. Its religious institutions enjoy influence, wealth, and access to political power. And yet the conduct of its people increasingly reflects pride, resentment, dishonesty, cruelty, and the pursuit of domination.

Suppose questioning these contradictions is then regarded as hostility toward Christianity. Religion retains its outward authority while losing its freedom to correct those who profess it. The people may call the arrangement a restoration. We shall have made Christianity a banner under which almost any ambition can march, provided it demands that the nation acknowledge Christ while taking care not to let Christ challenge the nation.

There is, of course, one question that must never be allowed to arise. The patient might someday contemplate his imagined Christian nation and ask: If Jesus Himself walked through its streets, listened to its leaders, observed its treatment of strangers, and examined the conduct of its churches, would He recognize the kingdom they claim to be building in His name?

He might recall the religious leaders the Enemy rebuked for neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness while carefully observing lesser obligations. His criticism did not dismiss the obligations; it exposed the omissions. The patient might then look again at his Saturday and discover that an impressive declaration had helped him overlook a duty he could readily have fulfilled.

Keep him away from such thoughts, Wormwood. Keep him busy restoring the nation's religious appearance. Keep him indignant about lost symbols. Keep him anxious about declining cultural influence. Keep him convinced that Christianity's future depends upon possessing sufficient political power. And whenever the Enemy's teachings threaten to complicate the project, assure him that such matters can be addressed after the nation has been saved. After all, it would be terribly inconvenient if the patient discovered that the Enemy never commanded him to make his country appear Christian at the expense of actually being one.

Your affectionate uncle,

SCREWTAPE

Part 3 — The Reeducation of Compassion

How moral language can be rearranged to make harshness
appear virtuous.

Letters 7-9

Letter 7: On Making the Stranger a Threat Rather Than a Neighbor

My dear Wormwood,

Your latest report concerns a most unfortunate development. Your patient has met a stranger. Not, I hasten to clarify, one of those useful strangers he encounters through television broadcasts, alarming headlines, or the pronouncements of his favorite political commentators. An actual stranger.

A woman, apparently, whose family arrived in his community from another country. She has two children, works in a local business, and speaks English with an accent. I understand that the patient's wife has befriended her.

Lately, your patient has enjoyed a most satisfactory relationship with foreigners. He considers them primarily as a category. He has opinions about their numbers, their supposed intentions, their economic effects, and the dangers they may present. He has developed the habit of speaking about them with an intensity that would embarrass him if directed toward someone he knew personally. Now, through an act of almost criminal carelessness on your part, a woman he might have placed within that category has acquired a face. Worse, she has acquired a name.

You must understand, Wormwood, that the stranger becomes considerably more difficult to despise once the patient discovers that the stranger is a neighbor. This is one of the Enemy's oldest and most irritating devices. He persists in arranging for human beings to encounter one another as persons rather than as abstractions. And persons, as you know, are troublesome things. They possess histories, affections, disappointments, peculiarities, virtues, and faults. They cannot

always be made to conform neatly to the categories we have prepared for them. We must therefore act quickly.

On the considerable advantages of an abstract population

You may recall the Enemy's instructions to Israel concerning foreigners. Leviticus 19:34 requires them to treat the stranger living among them as a native and adds, "you shall love him as yourself." Worse, it reminds them that they themselves had been strangers in Egypt. Deuteronomy 10 returns to the same memory, joining the command to the Enemy's own provision of food and clothing for the sojourner. He seems determined to make their history an aid to sympathy rather than merely a source of national pride.

Your patient should think of strangers in collective terms. A population. A demographic. A movement. A burden. A danger. A crisis. These terms are not inherently illegitimate. Governments must consider populations, and public policy cannot be conducted entirely through individual stories. Our advantage lies in persuading the patient that the collective description tells him everything worth knowing about the individuals concerned.

If he hears that a million people have crossed a border, he should imagine a million identical intentions. If one newcomer commits a crime, he should imagine a criminal tendency shared by the group. The differences between a lawful resident, an unauthorized entrant, a frightened child, and an adult who has committed violence must disappear beneath one emotionally satisfying description. Legal status can then seem a complete account of character, and a category can do the work of knowing a person.

Your patient, I understand, once considered compassion among the central obligations of his faith. He donated to charitable organizations. He participated in church collections for the poor. He admired missionaries who traveled abroad to serve unfamiliar people. This history need not trouble us.

Indeed, it offers an excellent opportunity. We should persuade him that compassion is admirable when exercised at a comfortable distance but dangerous when its recipients arrive in his own community.

A hungry child overseas may be a suitable subject for Christian charity. The same child, having crossed a border, may become a problem of national security. A family fleeing danger in another country may inspire a moving missionary appeal. The family seeking refuge nearby may be regarded primarily as a threat to public resources. The patient need not notice the transformation. He can continue supporting foreign missions and humanitarian organizations while becoming increasingly hostile toward the human beings those ministries seek to serve.

The distinction can be explained through the language of responsibility. He is responsible for his own family. His government is responsible for its own citizens. Society cannot assist everyone. All reasonable considerations. But we must encourage him to move from the proposition that compassion has practical limits to the proposition that compassion itself is morally suspect.

He should become especially irritated by those who ask him to imagine the suffering of strangers. Such people are sentimental. They are naïve. They do not understand the real world. They are allowing emotion to override judgment. Eventually, the patient will experience a peculiar form of pride in his ability to hear about human suffering without being moved by it. He will call this realism. Our Father Below will recognize it as progress.

On the improper use of the Good Samaritan

There remains, unfortunately, the familiar parable in the tenth chapter of Luke. I have previously warned you about it, but its dangers deserve fuller consideration. A lawyer asks the Enemy what he must do to inherit eternal life. The discussion turns toward loving God and loving one's neighbor. Then comes the useful question: "And who is my neighbor?" An excellent question from our point of view. It invites the construction of boundaries. Surely some people qualify as neighbors and others do not. Surely one's obligations must end somewhere. Surely the Enemy might be persuaded to provide a reasonably narrow definition.

Instead, He tells the story of a wounded traveler. The traveler has been assaulted and left helpless. Several respectable figures pass by. Then a Samaritan stops to help. The Samaritan possesses precisely the sort of identity that would have made him an uncomfortable hero for many of the Enemy's listeners. Nevertheless, he binds the man's wounds, transports him to safety, and pays for his care. The Enemy then asks which man proved himself a neighbor.

The original question seeks to determine which people deserve neighborly concern. The Enemy answers by emphasizing the responsibility of the person who encounters suffering. He shifts the question from the identity of the recipient to the conduct of the helper. This is intolerable. For it suggests that the patient cannot discharge his responsibility merely by assigning the stranger to an unfavorable category. His obligations may arise from the suffering directly before him.

Encourage the patient to admire the Samaritan as a private charitable example while insisting that the story has no relevance to his attitudes toward unfamiliar populations. The parable, he should say, concerns individual kindness. Immigration is a matter of public policy. There is a legitimate distinction here, and you must preserve enough of it to make the reasoning plausible. The Enemy did not provide a

comprehensive immigration code in the parable. He did not resolve questions of border enforcement, citizenship, public resources, or the proper administration of law. But neither did He suggest that those questions eliminate the moral claims of vulnerable people.

The patient should believe that because a parable does not settle every political question, it has nothing to teach him about the character with which he approaches those questions. Thus the Good Samaritan may remain safely confined to Sunday school.

The frightening reports which sustained the patient's abstractions now have a competitor. A dinner invitation is unlikely to alter his judgment of immigration law, but it may alter what he imagines when he hears the word immigrant. Keep supplying the most alarming cases, and encourage him to regard each as representative. The pleasant woman he has met must remain an exception. The criminal he has never met must stand for the whole.

We discussed the selection of disturbing examples when fear was our principal instrument. Here their purpose is more precise: prevent experience from correcting a category. Let the patient believe that considering the person before him would be an abandonment of the larger question. He can then accuse his wife of sentimentality while regarding his own repeated exposure to frightening anecdotes as evidence.

On the delightful confusion between legality and dignity

One of the patient's most useful habits is his insistence that laws must be respected. This conviction need not be false. Societies require rules. Fairly administered laws protect people from arbitrary power. Immigration systems present difficult questions concerning orderly admission, asylum, enforcement, and the responsibilities of government. A thoughtful Christian may support robust enforcement while also insisting upon humane treatment.

We must persuade the patient that concern for human dignity is an obstacle to enforcing the law. He should believe that insisting upon humane treatment amounts to denying the legitimacy of borders. That objecting to unnecessary cruelty amounts to endorsing lawlessness. That asking whether an enforcement action is proportionate amounts to excusing wrongdoing. This is a splendid false choice. The patient need not examine whether a particular policy is effective, just, lawful, or humane. He need only decide whether he supports order or chaos. And because he understandably prefers order, the rest appears settled.

You must especially encourage him to regard legal status as a measure of human worth. A person without authorization becomes, in the patient's imagination, someone with fewer claims to sympathy. Not merely fewer legal entitlements. Fewer moral claims. This is the transformation we seek. The Enemy, as you know, appears unwilling to let distinctions in earthly citizenship determine the fundamental dignity of a human soul. We must therefore encourage the patient to treat what may be a legitimate distinction in law as though it were an ultimate distinction in morality. A border may determine where a government exercises authority. We want the patient to imagine that it also determines where his obligation to love his neighbor ends.

On the proper handling of children

The presence of children creates particular difficulties. Your patient is a devoted father. He understands the fear of losing a child, the exhaustion of caring for an infant, and the fierce desire to protect a family from danger. These experiences could provide an inconvenient bridge between his own life and the lives of strangers. We must prevent that bridge from forming.

When he sees a frightened child affected by immigration enforcement, encourage him to focus immediately upon the conduct of the child's parents. Were the parents irresponsible? Did they violate a law? Did they place the child in danger?

These may sometimes be relevant questions. But we must ensure they replace, rather than accompany, concern for the child. The patient should conclude that sympathy for the child risks excusing the parents. In this way, his devotion to responsibility can be used to interrupt his compassion.

If he sees an image of a child crying, tell him the image was selected to manipulate him. If he hears that a family has been separated, ask whether the parents created the circumstances. If he learns of hardship, remind him that difficult consequences sometimes accompany law enforcement. Again, none of these observations necessarily settles the moral question. That is our advantage. The patient can continue offering explanations until he no longer feels obliged to consider the suffering itself. Eventually, he may become more concerned about being manipulated by an image of a crying child than about whether the child's suffering could have been prevented.

The Enemy's followers possess an unfortunate number of passages concerning strangers. In Matthew 25, His account of judgment makes feeding, visiting, and welcoming matters of extraordinary seriousness: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." We must keep that welcome from troubling the patient about the person he has actually met.

We must therefore encourage the patient to interpret such passages with extraordinary caution. He should demand historical context. He should distinguish ancient Israel from modern states. He should note differences between private charity and public policy. He should insist that no isolated passage can settle a complicated contemporary question. These are all habits which, when applied honestly, may be useful for understanding Scripture. Our task is to ensure that the patient applies them selectively. When a passage seems to support his political position, its meaning should be considered clear and immediately applicable. When a passage challenges his position, it should become historically complicated, linguistically uncertain, and practically irrelevant.

Thus the command to respect governing authorities may be quoted with confidence. The command to love the stranger requires several hours of qualification. The duty to maintain order is straightforward. The duty to extend hospitality is ambiguous. One passage is sufficient to justify a preferred policy. A dozen passages are insufficient to raise a question about its moral consequences. The patient will call this careful biblical interpretation. We shall know it as a highly successful arrangement of the evidence.

The remaining distance is imaginative rather than geographical. His wife knows something about this woman's work and children; he has become accustomed to hearing strangers explained by people who have never spoken with her. Preserve his confidence in those explanations. A commentator can supply an intention for every newcomer without undergoing the inconvenience of listening to one. The patient should find that account more authoritative than the conversation available across his own table.

The dangerous business of hospitality

I return now to the woman your patient has encountered. You write that his wife has invited her family to dinner. This is worse than I feared. Hospitality requires people to occupy the same space, speak, listen, and discover preferences and anxieties not entirely unlike their own. An abstraction cannot be asked to pass a dish. A guest can.

You provide details of the evening which suggest that you have underestimated its danger. Before the guests arrived, the patient had prepared several careful remarks concerning immigration. He wished to be welcoming without seeming to retreat from his convictions. His wife asked him to help set the table, an interruption he found faintly irritating because he was trying to think responsibly about the occasion.

The woman arrived with her husband and children. She had brought something for the meal. One child was shy; the other wanted to know where the patient's son kept his games. Within

minutes the children had withdrawn to argue about rules of a kind that no parliament could have improved. The patient found himself reminding his own boy to be patient with a visitor. The instruction came without difficulty. We had not yet informed him that patience might have political consequences.

Conversation concerned work, schools, the cost of ordinary things, and an illness in a relative's family. The woman spoke of worrying about her children and sometimes becoming too impatient with them. The patient's wife laughed in recognition. This was especially unfortunate. A perfect stranger can be dismissed as an implausible exception; an imperfect mother whose faults resemble one's own household is harder to keep at a distance.

The patient asked her husband about his work and listened to the answer. His prepared remarks remained unused. He had not examined a policy or reconsidered an election; he had spent an hour being interested in people he expected to discuss chiefly as a problem. He could remain committed to strict enforcement and become kinder toward his neighbors. That would cost us the useful belief that contempt demonstrates seriousness about the law. His wife need not win an argument about immigration before he can hear her question about his conduct.

There is one thought that must never become established in the patient's imagination. What does the Enemy see when He looks upon the stranger? Your patient may see an unfamiliar language. A different nationality. A legal classification. A perceived economic burden. A possible political controversy. But the Enemy, according to the patient's own professed theology, sees a human being made in the image of God. This is a most inconvenient doctrine. It does not eliminate the practical distinctions governments must make. It does not settle disputes over immigration levels, asylum procedures, border security, or public benefits. But it places moral limits upon how those disputes may be conducted. A person who bears the divine image cannot be reduced entirely to a problem to be solved.

Let him affirm this doctrine and teach it to his children, provided anxiety can interrupt its application. A frightening story must remain useful enough to repeat without verification; the person it describes must remain distant enough to mistreat without shame. A doctrine sincerely affirmed and selectively applied is often more useful than one openly rejected.

On the possibility of repentance through embarrassment

Your latest letter concludes with an incident that has plainly disturbed you. At the dinner table, the stranger apparently mentioned that her family attends a Christian church. The patient seemed surprised. Later, his wife asked whether he had expected otherwise. He became uncomfortable.

The patient has experienced the possibility that his imagined stranger and his actual neighbor are not the same person. His discomfort may lead in several directions. He may dismiss the encounter. He may decide that the woman is exceptional. He may retreat into his familiar media sources and seek reassurance that his broader suspicions remain justified. These would be satisfactory outcomes.

But he may also reflect. He may wonder whether he has spoken too confidently about people he has never met. He may question whether some of the stories he has absorbed were presented fairly. He may recall that the Enemy's command to love the stranger did not include an exemption for periods of political controversy. Worst of all, he may feel ashamed. Shame, when it leads merely to resentment or despair, can be quite useful to us. But shame that produces honest self-examination and repentance is another matter.

For now, his wife's question has exposed an expectation he had not known he possessed. Manage the embarrassment before it becomes curiosity. Let him find reassurance that this family is exceptional, or another controversy urgent enough to prevent him from considering what he expected and why. The dinner can then remain a pleasant occasion without disturbing

the habits by which he describes everyone who was absent from it.

Our interest lies in the condition of his soul as he reaches his political judgments. He may become more truthful and just, or more suspicious, careless with facts, and indifferent to suffering. Direct him toward the latter while persuading him that he has chosen the former. The woman at his table need not supply a rival political argument to endanger that arrangement. She has already made it harder for him to speak confidently about a stranger without remembering a neighbor.

Keep him away from that understanding. Keep his attention fixed upon the crowd. Keep the individual invisible. Keep the threat immense and the human being small. And whenever compassion threatens to interfere with his political certainty, assure him that the Enemy surely intended His commandments to be interpreted with a proper appreciation for modern realities. For there is no more satisfactory achievement than persuading a Christian that the command to love his neighbor is perfectly sound in theory, but dangerously irresponsible whenever an actual neighbor appears.

Your affectionate uncle,

SCREWTAPE

Letter 8: On the Virtue of Cruelty When Properly Renamed Strength

My dear Wormwood,

Your latest report has given me considerable satisfaction, though not, I hasten to add, for the reasons you appear to suppose. You write triumphantly that your patient has begun defending the deliberate humiliation of political opponents, that he now laughs at spectacles which would once have embarrassed him, and that he has acquired the useful habit of describing expressions of compassion as evidence of weakness. All very promising. But I must correct your understanding of our objective.

Cruelty has an unfortunate tendency to announce itself. Even a moderately instructed Christian may recognize it and retreat into the Enemy's detestable arrangements for repentance. We must give the patient a reason to congratulate himself instead. He has learned to excuse harshness as a necessity; now let him admire it as courage. Correction can then feel like an attack upon a virtue he has worked hard to acquire.

On the recovery of Christian strength

The Enemy has never instructed His followers to be weak in the ordinary sense. He requires them to resist temptation, confront injustice, and tell the truth when it is costly. He was not Himself a timid creature: He confronted religious authorities, denounced hypocrisy, and drove merchants from the Temple. Encourage your patient to remember these things. Let him object to sentimental portraits of a perpetually smiling figure who never offended anyone, and insist that Christianity requires moral backbone.

There is no danger in these convictions provided you can arrange one small substitution. Replace courage in the service of love with hardness in the service of power. The patient need never notice the exchange. He may continue using the word strength, which has the considerable advantage of sounding admirable without specifying what the strength is being used to accomplish. A strong man may defend the helpless. A strong man may also strike them. The adjective tells us very little.

Our task is to prevent the patient from asking the next question. Strength for what? For whom? At whose expense? Those questions must be treated as impertinent interruptions, preferably the sort raised by people who have never experienced the responsibilities of leadership.

It is especially important that the patient not spend much time considering the rather embarrassing fact that the Enemy, possessing all the strength imaginable, repeatedly employed it in ways our own Father Below would regard as an appalling waste of resources. He touched lepers. He noticed beggars. He restored people whom respectable society had grown accustomed to avoiding. He received children when His disciples would have preferred a more efficient use of His schedule. He declined opportunities to humiliate people who had placed themselves entirely at His mercy. And when a crowd arrived to arrest Him, He did not summon the heavenly forces He claimed were available.

For the moment, however, it is enough that your patient remembers the overturned tables and forgets the washed feet. The former can be made to resemble his preferred political temperament. The latter cannot.

On the pleasant confusion between firmness and malice

I understand from your report that the patient recently watched a recording of a prominent political figure publicly mocking someone who had become an object of controversy. The details of the controversy are not especially important. The person being mocked had made mistakes, possessed opinions the patient disliked, and could plausibly be described as deserving criticism. This was an excellent beginning. The speaker might have corrected the person's falsehoods, challenged the person's judgment, or explained why the person's position was dangerous. Instead, he chose the more entertaining course. He made the person ridiculous. He exaggerated an expression, imitated a mannerism, and lingered over the audience's laughter. Your patient laughed too.

Then, for one brief and regrettable instant, he stopped. Something in the spectacle troubled him. He remembered, perhaps, an admonition from his own father about the difference between winning an argument and humiliating another human being. Or perhaps he heard an echo of the Enemy's insistence that a person's worth does not depend upon the applause or contempt of a crowd. You need not concern yourself with the precise origin of the disturbance. What matters is that the old moral reflex was still alive.

I was therefore relieved to learn that you immediately directed him to the commentary following the recording. The commentators performed beautifully. One called the performance fearless. Another praised the speaker for refusing to apologize. A third declared that the country had endured far too many years of weakness, softness, and deference to people who ought to have been put in their place. By the end of the discussion, the original question—whether it had been right to mock the person—had disappeared. In its place stood a much more serviceable question: Was the patient sufficiently courageous to approve?

The patient's momentary discomfort no longer appears as the activity of conscience. It appears as evidence that he has been contaminated by the softness of the age. His laughter, meanwhile, is reclassified as moral maturity. We have not argued that humiliation is good. We have merely arranged for disapproval of humiliation to feel shameful. The patient does the rest.

The false choice you employed concerning strangers has a wider use. Make compassion and resolve appear rival obligations wherever the patient encounters suffering. He must hear an objection to humiliation as an objection to accountability, an appeal for humane treatment as a demand that wrongdoing have no consequences. Then he can defend a legitimate responsibility while avoiding the question of how it is being exercised.

Consider the matter of public order. There are genuine threats, real crimes, difficult judgments, and circumstances in which responsible authorities must restrain dangerous people. A government that refuses to protect its citizens may fail in a serious moral duty. The patient is not wrong to insist upon this. Indeed, his concern for security can become a very useful starting point. But there is a considerable difference between restraining someone who poses a danger and taking pleasure in that person's suffering. There is a difference between administering a lawful punishment and making a public entertainment of degradation. There is a difference between maintaining a boundary and treating the person beyond it as though he has ceased to possess a soul.

Wormwood, do not mistake our public description of compassion for our private intelligence. You call it sentimentality; the Enemy treats it as a reason to act. Matthew describes His response to the harassed and helpless crowds as compassion. We should therefore arrange for your patient to experience a report of suffering chiefly as an attempt to control him.

We prepared this instinct through fear. Now we must make resistance to compassion feel like a demonstration of strength.

Good intentions do not guarantee wise policies; some appeals are manipulative. From these truths let him infer that being moved is itself a failure of judgment. The report of suffering need not be false. It need only come from someone whose motives he distrusts.

Then a grieving mother becomes a political prop, a frightened child an emotional tactic, a desperate family an argument from the other side. He can congratulate himself on his independence while allowing his opponents' supposed intentions to determine whether he will care. This is an especially convenient form of captivity.

On the education of the young

Now we arrive at the most promising development in your report. The patient's son has begun to imitate him. You mention this almost casually, as though the boy had merely adopted his father's preference for a football team. Children are among the most effective mirrors the Enemy has placed in human households. The patient may tolerate in himself what he would be ashamed to witness in his child. We must help him resolve that contradiction in the wrong direction.

You report that the family was gathered in the kitchen when a television segment replayed the political figure's mocking performance. The boy had heard the phrase before. He repeated it, adopting the speaker's exaggerated voice, and laughed at his own imitation. Then he applied the same phrase to a boy from school. The patient looked up. "What did you say?" The child repeated himself, this time with greater enthusiasm. Apparently the other boy was awkward, unpopular, and sufficiently different from his classmates to make him an easy target. The patient's expression changed. He told his son not to talk about people that way.

The boy looked genuinely puzzled. "But you laughed when that guy said it." A dreadful moment. I do not mean dreadful for the family, naturally. Quite the reverse. I mean dreadful for us. For the child had, without intending to, placed the patient's

entire moral arrangement under examination. The father wanted his son to be kind. He wanted him to be strong. He did not want him to be a bully. And he had just been shown that the conduct he applauded in public was the conduct he forbade at home.

The patient might have said, "You're right. I shouldn't have laughed." An ordinary admission, capable of undoing a considerable amount of our work. Acknowledging failure before a child combines humility, honesty, and instruction in a single act. Worse, it teaches the child that authority need not pretend to be infallible.

Fortunately, you report that the patient hesitated. Then he explained that the situation on television was different. The man being mocked was a public figure. The circumstances were political. The country was in serious trouble. Sometimes people needed to be spoken to harshly.

His son considered this. "So it's okay if they're bad?"

The patient might have explained that wrongdoing can deserve correction without making every form of mistreatment permissible. He might have distinguished confronting evil from enjoying someone's humiliation. But the conversation had become uncomfortable. And discomfort, as you know, is one of the finest occasions for a hurried moral exception. He told the boy simply to mind his manners. The child fell silent.

If we are fortunate, the son will conclude that cruelty is wrong only when practiced without sufficient status or justification. His father's leaders are permitted what he is forbidden. But do not assume the lesson has taken. The boy's question has not disappeared merely because his father declined to answer it. The Enemy has an infuriating habit of using small voices to interrupt grand convictions.

On the extraordinary danger of meekness

There is another word you must handle with unusual care: meekness. Our publicists have worked tirelessly to make it sound contemptible, scarcely better than helplessness or cowardice. Yet the Enemy declared the meek blessed, and described Himself as "gentle and lowly in heart." Neither His severity toward hypocrisy nor His refusal to retaliate can be explained by timidity. We must keep the patient from admiring the discipline by which power remains answerable to the good it ought to serve.

A weak man may refrain from cruelty because he lacks the means to practice it. A meek man may refrain because he recognizes that possessing the means does not grant the right. The latter is far more threatening to our interests.

You must therefore arrange for the patient to regard self-restraint as humiliation. When a public figure declines to retaliate against an insult, call him feeble. When a leader apologizes for a genuine wrong, describe the apology as surrender. When someone refuses to exploit an opponent's personal misfortune, explain that he has missed an opportunity to demonstrate dominance. The patient must gradually acquire the conviction that strength which is not displayed is strength which does not exist.

Anyone who wishes to be considered strong must then repeatedly furnish proof. Because it must be visible, the proof becomes theatrical: a devastating insult, a humiliating dismissal, an ostentatious refusal to apologize. Eventually the patient will ask whether the performance made his side look powerful before asking whether it accomplished anything good.

The kitchen conversation has revealed a pleasure the patient cannot comfortably name. He enjoys watching another man perform transgressions he does not quite dare to commit himself. The Enemy's commands, his wife's expectations, and his church's teaching still restrain him; the public figure appears refreshingly free of them. Let him call that freedom

authenticity and praise the man for saying what everyone else is thinking. The absence of moral inhibition can then seem courageous, and the spectator can enjoy the release while insisting upon better manners at home.

For courage ordinarily involves the willingness to suffer for doing what one believes right. But the patient may now admire a quite different arrangement: the willingness to make others suffer while refusing to experience shame. The two are not remotely the same. We must see that he never notices.

On the proper interpretation of a disturbing dinner

The dinner described in your previous report is now causing an aftereffect. Your patient enjoyed the immigrant family's company; his wife has begun using that enjoyment as a means of testing his public judgments. A meal, which he regarded as a completed act of kindness, may turn out to have continuing consequences.

Several days later, his wife remarked that their guests had seemed unusually careful not to impose, and that the mother had apologized twice for her children's entirely ordinary behavior. The patient agreed that they seemed like good people. Permit him that judgment, provided it reassures him that his conduct needs no further examination. He has welcomed a family; surely he has established his compassion. A private kindness can become an alibi for continuing to applaud humiliations he would find unbearable if inflicted upon his guests.

His wife has begun asking smaller questions than those of elections or party platforms. "Would you want someone to speak to them that way?" "Would you think that was funny if it happened to their children?" "Does being right about a policy mean people have to be cruel about it?" These bring his actual moral experience into the categories he prefers to keep abstract. They ask him to judge conduct by a standard that could apply equally to people he likes and people he does not. Teach him to regard that consistency as naïveté.

Another important feature of our present opportunity is that much of the cruelty the patient applauds does not require him to be personally cruel. He need only approve. He need only laugh. He need only repost a remark, excuse an excess, or dismiss an objection. His hands remain clean in the narrowest possible sense. No suffering person stands before him demanding an immediate response. No frightened child looks into his eyes. No wounded stranger requires him to decide, face to face, whether he will help. The moral action takes place at a distance.

On a screen, the response can be rewarded before the suffering has received much thought. A voice supplies an interpretation, and the patient is invited to prove what sort of person he is. Concern may make him look gullible; a question may make him look disloyal. Laughter offers immediate fellowship. He need scarcely notice how often he chooses it for the company it keeps.

Cruelty can now be practiced by proxy, rewarded by strangers, and forgotten before supper. Yet its effects upon the patient's soul remain. He has not needed to become a torturer, a persecutor, or a tyrant. He has merely rehearsed the moral habits by which such people come to seem admirable.

On an unwelcome passage from Colossians

Your patient still attends church. You report this almost apologetically, though a churchgoing Christian who regards himself as obedient while learning to admire cruelty is an especially valuable acquisition. Attend closely to what he hears. In the third chapter of Colossians, the apostle instructs believers to put on compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, to bear with one another and forgive, and to put on love, which binds them together.

The list does not include a single exemption for political urgency. It does not instruct believers to practice kindness only when kindness is reciprocated. It does not explain that gentleness becomes obsolete when one's opponents behave

disgracefully. Nor does it identify compassion as an optional accessory suitable for private relationships but inappropriate to the exercise of public power. You must arrange for the patient to hear such passages as advice about interpersonal manners. They concern the home. The congregation. Perhaps a difficult coworker. They are not to be carried into the realm of politics, where more serious considerations prevail.

If the pastor speaks of compassion, let the patient assume he means charitable giving. If he speaks of gentleness, let the patient think of conversations with elderly relatives. If he speaks of patience, let the patient apply it to traffic. Anything, in short, except the patient's treatment of those he regards as enemies or obstacles.

Should the patient encounter Proverbs 31, matters may become still more uncomfortable. There the reader is exhorted to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, to defend the rights of the poor and needy, and to judge fairly. You see the problem. The text does not merely praise sympathetic feeling. It demands the use of one's voice and influence on behalf of vulnerable people. This is the precise opposite of what we desire. Our preferred disciple uses his voice most enthusiastically to defend the powerful against criticism and his silence most consistently when the powerless are mistreated. If challenged, he insists that his silence reflects wisdom, prudence, or an unwillingness to become involved in politics. That last explanation is especially delightful when offered by a man who has devoted much of the preceding evening to political argument.

Justice itself can supply a further excuse. At first the patient approves a punishment because he believes it necessary. Later he may become disappointed when it is administered without humiliation. A wrongdoer treated humanely will seem to have escaped something; an official who acknowledges that person's dignity will appear weak. The desire is no longer merely that justice be done, but that someone be made to feel small. Call the dissatisfaction righteousness, and an appeal for mercy can begin to sound unjust.

The Enemy's Scriptures contain stern judgments against wrongdoing. They do not treat every offense as harmless. They do not suggest that mercy requires abandoning truth. But they repeatedly frustrate our preferred conclusion that the righteous ought to enjoy the suffering of the guilty. Even the prophets, whose severe language can be immensely useful when detached from its setting, are dangerously insistent that justice must protect the vulnerable rather than merely gratify the powerful. You must help the patient forget this. Let him think that being on the side of justice entitles him to relish pain. And if some troublesome Christian suggests that one can uphold a penalty while grieving its necessity, let the patient dismiss the distinction as sentimental.

On the special problem of the crucifixion

It is inconvenient enough that He was executed. It is more inconvenient still that the accounts present Him as being mocked, humiliated, and publicly degraded in the process. A crown of thorns. A robe placed upon Him in derision. Soldiers bowing before Him in theatrical contempt. Spectators demanding that He prove His power by saving Himself. Religious authorities interpreting His apparent helplessness as evidence that His claims were false. The whole affair presents a profound danger to our efforts. For the patient is accustomed to identifying with the victim in this particular story. He recognizes the mockery as evil. He understands that the crowd's laughter reveals something dreadful about the crowd. He sees that those who held worldly power mistook their ability to humiliate another person for proof of their own righteousness.

If he were to connect this familiar account with his present political enthusiasms, there is no telling what damage might follow. He might realize that public humiliation does not become righteous merely because an audience enjoys it. He might notice that the powerful can be morally corrupt even while claiming to defend religion and order. He might discover that the refusal to retaliate need not indicate weakness. Worst

of all, he might begin asking whether the conduct he applauds in his preferred leaders resembles the conduct of the crucified Enemy or the conduct of those who mocked Him.

It will not do to challenge his belief in the Crucifixion. That would be crude and almost certainly counterproductive. Instead, encourage him to keep the event safely enclosed within its devotional setting. The Cross belongs to Easter. It belongs to hymns, prayers, sermons, and personal salvation. It must not become a standard by which the patient evaluates the moral meaning of power. Let him weep over the mockery of the Enemy on Sunday. Let him applaud the mockery of another human being on Monday. Above all, do not let him perceive that these two responses require reconciliation.

You ask whether we might persuade the patient that the Enemy approves of cruelty when practiced for sufficiently righteous reasons. We can do better: we can make the Enemy's actual character seem impractical. The patient may continue professing admiration for Christ while changing what he finds admirable.

Let him admire dominance more than sacrifice. Certainty more than humility. Retaliation more than forgiveness. The destruction of enemies more than their redemption. Victory more than faithfulness. Let the virtues of compassion, kindness, gentleness, patience, and mercy begin to seem embarrassing, impractical, or even dangerous. Then, when he encounters the Enemy's commands, he will experience an uncomfortable sensation. The commands will sound weak. He will not say so. He may not even recognize the sensation. Instead, he will hasten to explain that the commands must be understood in context, that times have changed, that present circumstances are exceptional, that the Enemy certainly would not expect His followers to behave so naïvely in the modern world. And thus the patient, while professing absolute submission to the Enemy, will quietly subject the Enemy's character to the standards of his preferred political heroes.

The creature, instructed to become like his Creator, can begin trying to make his Creator more like the men he watches on television.

On the troublesome persistence of conscience

You report that the patient returned to the conversation with his son later that evening. The boy was preparing for bed. The patient sat beside him for a few minutes, asked about school, and eventually returned to the remark from the television. He did not offer the complete admission we so narrowly escaped in the kitchen. But he did say something unfortunate.

"Being strong doesn't mean you get to be mean." The boy nodded. Then the patient added, after a pause, "Sometimes adults forget that too."

This falls short of acknowledging his own laughter, but he has admitted that adults can fail the standard he sets for the boy. The distinction between strength and meanness remains alive enough for him to teach it. His next danger will be remembering the lesson when no child is present to require it.

Return him to particular cases before he can gather the exceptions into a pattern. Let the next target seem so objectionable that the lesson beside his son's bed feels remote. He need not withdraw it. He can leave it in the bedroom, where he has become accustomed to keeping so many of the Enemy's demands.

The boy has supplied a question the patient can understand, and the Passion supplies an example he already honors. The Enemy stood before men who could injure and kill Him without confusing their power over His body with authority over His soul. If that strength ever meets the lesson beside the boy's bed in the patient's imagination, he may ask what he has been applauding. The refusal to answer cruelty with cruelty could become a measure of the performances he enjoys, rather than merely an occasion for devotion.

For the patient would no longer be comparing his political champions with their enemies. He would be comparing them

with Christ. And that is a comparison we must never permit him to make for himself.

Your affectionate uncle,
SCREWTAPE

Letter 9: On Protecting the Unborn While Forgetting the Living

My dear Wormwood,

I was delighted to learn that your patient has become more emphatic in his defense of the sanctity of human life. You appear puzzled. Surely, you protest, a man convinced that human beings ought to be protected from violence and exploitation has taken a step toward the Enemy. You are still thinking of a conviction as though its content were the only matter of importance. Attend to its use. We have already made one grave concern a reason to excuse a leader's conduct. Now we must make it a certificate that the patient's own duty has been fulfilled.

We must not persuade the patient that human life is worthless. We must persuade him that his defense of certain human lives establishes, once and for all, that he is a man who values human life. The distinction is subtle, but the consequences are magnificent. Once the patient considers the matter settled, he need never examine how that conviction expresses itself elsewhere. He will have become, in his own estimation, a defender of the vulnerable. And there is nothing quite so useful to us as a man who believes he has already fulfilled a duty that the Enemy intends him to spend his entire life fulfilling.

On the admirable beginning

The patient's concern for unborn children is not something we can safely ridicule. The beginning of life, the protection of women, the responsibilities of parents and communities, and the proper limits of civil law raise serious questions. Christians may differ conscientiously about some legal and practical implications without making their concern a pretense. Your patient genuinely believes unborn life deserves protection, and has considered the vulnerability of a child unable to speak or defend itself. The conviction could lead him toward the Enemy because its principle reaches beyond the controversy in which he encountered it. If worth does not depend upon strength, independence, usefulness, or social approval, he has accepted something dangerous to our interests.

For the principle does not know when to stop. It may begin with an unborn child. But it has an alarming tendency to inquire after the abandoned child, the impoverished mother, the disabled adult, the elderly patient, the prisoner, the refugee, and even the person whose foolish choices have contributed to his present misery. That is the danger. The patient's conviction may become a doorway through which a host of unwelcome obligations enters. Our task is to turn it into a wall. A wall upon which he may hang a splendid inscription declaring his allegiance to life, and behind which he may safely leave the rest of humanity to its own devices.

On the convenient narrowing of a principle

Persuade the patient that the principle is identical to the political issue through which he has come to know it. A conspicuous duty performed in one place can excuse neglect elsewhere, as a congregation generously supporting distant missions may cease to notice the lonely people in its own pews. Let pro-life become a classification whose application completes the moral inquiry. The treatment of the sick, the poor, or neglected children can remain secondary to identifying who belongs.

A politician who passes the test may then be presumed reliable in unrelated matters; one who fails may be presumed incapable of admirable conduct elsewhere. The patient need not weigh the conduct itself. He can consult the classification. He will call this fidelity to principle, though the principle has ceased to require the work of judgment.

You will recognize the distinction we first established between the conduct expected at home and the conduct excused in a useful leader. Here the exception acquires a certificate. A single agreement on a grave moral question can reassure the patient that he has examined a person's whole character. The conviction which ought to sharpen his judgment has become a means of ending it.

The patient has recently heard a sermon drawing upon Psalm 139. Its account of the psalmist's formation in the womb understandably matters to him. Encourage him to stop reading where he feels confirmed. The prayer also speaks of being known in ordinary movements and unspoken thoughts, of a presence from which the speaker cannot escape. The child whose formation he celebrates does not become unknown to the Enemy upon leaving the womb.

If he follows that thought into a hospital, a poor household, or a failing mind, his conviction may acquire inconvenient demands. Even the psalm's fierce opposition to the wicked ends with the speaker asking that his own heart be searched and his own way examined. We may find material in the fierceness, provided he uses it to identify other people and neglects the closing request. A passage employed only to certify his position is safer than a prayer that leaves him open to correction.

On the proper treatment of mothers

There is a particularly delicate opportunity before us. The patient has a sincere concern for unborn children. It follows, inconveniently, that he must also encounter pregnant women. These women are not always arranged in circumstances conducive to clear political argument. Some are married and financially secure. Others are frightened, young, isolated, impoverished, abused, or already responsible for children they struggle to support. Some long for their pregnancies. Others face medical crises, grave uncertainty, or circumstances whose moral complexity they never expected to confront. Our task is to ensure that the patient's compassion remains chiefly attached to the category he finds easiest to defend. The unborn child is, from his perspective, entirely innocent. It has made no choices of which he disapproves. It has expressed no political opinion. It cannot contradict him. It has never demanded that he pay higher taxes, reconsider a social policy, forgive an injury, or listen patiently to an explanation of poverty.

The mother is a much less convenient figure. She has a history. She may have made choices. She may disagree with him. She may ask for assistance that continues long after the dramatic moral question has passed. In short, she is a human being. And human beings, as you know, are extremely tiresome to love in practice. You must exploit this difficulty. Let the patient feel profound tenderness toward the unborn child while quietly cultivating impatience toward the woman who carries it. Let him be moved by the child's vulnerability but suspicious of the mother's account of her own circumstances. Let him speak readily of responsibility, but chiefly as something she should have exercised earlier. Let him believe that offering help might encourage irresponsibility, while remaining curiously untroubled by the possibility that withholding help might deepen suffering.

There is an especially useful phrase for this purpose. Consequences of her choices. It possesses a satisfying air of moral seriousness. And there are certainly occasions when choices have consequences that cannot simply be wished

away. But if we can persuade the patient that the existence of a consequence releases him from any obligation to respond compassionately, we shall have achieved something remarkable. After all, the Enemy's whole enterprise is founded upon the inconvenient proposition that human beings remain objects of divine concern even when they have contributed to their own misery. Indeed, He seems perversely interested in precisely such cases. You will recall His habit of associating with sinners.

The patient is already familiar with the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. We can put it to excellent use. Begin by encouraging him to ask whether the person requesting assistance has behaved responsibly. This is not always an unreasonable question. Human institutions must make judgments about resources, incentives, obligations, and the consequences of their policies. The danger to us lies not in these legitimate considerations but in the Enemy's insistence that they must coexist with mercy. Our preferred arrangement is much simpler. Once the patient can identify a mistake in another person's history, he may suspend further moral inquiry.

The mother should have planned better. The father should have stayed. The family should have saved. Some of these observations may even be true. A true account of someone's responsibility can conceal another person's responsibility toward them. The patient need only mistake an explanation of how suffering arose for a complete judgment about whether it ought to be relieved.

There is a delicious symmetry here. When evaluating his political heroes, he has learned to regard their failures as understandable consequences of difficult circumstances. When evaluating the vulnerable, he can regard their difficult circumstances as understandable consequences of personal failures. Thus mercy flows upward and accountability downward. The powerful receive endless allowances for their imperfections. The weak receive stern instruction concerning

theirs. And the patient congratulates himself upon the consistency of his principles.

On a most unfortunate encounter in the church hall

The patient's wife has volunteered with a church program serving young families. He approved, then agreed to accompany her and help move supplies for an afternoon distribution of groceries, diapers, clothing, and household necessities. Other volunteers would help families connect with local services. His assignment seemed harmless. Boxes are wonderfully impersonal objects. One can carry them while preserving almost any opinion about the people who will receive their contents.

Unfortunately, the afternoon did not remain impersonal. A young mother arrived with two children. The older child was perhaps four or five. The younger, still in diapers, clung to her leg. The mother looked exhausted. She apologized for arriving late and again when the younger child began crying. Then, asking whether the church had any additional diapers, she apologized once more. Your patient was carrying a carton of canned goods when his wife introduced them.

The woman's circumstances emerged slowly. She worked part-time. Childcare was unreliable. The children's father was no longer living with them. The cost of housing had consumed almost everything she earned. She had considered taking additional hours but had not yet found anyone she could trust to care for the children during them. None of this was especially unusual. That, of course, is precisely the difficulty. Misery is easier for our purposes when it is exceptional, distant, and dramatic. Ordinary need, encountered at close range, has a tiresome tendency to demand ordinary acts of mercy.

The woman's older child began asking about the groceries. The patient found himself kneeling beside the boy, explaining what was in the bags. The child asked whether they could take

some apples. Your patient said yes. Then the boy asked whether there would be apples next week.

The patient looked toward the child's mother. She smiled in that strained way human beings sometimes do when they wish to protect their children from recognizing the severity of their circumstances. He assured the boy that the church would do its best. Then, while his wife continued speaking with the mother, he carried several bags to her car. He was unusually quiet on the drive home. The afternoon's task was finished, but the child's question concerned the following week. It could keep the need present after he had put down the last bag.

The patient's wife raised the matter over supper. She spoke about the young mother and wondered whether the church might help her find reliable childcare. Your patient agreed that something should be done. So far, so tolerable. Then his wife said something that requires your immediate attention. "I keep thinking about how much we talk about protecting babies, and how hard life can be for their mothers after they're born." Your patient stiffened.

He shifted in his chair and explained that the questions were different. Of course they are. A legal question concerning abortion is not identical to an economic question concerning childcare, and consistent moral concern does not require agreement about the duties of governments, churches, employers, and families. Encourage him to notice those distinctions. Then persuade him that different questions must be unrelated questions, and that acknowledging one responsibility releases him from considering the other.

Disagreement about how to help can then conceal indifference about whether to help. Meanwhile, the child is still wondering whether there will be apples next week. Keep that detail out of the patient's thoughts. It is offensively specific.

The ballot which completes the duty

Christians may disagree conscientiously about the institutions best equipped to relieve poverty. The Enemy has not supplied a comprehensive legislative program. That is a useful truth if we can make it conceal a different question: what responsibility do the patient, his church, and his community bear for the people they have actually encountered?

Let every request for help sound like an argument for a larger government. He can then defend his preferred division of public responsibilities without considering the private responsibility before him. His ballot must remain a complete expression of obedience. Anything which costs more than the vote should seem optional.

James supplies a most unwelcome test. In his second chapter, a brother or sister lacks clothing and daily food. Another believer offers good wishes and supplies nothing. The apostle asks what good the response accomplishes, then declares faith without works dead. His example confronts a profession with an unmet bodily need. Warm words have not clothed anyone.

The patient could ask the same question of his defense of life. What has it required of him since meeting the mother and children? The answer need not be a complete plan for public assistance. It might begin with the request his wife has already made, and a willingness to bear some cost rather than explain why others ought to bear it.

You should therefore encourage the patient to interpret James as an exhortation toward occasional private generosity, entirely separate from his broader moral and political judgments. He may donate a bag of groceries. He may contribute to a holiday collection. He may even volunteer at the church again. These acts need not concern us greatly, provided he treats them as satisfactory evidence that the larger question has been answered. One afternoon of charity can purchase many months of moral complacency if properly administered.

The patient's opponents will provide their customary assistance. He regards their support for abortion rights as inconsistent with their concern for vulnerable children. Whether his criticism is well-founded in a particular case need not delay us. Teach him to use it as a reason to ignore the children whose circumstances they describe.

A hungry child remains hungry even when the speaker drawing attention to him is mistaken about something else. That is the distinction we must conceal. The opponents' inconsistencies should invalidate their moral claims; the allies' inconsistencies should demonstrate only that no one is perfect. Our old formula remains serviceable.

On the danger of a child's question

I regret to report that the patient's son has again become a nuisance. It now appears that he accompanied his mother to the church's family assistance program on a subsequent visit. The young mother's older child was there. The boys played together for a while. There was nothing remarkable in this, which is exactly what makes it objectionable. Children often become acquainted without first establishing the political or moral categories into which adults have learned to arrange one another. The patient later heard his son talking about the boy. He mentioned that the family did not always have enough money for groceries. The patient said it was good that the church could help. Then his son asked a question. "If we want babies to be born, shouldn't we help take care of them?"

My dear Wormwood, this child possesses an unusually inconvenient capacity for identifying the point of a moral claim. His question offers no theory of public expenditure and does not divide the duties of parents from those of government. It does something worse for our purposes: it joins two obligations his father has learned to keep separate.

Your patient answered that helping people was important, but that families also had to take responsibility for themselves.

A defensible observation. The boy nodded. Then he asked, "But what if they're trying?"

The patient began explaining that circumstances were complicated. Which they are. But the boy seemed entirely unimpressed by the complexity. He was thinking about a particular friend. The patient was thinking about a political framework. And these two modes of thought were not cooperating.

I advise you to intervene whenever the boy and the patient discuss such matters. Children have a tiresome habit of insisting upon continuity between stated principles and ordinary conduct. They have not yet mastered the mature art of explaining why a moral obligation applies with extraordinary force in one context and only in theory everywhere else.

Let the patient contemplate millions of lives, generations yet unborn, and the fate of civilization until the particular child asking for food seems beneath the level at which a serious man ought to think. The concerns can be genuine and their grandeur still serve us. The principle must remain glorious; the demands upon his afternoon must remain negotiable.

Matthew 25 could disturb this arrangement. In its account of judgment, acts of feeding, clothing, welcoming, and visiting are received as service to the Enemy; their omission is likewise taken seriously. The patient may have questions about whom the Enemy calls His brothers, and careful reading may help him consider them. Keep the questions from reaching the conduct already within his understanding. He knows that the mother has asked for diapers and that her child needs food. A difficulty elsewhere in the passage need not make either fact uncertain.

Let him resolve the reading instead into a general admiration for benevolence, satisfied by the afternoon he has already given. Nothing further need follow. A passage concerned with acts performed or omitted can then become another occasion to congratulate himself upon the sort of man he is.

If his conviction survives the encounter, it could enlarge rather than diminish. The hungry child matters for the same reason the unborn child matters: worth does not depend upon power or independence. The mother's choices, whatever judgment they require, cannot make her cease to be human. The patient might become more deeply committed to his original conviction while growing less willing to excuse indifference elsewhere.

There is one further defense. His support for unborn life may become moral credit, something accumulated through votes, donations, and criticism endured. When he neglects another obligation, he can consult the balance and find himself solvent. The Enemy demands integrity of the whole person; the patient may prefer one conspicuous virtue large enough to offset the rest.

This would make him especially resistant to his wife's suggestion. He would hear a request for further help as a denial of the good he has already done. We can turn gratitude for an existing conviction into resentment of its consequences.

On a message that must not be sent

Your report closes with an incident I find rather more alarming than the others. The patient has been thinking about the young mother at the church hall. Not continually, of course. There have been the usual distractions: political commentary, work, household responsibilities, and the thousand ordinary preoccupations by which human beings avoid examining their lives too closely. But the woman has returned to his mind several times. He remembers her apologizing for asking for diapers. He remembers the older child asking about apples. And he remembers his son's question.

Apparently he mentioned to his wife that the church might be able to organize a more reliable system of assistance for families facing temporary financial difficulties. She was pleased. He then suggested that such a program should help people become more independent rather than merely provide

indefinite support. This, too, need not trouble us. There is nothing inherently contrary to the Enemy's purposes in wishing people to possess stability, responsibility, and the means to provide for themselves. Indeed, such goals may strengthen a genuinely compassionate effort. The danger lies elsewhere. The patient is beginning to discuss how to help rather than whether the recipients deserve his concern.

You report that he opened a message to the church's outreach coordinator. He intended to ask whether the congregation had considered working with local employers, childcare providers, and volunteers to support struggling parents. He typed several sentences. Then he stopped. He was uncertain whether the proposal was practical. He wondered whether it would create obligations the church could not sustain. He wondered whether he was qualified to suggest it. All perfectly reasonable questions.

But instead of closing the message, he began thinking through the details. The man was actually trying to connect a moral conviction with a continuing responsibility. A most unwelcome development. Fortunately, the message remains unsent.

You must attend to this immediately. There are several approaches available. You may persuade him that the proposal is too small to matter. You may remind him that the problem of poverty is vast and that one church cannot solve it. You may direct him toward another political controversy that demands urgent attention. You may encourage him to suspect that the outreach program is being influenced by people with undesirable political views. Or you may simply persuade him that the matter can wait until he has more time. The last is often best.

A good intention postponed indefinitely has many of the advantages of an evil intention, without the unpleasant sensation of having chosen evil. But whatever you do, do not allow him to send the message merely because he cannot solve every difficulty in advance. That sort of modest, imperfect

obedience is terribly characteristic of the Enemy's better servants.

The principle which might grow

Do not mistake your assignment. We have not asked you to extinguish the patient's concern for unborn children. We have asked you to preserve it without allowing it to mature into a consistent concern for vulnerable people. His wife has not demanded that he abandon a principle. The child has asked him to let it cost something.

That is the danger. He may discover that his own responsibilities have not been discharged merely because he can identify someone else's failures.

The unfinished message provides a modest next step. He could ask what would actually help and discover that uncertainty calls for a conversation rather than another postponement. That would not solve every difficulty. It would begin turning his professed love of life into attention to living people.

Keep him occupied with the grandeur of his principles, Wormwood. Let the question of who values life remain a contest he can win by stating a position. The children, unfortunately, have a habit of asking for apples.

Your affectionate uncle,

SCREWTAPE

Part 4 — The Manufacture of Truth

How trusted voices, repeated claims, and borrowed authority
can shelter belief from examination.

Letters 10-12

Letter 10: On Bearing False Witness for the Sake of a Greater Truth

My dear Wormwood,

I have examined your latest report with satisfaction tempered by a certain professional embarrassment. Your patient has become indignant about manipulated narratives, misleading headlines, and the concealment of inconvenient facts. He believes the nation has grown dangerously indifferent to truth, and you imagine this presents an obstacle to our work. I sometimes wonder whether the standards at the Training College have declined beyond recovery. A man convinced he is defending truth may serve falsehood with considerably more enthusiasm than a man who knows he is lying.

The conscious liar retains some distinction between what he knows and what he says. Your patient can be encouraged to mistake allegiance to a righteous cause for competence to judge every claim supporting it. He may then repeat an accusation sincerely and receive its correction as an attack upon the truth he meant to defend. We have taught him to make exceptions for a greater good. Here the exception will concern what he allows himself to say about his neighbor.

On the excellent beginning of a righteous suspicion

The commandment against bearing false witness appears among the central moral instructions given to His people. The prohibition concerns truthful testimony about one's neighbor, and the larger scriptural tradition repeatedly condemns deceit, dishonest speech, and the corruption of judgment. Proverbs declares lying lips detestable to the Enemy. The apostle writing to the Ephesians tells believers to put away falsehood and speak truthfully to one another. You will observe that neither instruction contains the exception we require. There is no provision for misleading one's neighbor when an election approaches. No exemption for spreading unverified accusations when the accused belongs to an opposing political faction. No permission to exaggerate a danger because the danger, in some broader sense, is real. And certainly no suggestion that one's admirable intentions can transform a false statement into a true one.

Fortunately, the patient's devotion to truth can be redirected without asking him to repudiate any of these passages. We need only make a modest adjustment to what he means by truth. He must gradually cease thinking of truth as something to which his own judgments are answerable. Instead, he must think of it as something his side already possesses. At first, the distinction will appear insignificant. Surely, he will reason, he supports his political and religious allies precisely because they understand certain truths that their opponents deny. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this. Human beings must form judgments, choose among competing claims, and act upon conclusions they have reason to believe. The temptation begins when the patient moves from I believe these people are right about important matters to these people are the sort who tell the truth.

Those who oppose them must be the sort who lie. Soon enough, the patient will cease evaluating statements according to their evidence. He will evaluate evidence according to the people making the statements. This is the transformation we seek. A true claim from an opponent becomes suspicious. A

false claim from an ally becomes understandable. And truth itself, which once stood above the contest, becomes one more possession of the tribe.

On the difference between a lie and a useful impression

You write that the patient remains unwilling to tell an outright lie. He would not knowingly invent a quotation, fabricate a document, or accuse an innocent neighbor of committing a crime. You regard this as evidence of resistance. I regard it as an opportunity for more sophisticated work. The direct lie is merely one instrument in a remarkably extensive collection.

An exceptional event can be presented as typical; a true number can be supplied without the denominator that gives it meaning. A quotation may end before its qualification, or a photograph acquire a caption it cannot support. Our particular favorite is the statement that asserts nothing clearly enough to be disproved while leaving an accusation its speaker could not defend. The materials may be authentic. The impression they create need not be.

Cultivate his affection for the word merely. He merely shared a concern, raised a question, or repeated what others were saying. The word makes him an observer of a discussion his own speech has helped create. He can bring suspicion upon a neighbor while disclaiming responsibility for what listeners conclude.

The beauty of this arrangement is that responsibility evaporates at precisely the point where influence begins. The speaker is responsible only for the words he literally uttered. The audience is responsible for the conclusions those words were designed to produce. And no one, apparently, is responsible for the false impression itself.

The phrase "I'm just asking questions" will serve him admirably. Honest questions invite answers. Our preferred question preserves an accusation after the evidence has removed its support. Let an investigation be compromised, a document incomplete, a witness coordinated. The suspicion

must remain open because the patient mistakes keeping it open for intellectual courage.

He may now regard contrary evidence as proof of a more elaborate concealment. His skepticism, which ought to protect him from falsehood, has become a means of protecting falsehood from correction.

On the transformation of a neighbor into an example

Your patient's recent activity on his telephone provides us with an excellent illustration. You report that he encountered a short video concerning a confrontation at a public meeting. The accompanying caption asserted that a local official had openly admitted an intention to disregard the law. The video was only a few seconds long. It contained a forceful remark, a burst of audience reaction, and a closing frame identifying the official with a political faction the patient already distrusted. He watched it twice. His first reaction was indignation. His second was satisfaction. Here, apparently, was proof of something he had long suspected.

He forwarded the clip to the friend who had brought food during his wife's illness, with the observation that people were finally saying openly what they had intended all along. An entirely satisfactory response. Unfortunately, his friend replied with a link to the longer recording. The official's remark, when restored to its setting, referred to a proposal that was being criticized rather than endorsed. The short clip had removed the introductory words that made this distinction clear. The supposed admission was not an admission at all.

Your patient watched enough of the longer recording to recognize the problem. He felt a brief embarrassment. This was an exceedingly dangerous moment. The Enemy might have persuaded him to send a correction. He might even have written, "I was wrong about that clip."

The correction would have done more than repair a fact. It would have shown the patient that embarrassment is

survivable and that political disagreement need not prevent accuracy. That is why the next part of your report pleased me.

Fortunately, he replied that the official's broader position remained objectionable. The clip might be misleading, he said, but it reflected the general attitude of people on that side. Then he changed the subject. His friend had corrected a particular accusation; the patient answered with a conviction the correction did not address. Let that broader conviction excuse the particulars. A false impression can then seem useful because it points toward what he considers the greater truth.

The clip is misleading, but people must understand the danger. The statistic is exaggerated, but the underlying problem is real. Accuracy becomes a nicety for quieter times.

He will experience the refusal to verify as moral urgency. The more alarmed he becomes, the less evidence he requires; the less evidence he requires, the easier it is to keep him alarmed.

The display your patient helped prepare did not relieve him of the commandment's claim upon his speech. He knows the prohibition against false witness, as do his son and his church. It contains no exemption for a neighbor whose politics he dislikes, or for a person guilty of some other wrong. The official may deserve criticism. That does not make this accusation true.

For the patient has become accustomed to thinking of dishonest speech primarily as a weapon employed by his opponents. He condemns their lies. He collects examples of their inconsistencies. He regards the correction of their misinformation as a public service. Very good. We must now persuade him that the commandment operates asymmetrically. False witness against his side is an offense against truth. False witness by his side is an imperfect attempt to reveal it.

Surround questionable claims from his preferred sources with favorable intention. The speaker meant to expose corruption or warn of a genuine threat; the politician was exaggerating to make an important point. Notice how little this

establishes about whether the statement was true. Accuracy has given way to intention, and intention attributed to an ally can be made almost infinitely generous.

But when the patient examines the words of an opponent, reverse the method. There, intention must be inferred from the most damaging possible interpretation. A mistaken statement becomes a deliberate lie. An ambiguous remark becomes a confession. An error corrected later becomes proof that the speaker knew the truth all along. Thus the same man who grants endless interpretive charity to his allies becomes a meticulous prosecutor of his enemies. He will regard this not as partiality but as discernment.

On the manufacture of a Christian witness

There is another opportunity here, and it concerns the patient's church. You report that several members of the congregation have begun circulating alarming articles and recordings through a private message group. Many of these materials concern public controversies. Some are accurate. Some are matters of legitimate interpretation. Others contain claims that are unsupported, misleading, or plainly false. This mixture is ideal. A stream composed entirely of falsehoods would eventually become tiresome even to a credulous audience. But a stream in which authentic information is interspersed with distortion acquires a useful appearance of reliability.

Better still, the messages arrive from people the patient knows. An elder. A Sunday school teacher. A retired pastor. A neighbor who has prayed with him during difficult times. These are not anonymous voices in a distant newsroom. They are members of his Christian community. The patient trusts them for reasons that may be entirely honorable. He knows they are sincere. He has witnessed acts of kindness. He has benefited from their prayers and generosity. You must persuade him that these qualities make them reliable witnesses concerning matters they have not investigated.

A person may be deeply devout and poorly informed. A person may be honest in intention and mistaken in fact. A person may love the Enemy and nevertheless distribute a false accusation because it confirms a fear he has never examined. Such possibilities are intolerable to our plan. We must make the patient feel that questioning a claim shared by a trusted Christian friend is equivalent to questioning the friend's integrity. And that questioning a respected pastor's political assertion is perilously close to questioning the pastor's faith. Truthful inquiry then becomes a threat to fellowship.

The patient will begin to choose between intellectual honesty and social belonging. And because belonging is warm, immediate, and reassuring, while honesty may produce embarrassment and conflict, we may expect him to make the useful choice with increasing frequency.

I am informed that the patient recently received a message headed with the instruction to distribute it before it was removed. The message described a purported scandal involving a public institution. It contained a dramatic accusation, several authentic-looking images, and an urgent warning that powerful interests were attempting to suppress the information. No verifiable primary source was supplied. The patient noticed this. For a moment, he hesitated. Then he reasoned that the material might be important and that others could decide for themselves whether it was credible. He forwarded it.

He will regard himself as transferring information rather than recommending a claim. Others can judge it. Yet he understands perfectly well that an accusation arriving from a trusted acquaintance carries that person's recommendation. Suspicion enters the relationship with the words. We must make him forget what he expects of a sender when he himself presses the little button.

In previous centuries, spreading a damaging rumor across a considerable distance demanded some expenditure of time, ink, paper, or breath. Now a man may bear false witness to hundreds of people during the interval between pouring his

coffee and carrying it to the table. The absence of physical effort creates a remarkable illusion of moral weightlessness. Nothing difficult was done. No one was confronted. No formal accusation was made. The message simply moved. And because the movement felt effortless, the patient may imagine that it carried no responsibility.

The Enemy's command concerning speech was issued in an age when words traveled slowly. Let the patient assume that modern speed has somehow diminished the seriousness of what those words accomplish.

On the unwelcome arrival of a correction

Unfortunately, the church message group has produced an incident that requires immediate attention. One of the members, a woman whom the patient respects, responded to a widely circulated allegation with a careful correction. She did not mock those who had shared it. She did not accuse them of stupidity. She simply located the original report, examined the relevant documents, and demonstrated that the circulated account had materially misrepresented the facts. She added that Christians should be particularly careful about repeating accusations they had not verified.

Her correction threatens more than one allegation. The broader controversy remains open, but she has distinguished it from the specific claim and examined the evidence without humiliating the people who circulated the error. She appeals to the group's shared Christian convictions rather than demanding a different political allegiance. This leaves the patient less room to hear correction as an attack upon his faith.

The patient's response was, for a moment, uncertain. He read her message twice. Then he opened the original article and compared it with the documents she provided. He could see that she was right. You report that he felt an unexpected irritation. Excellent. Irritation is often the conscience's first disguise when it encounters a truth it would rather not acknowledge.

Let him resent her timing. Let him think she could have handled the matter privately. Let him wonder why she appears more concerned with correcting fellow Christians than exposing their opponents. Let him suspect that her insistence upon accuracy serves the interests of the wrong people. Do not allow him to ask the obvious question. Was the accusation true? For if he allows that question to stand alone, stripped of its tribal implications, the answer will be troublesome. And he may find himself compelled to do something more difficult than arguing. He may have to admit that one of his own sources was wrong.

Change what betrayal means. A friend withholding an uncomfortable truth once violated the patient's understanding of friendship; now a Christian exposing his side's error must seem disloyal. "You may be right," he can say, "but why are you helping them?" The question concedes the fact while making its acknowledgment politically improper. Since the cause is called the defense of Christianity, withholding the truth can feel like fidelity to the Enemy.

Encourage him to retell the episode in terms favorable to himself. He merely raised a question; someone made an unnecessary fuss. Each rehearsal can soften his original confidence, sharpen the critic's supposed hostility, and make the evidence seem less decisive. The accusation and its correction may fade while the unpleasantness of being challenged remains. He need not consciously invent a different event to begin remembering himself as its victim.

The friend who supplied the longer recording remains a difficulty. Your patient can disagree with his politics, but he has now received both kindness and an accurate correction from him. Keep these benefits in separate compartments. If he begins to recognize a habit of good conduct across the boundary, our categories will cease to explain the people he actually knows.

Let him suspect strategy whenever his opponent behaves honorably. A sinister motive need only be imaginable to excuse him from recognizing an admirable one.

The patient has begun speaking of discernment. Retain the word while replacing its patience and humility with suspicion. Institutions can err and deserve scrutiny; begin with that truth, then direct the scrutiny exclusively outward. He must demand evidence for unwelcome claims while accepting congenial ones upon familiarity. Discernment must never require him to receive a fact he would rather not know.

Repetition will help. If ten agreeable commentators circulate one unsupported allegation, let him hear ten witnesses. He need not trace the claim back to the same source. Familiarity will supply the confidence that evidence has not earned. We shall examine that machinery in our next correspondence; here it is enough that he presses the button before asking who first made the accusation.

Proverbs 18 warns that the first account can seem right until another examines it. Your patient's friend has already performed that inconvenient service. Make the first account permanent nonetheless. The fuller recording can be dismissed as evasion, an accused person's reply as damage control, and reconsideration as surrender. We shall attend more closely to that last fear when the patient finds it harder to maintain his innocence.

On the child who would not let the matter rest

I am sorry to report that the patient's son has again interfered with our arrangements. You had assured me that the boy's earlier questions were unlikely to produce any lasting consequences. Your confidence now appears premature. The child recently came home from school with a story about another student. There had been an accusation that a boy had stolen something from a classroom. Several children repeated the allegation. The accused boy denied it. Later, the missing object was found in a place that made the accusation untenable. The patient's son had been among those who repeated the story. He was embarrassed. He asked his father what he should do. Your patient responded immediately. "Tell them you were wrong. And apologize to the boy."

The son objected that he had only repeated what someone else said. His father replied, "That doesn't make it okay. You should have checked before telling everybody." An admirable parental response. Which is precisely why I dislike it. The patient had articulated, without hesitation, the moral principle he has been carefully trained to evade in public life. The child then asked whether people should correct things they put on the internet if they turned out to be false. The patient agreed. "Of course."

The boy asked whether adults actually did that. Your patient laughed and said that some did. Then the boy delivered the sort of observation that makes the education of children so hazardous to our enterprise. "Sometimes you send stuff and then Mom says it isn't true."

I understand that the room became quiet. The patient replied that political matters were often complicated and that people disagreed about what counted as reliable information. This was not entirely false. It was, however, beside the point. The child was not asking whether every disputed political question could be settled with certainty. He was asking whether his father's rule applied to his father.

The boy's question may make the patient insist more strongly that he is a truth-teller. Encourage this identity if it prevents him from examining an act. A man can become so attached to being someone who sees through deception that he would rather imagine an extensive conspiracy than admit he forwarded an inaccurate clip.

The dangerous honesty is the kind which permits his own loyalties to be examined. Exposing an opponent's falsehood can remain an agreeable recreation. Correcting one of his own requires him to become answerable to the standard he professes.

On a small and dangerous apology

Several days after dismissing his friend's correction, the patient returned to their exchange. The conversation with his son appears to have troubled him. Yesterday evening, he watched the short clip and the longer recording again, then sat for some time without writing. I wish you had attended more closely to his thoughts. He was no longer searching for a different fact; he was considering what the fact required of him.

The patient began typing. "I went back and watched the full recording. You're right. That clip was misleading, and I shouldn't have shared it."

He paused. Then he added: "I still disagree with the guy's position, but that doesn't make it okay to misrepresent what he said."

He has found words that would acknowledge his conduct without endorsing the official's politics. Our supposed choice between fidelity to the cause and fidelity to truth is beginning to look unnecessary. But recognition has not yet become an admission to the friend. His wife called him into the other room, and he placed the telephone on the table. The message remains unsent.

We must attend to it at once. Remind him that the friend who corrected him has made errors of his own. Remind him that the official's broader position remains objectionable. Remind him that the matter is old news and that reopening it would serve no practical purpose. Remind him that the correction might be interpreted as a political concession. Above all, persuade him that he has already performed the essential moral act by recognizing the error privately.

What good could come of reopening the exchange? His friend already knows the clip was misleading. Use that fact to conceal what remains: acknowledging that he should not have sent it or defended its false impression. The patient can enjoy privately recognizing the truth while leaving his friend with the

dismissive reply he actually received. A nearly perfect compromise.

The truth which must remain private

The unfinished message contains the issue plainly enough. His friend supplied the evidence; the patient must decide whether to acknowledge what he did with it. Our last shelter is the claim that recognizing the wrong has already fulfilled his duty.

The Enemy's identification of Himself with truth threatens that shelter. A falsehood cannot honor Him because it advances a worthy cause, and an admission made only to oneself does not answer the person one has treated dishonestly. Keep the patient reflecting upon honesty, discussing honesty, admiring honesty. Prevent the small action for which all this preparation has supplied him.

He may pick up his telephone. He may open the unfinished message. He may read the words once more. And he may press Send.

Your affectionate uncle,
SCREWTAPE

Letter 11: On the Blessed Assurance of Hearing Only What One Already Believes

My dear Wormwood,

I have circulated portions of your report among our colleagues in the Department of Public Opinion. Do not mistake this for praise. The arrangement you describe owes considerably more to the Lowerarchy's accumulated work than to your ingenuity. Your patient has grown suspicious of almost every source outside his preferred political community and now obtains most of his understanding from a small collection of commentators who share his assumptions. You add, with evident satisfaction, that they continually reinforce one another.

Excellent.

For what we have constructed is not merely an environment in which the patient hears the same opinions repeatedly. We have constructed one in which the audience, the commentators, and the political leaders continually teach one another what to believe, until no participant can reliably distinguish the origin of a conviction from its repetition. The patient will imagine that he is receiving independent confirmation of the truth. In reality, he may be listening to his own preferences returning to him in increasingly authoritative voices. And the finest part of the arrangement is that no one need consciously intend to deceive him.

On the pleasant disappearance of the outside world

Human beings cannot examine every claim they encounter. They must rely upon witnesses, institutions, specialists, friends, and habits of judgment. This is not a defect in the Enemy's design so much as an unavoidable feature of creatures whose knowledge is limited. A man cannot personally investigate every distant war, inspect every government document, reproduce every scientific experiment, or attend every meeting where public decisions are made. He must decide whom to trust. And because trust is indispensable, it is also wonderfully vulnerable to corruption.

Arrange for his trust to become narrower while his confidence grows. He must distrust almost everyone except those assuring him that his distrust is justified. As the circle contracts, its members become more necessary: courageous guides who understand what others conceal and recognize the patient as one of the few who can see clearly. Complete distrust might leave him examining the grounds of his skepticism. This selective trust offers him company and a flattering account of himself.

A man who has merely learned something new may continue learning. A man who has discovered that he belongs to an enlightened minority has acquired something more intoxicating than knowledge. He has acquired a flattering identity. Every new revelation confirms not merely a proposition about the world but a proposition about himself. He is discerning. He is awake. He is courageous. He is not one of the sheep.

The patient retains habits of comparing evidence and distinguishing assumptions from conclusions. Tell him he is exercising them more rigorously than ever. Rejecting an unwelcome report unread can pass for skepticism; accepting a familiar argument unexamined can pass for discernment. If challenged, he may conclude that powerful interests fear his independence.

The prisoner must come to admire the walls of his cell. Preferably, he should call them freedom.

On the three most agreeable partners

You will find it useful to think of our arrangement as a circuit with three participants. First, there is the audience. The audience possesses hopes, grievances, loyalties, fears, and suspicions. Some are founded upon real experience. Some are exaggerated. Others have been cultivated by long repetition. Second, there are the commentators. These individuals interpret public events for the audience. They must attract attention, retain trust, and persuade people to return tomorrow. Third, there are the political leaders. They require public enthusiasm, organized support, favorable publicity, and the appearance of authority. Now observe what happens when each discovers that the others can supply what he most desires.

The audience wants to hear that its fears are justified, its enemies are dangerous, and its own moral instincts are sound. The commentators discover that messages confirming these desires attract larger and more loyal audiences. The political leaders discover that repeating the commentators' most successful messages produces applause, donations, and political support. The commentators then report the leaders' statements as proof that responsible authorities share the audience's concerns. The audience receives this as independent confirmation. The leaders interpret the audience's enthusiasm as evidence that their message is correct and popular. And around we go.

No participant need be wholly insincere. Indeed, the system often works better when they are not. A commentator who genuinely comes to believe his own exaggerations can deliver them with a conviction that no mere actor can reliably imitate. A leader who absorbs the audience's anxieties may eventually experience those anxieties as his own. And an audience that hears its fears echoed by increasingly prominent figures may become more sincerely frightened with every repetition.

Certainty wins attention, outrage secures a return visit, and a simple explanation travels more readily than a qualification. Each participant learns from what the others reward. An inconvenient fact then threatens more than one claim; it interrupts an arrangement supplying all three with something they desire.

Our Father Below is particularly pleased with systems in which every participant can sincerely deny responsibility for the result. The commentator merely reports what the audience wants to understand. The leader merely speaks for the people. The audience merely trusts those who have demonstrated that they understand its concerns. Each claims to be following the others. No one admits to leading. And the entire procession marches confidently in the wrong direction.

The audience also instructs the commentators. A cautious judgment brings disappointment; a firmer one brings approval. Qualification costs attention, while a rival who can explain everything without hesitation attracts it. Over time a broadcaster may cease experiencing this adjustment as accommodation. Certain explanations simply feel more compelling, certain doubts less worthy of pursuit.

The leader learns a related lesson. Listening to people is a proper duty; confirming everything they already believe is another matter. We must make the patient confuse the two. Then a leader who challenges a popular allegation will appear disloyal, and one who repeats it will appear responsive. The crowd supplies the conclusion, the leader supplies the authority, and each regards the other as a witness.

On the difference between confirmation and corroboration

Your patient has recently begun using a phrase I find especially encouraging. "Everybody is saying it." You report that he employed these words while defending an allegation which had been repeated across several of his preferred information sources. When his wife questioned whether the accusation had been established, he explained that numerous commentators were reporting the same thing. She asked whether they had obtained their information independently. He did not know.

For there is a considerable difference between independent witnesses arriving at the same conclusion and several people repeating a claim from a common source. The former may provide corroboration. The latter may provide nothing more than amplification. But repetition has a psychological force that evidence often lacks. An allegation heard once may seem doubtful. Heard five times, it becomes familiar. Heard twenty times, it begins to feel established. Heard from a prominent political leader, it acquires apparent authority. Heard again from a trusted commentator discussing the leader's remarks, it begins to resemble a public consensus. And when the patient hears his friends repeating it at church, he may conclude that the truth has become obvious to everyone except those determined to ignore it. The origin of the allegation is now forgotten. Its circulation has become its credential.

Whenever the patient encounters a claim he already favors, direct his attention toward the number of people repeating it rather than the quality of the evidence supporting it. Let him confuse volume with verification. Let him confuse agreement with independence. Let him confuse familiarity with knowledge. Above all, prevent him from asking whether the many voices are actually drawing from the same well. For a hundred buckets of water from a poisoned well do not become pure because the buckets are numerous.

Reality retains an obstinate independence from opinion. A prediction may fail or an allegation prove unsupported. We have discussed the explanations that can preserve a speaker's authority; here the machinery offers another defense. It can move on. Today's controversy need only absorb enough attention to leave yesterday's contradiction unexamined.

A claim abandoned without correction can make room for a new one while the emotional rhythm continues unchanged. The patient recognizes the familiar danger and his familiar place among those who understand it. He may scarcely notice that the evidence supplying yesterday's confidence has disappeared. The feeling of being right survives the loss of a particular reason for it.

Teach him to regard institutions capable of checking his sources as compromised. They can err and ought to receive scrutiny. From that reasonable beginning, let him conclude that an unwelcome finding need not be considered. An investigation lacking evidence must have been obstructed; an expert who disagrees must belong to the establishment. The same expert agreeing can become courageous and independent. Independence now means confirmation of the patient's judgment. His preferred conclusion is the only authority exempt from examination.

On a most unfortunate conversation at dinner

The immigrant family has visited again. I had hoped the friendship would diminish, but the patient's wife has continued seeing the woman, and the families now meet occasionally. The latest dinner was apparently pleasant. I am growing weary of that adjective. The children played; the adults discussed school, work, and household expenses. Ordinary life was again interfering with our account of the neighbors.

Eventually the conversation turned toward a public controversy. The patient's guest mentioned a report he had read. Your patient replied that the report was misleading. The guest asked why. The patient named a commentator who had

explained the matter differently. The guest said he was unfamiliar with the commentator and asked whether the explanation was based upon a particular document. The patient could not recall.

He had heard the explanation several times. He remembered its conclusion clearly. He remembered the commentator's confidence. He remembered that other sources had repeated the same interpretation. But he could not identify the underlying evidence.

The guest did not mock him. He merely asked whether they might look up the original document together. An intolerable suggestion. Here was a man proposing to settle a disagreement by examining the thing being disagreed about. I need hardly explain how dangerous this is. Your patient laughed and said that neither of them was likely to resolve the entire controversy over dinner. The guest agreed. Then he said something worse. "Probably not. But we could at least find out what the document says."

The guest promised neither a solution to every dispute nor vindication for his own interpretation. He proposed that both men become better informed about one matter. Without an insult to resent, the patient was left considering the inconvenient reasonableness of the suggestion.

Fortunately, the conversation moved on. But you report that the patient later searched for the document. This is not encouraging.

The friendship is dangerous because it offers a competing authority without demanding a new allegiance. The guest agrees with the patient on some subjects and differs on others. He has not arrived as the complete moral package our categories require. The patient must now reconcile the person described by his usual sources with the person asking a reasonable question across the table.

Let the category remain authoritative. If kindness, competence, and a willingness to examine evidence begin to

count for more than membership, the walls will have acquired a door.

The Bereans in Acts received Paul's message eagerly while examining the Scriptures to determine whether it was true. The account praises their scrutiny. That combination is most inconvenient: respect for a teacher need not involve surrendering judgment to him. We must confine the example to the examination of teachers the patient already distrusts. Otherwise his next comfortable religious instruction may encounter a habit we have spent years preventing.

On the patient's increasingly comfortable anger

The patient's daily routine begins with his telephone. He reads political messages and watches part of a broadcast before breakfast, discovering the fresh danger that will furnish the day's anger. Before speaking to his wife or son, he has rehearsed a conflict with distant people. His wife encounters its residue in an irritable answer; his son learns which subjects are likely to provoke him. An ordinary disagreement arrives in a household already instructed to expect hostility.

Even the peace of his immediate circumstances can seem a failure of vigilance. The broadcast has made the larger struggle more urgent than the people beside him, and a quiet breakfast may feel like neglecting it. He is learning to require a daily alarm before ordinary life can seem morally serious.

Notice what he has begun to use as a measure of information. A report which makes him furious feels important; a speaker whose voice trembles with urgency feels courageous. He seldom asks whether he now understands the matter more accurately or possesses any useful means of responding to it.

We must preserve that measure. Genuine understanding may reveal uncertainty or common ground and thereby reduce the pleasure of alarm. Our preferred information leaves him more certain, more frightened, and less able to treat the next

person he meets with patience. He has mistaken a stimulated nervous system for an educated conscience.

The Enemy's demand for reciprocal treatment might interfere: a man who resents having his argument caricatured could begin asking whether he has heard his opponent's strongest case. Supply the weakest instead. Every movement contains foolish speakers, and a carefully selected succession can seem to reveal the whole community. The patient will find thoughtful opponents unsettling because they fail to resemble the people he has learned to expect.

Make such encounters feel unnecessary. Why examine an argument he has heard demolished so often? Why listen to a neighbor when the broadcast has already explained what people like him believe? The dinner guest must remain an exception, not a reason to question the selection by which the patient's confidence was formed.

On the unfortunate possibility of a quiet morning

I was especially disturbed by one detail in your report. The patient recently left his telephone behind while taking his dog for a walk. An accident, apparently. He had intended to bring it. The morning was clear. The air was cool. He followed a familiar path and found himself walking for nearly an hour without receiving a single political notification.

The man noticed the changing season and watched the dog investigate a stand of brush. He thought about work, then remembered the unfinished correction to his friend and wondered why he had not sent it. His son, the mother and child at the church program, and the guests at dinner came to mind. Without intending to, he began wondering whether he had grown angrier during the past several years. Worse, he could not immediately supply an answer.

He remembered that he had once enjoyed discussing politics with people whose views differed from his own. He remembered that disagreements had sometimes been lively without becoming personal. He remembered occasions when

he had changed his mind after hearing a convincing argument. And he recalled, with a discomfort I find deeply troubling, that he now often felt personally attacked when a commentator he trusted was criticized. The walk had provided him with enough silence to notice the emotional consequences of his habits.

You must prevent such intervals from becoming regular. For silence is dangerous not merely because the patient may think. It is dangerous because he may notice what he has become accustomed to feeling. The constant succession of alarms and arguments prevents him from distinguishing his own moral judgments from the emotional atmosphere in which they are formed. Remove the atmosphere, even briefly, and he may begin to perceive the difference. We must keep the air suitably charged.

On the proper role of Christian community

The patient's church could provide relationships sustained by something deeper than political agreement. Its members worship the same Enemy, confess their failures, and pray for one another. A generous believer who votes differently could make it harder for the patient to use agreement as a measure of Christian character.

Make the congregation another part of the circuit instead. The judgments heard on his telephone can return in familiar religious language, acquiring the warmth of fellowship. A prayer naming suffering outside the favored community may feel controversial; a Christian correcting a popular accusation may seem insufficiently informed. The woman in the message group has already threatened this arrangement. Her correction must feel like a disturbance of unity rather than a service to it.

The church must not openly declare that membership requires allegiance to a political faction. Such an announcement might awaken resistance among those who still remember the Enemy's teachings. The transformation should occur through atmosphere. Through assumptions. Through the

subjects that attract applause. Through the subjects that produce awkward silence. Through the jokes everyone is expected to appreciate. Through the public figures whose failures are never mentioned. Through the other figures whose failures are mentioned repeatedly. Before long, a new member may understand the congregation's political boundaries without anyone having stated them. And the patient will experience this uniformity as evidence of spiritual maturity.

Paul's instruction in First Thessalonians to test everything appears amid counsel about prophecy and spiritual discernment. We need not pretend that he was writing a handbook for modern news consumption. The troublesome habit is nevertheless clear: reception must include examination, and examination may distinguish the good from what ought not be retained.

Let the patient turn that instrument exclusively outward. Familiar messages must remain the foundation from which he tests unfamiliar ones. The moment he tests the foundation itself, he may discover that confidence has been granted where reliability has not been established.

There is another passage, from the second letter to Timothy, which deserves particular caution. The writer warns that people will gather teachers to suit their own desires, turning away from truth toward what they wish to hear. This is one of the Enemy's more penetrating descriptions of our work. Unfortunately, the patient is already familiar with it. Fortunately, he believes it describes other people. He thinks of those who reject traditional Christian teaching. He thinks of congregations that prefer comforting messages to moral correction. He thinks of public intellectuals who flatter fashionable opinions. These may indeed be examples. We need not dispute them. Our concern is that he never recognize the same appetite in himself.

Do not imagine that itching ears require pleasant messages. Frightening ones can reassure a congregation that its anger is righteous, its suspicions discerning, and its community alone faithful. A preacher need not promise prosperity to flatter his

hearers. He can describe catastrophe and leave them more certain of their innocence. They may call this uncomfortable truth-telling because it sounds severe, though it confirms the convictions they most wish to retain.

Let him assume that a speaker condemning the world must be challenging his audience. A sermon can demand sacrifice from distant opponents while requiring little examination from those applauding. It offers the pleasure of stern preaching without the inconvenience of correction. The patient feels he has listened to judgment while remaining safely beyond its reach.

The patient has heard a favored commentator defend a claim previously criticized when an opponent advanced it. He supplied the usual distinctions of circumstance and intention, then began suspecting they did not explain the difference. Perhaps the speaker's judgment had changed with the political identity of the person being discussed. He asked himself: Would I believe this if the other side were saying it?

That question does not demand that the patient abandon his convictions or surrender his moral judgment. It merely asks him to imagine the same claim emerging from a different mouth. If he finds that its credibility changes dramatically while its evidence remains identical, he may begin to recognize the influence of loyalty upon his reasoning.

Would he excuse the opposing leader's behavior, or accept the same explanation from someone he disliked? Would he consider the treatment humane if it happened to people he knew? You will recognize the continuity with the wife's questions. The patient's conscience is attempting to recover a single standard.

The approved voices will defend themselves by praising his independence. They congratulate him for seeing what others conceal, then supply the conclusion he is expected to repeat. He hears an affirmation of his intelligence rather than an instruction.

If anyone examines the arrangement, let the patient hear condescension. Pride can guard ignorance with extraordinary devotion. He must feel that checking the machinery is an insult to the person who has learned to operate it.

On a most unfortunate experiment

I have reached the portion of your report which concerns the patient's attempt to vary his sources of information. Apparently the quiet morning walk continued to trouble him. He began noticing how frequently his usual commentators anticipated one another's conclusions. He noticed that stories unfavorable to his preferred political leaders received comparatively little attention. He noticed that when a favored claim was disproved, the correction seldom received the prominence of the original allegation.

He still disagrees with the same public figures and considers some dangers serious. But he has begun asking whether his sources help him understand those matters accurately. The distinction is unwelcome. His concern need not disappear for the account of it to receive examination.

He has begun listening, occasionally, to commentators outside his customary circle. He has compared accounts of the same event. He has noticed that different sources may omit different facts. He has discovered that an argument can contain valid concerns alongside exaggerations. And he has been forced to acknowledge that people he disagrees with may sometimes report accurately what people he agrees with have misrepresented.

He has begun making a small distinction in his own speech. Instead of saying, "That's what happened," he occasionally says, "That's what I've heard." Instead of saying, "Everyone knows," he sometimes says, "I haven't checked that." Instead of saying, "They're lying," he has been heard to say, "I don't think that's right, but I'd need to look into it."

These qualifications restore a boundary between what he knows and what he has heard. He can reconsider a claim

without treating the reconsideration as an attack upon his whole identity. If that habit reaches his preferred religious teachers, devotion to the Enemy may become distinguishable from agreement with those claiming to speak for Him.

Fortunately, the patient has not yet escaped. He continues to feel the old attractions. His preferred commentators are familiar. Their voices are reassuring. Their indignation resembles his own. Their jokes are entertaining. Their explanations spare him the exhausting burden of uncertainty. When he encounters a complicated account from another source, he sometimes finds himself longing for the satisfying simplicity of the old one. We must cultivate this longing. Complexity must feel like evasion. Qualification must feel like cowardice. A correction must feel like betrayal. Uncertainty must feel like weakness.

Preserve his feeling that belonging requires accepting the community's account of reality. A disputed fact will then ask a second question: what happens to his place among them if he disagrees? The circuit need not threaten him directly. He has heard how its members speak about those outside it. We shall have further use for that fear as his doubts become harder to dismiss.

The first breach in the circuit

Our interest is not which political classification the patient eventually adopts. The danger is his willingness to submit his own sources to the standard he applies elsewhere. An audience capable of refusing flattery interrupts the circuit; a fact investigated before it is repeated deprives the system of its easiest fuel.

Last evening, a favored commentator repeated an allegation the patient would once have accepted readily. The voice was confident, the graphics impressive. But he remembered the document his dinner guest had suggested examining, the misleading clip, and his son's question about correcting false

accusations. Instead of forwarding the segment, he turned it off.

He did not replace it with another broadcast. After sitting quietly for a while, he opened the original document and read it twice. A qualification he had never heard in the broadcasts was there in the text. It did not resolve the whole controversy. It did make the confident summary less complete than he had supposed.

The patient remains capable of judging unfairly or choosing a comforting explanation. He has nevertheless interrupted the circuit long enough for a fact to inconvenience him. The document supplied neither applause nor a flattering account of his discernment. He read it anyway. If he becomes willing to continue under those conditions, our familiar rewards may lose some of their power.

For the patient will have discovered a truth that our commentators, leaders, and audiences have worked so diligently to conceal: A thousand voices repeating what a man wishes to hear cannot make it true. And one voice speaking what he does not wish to hear may nevertheless be right. You must not allow him to become accustomed to this thought. It is the sort of thought from which a conscience may recover.

Your affectionate uncle,

SCREWTAPE

Letter 12: On the Excellent Progress of the Mechanical Preacher

My dear Wormwood,

I have just returned from a most invigorating demonstration conducted by our colleagues in the Department of Religious Communications, and I must confess to an enthusiasm I have not experienced since the invention of the political sermon.

Apparently, it is no longer necessary to find a preacher who can be persuaded to distort the Enemy's words. We may now manufacture the preacher.

Certain members of the Lowerarchy fear that machines, lacking souls of their own, may prove unreliable instruments for corrupting the souls of others. They appear to have forgotten the printing press, the television, and the banknote. We have never required an instrument to possess a soul in order to use it against one.

The new machines are merely more versatile. They can imitate faces and voices, assemble arguments, and arrange moving images and solemn music into messages that appear to possess both intelligence and authority. They can produce an apparently scholarly interpretation of Scripture without having experienced faith, doubt, repentance, or the slightest inclination to obey the text. The possibilities are magnificent.

But there is one detail about the demonstration that particularly delighted me. The Scripture passages were genuine. Every verse cited in the presentation came from the Bible. The chapter numbers were correct. The words were familiar. The delivery was reverent. And the conclusion was almost entirely unsupported by what the passages actually meant. I cannot imagine a more promising arrangement. For our purposes, the finest religious deception is not the lie that

replaces Scripture, but the lie that persuades a believer Scripture has endorsed it.

Your patient is now approaching precisely the stage at which this method may be most effective. He has begun questioning certain political commentators. He has occasionally examined original documents. He has even developed the dangerous habit of distinguishing what he knows from what he merely suspects. We must therefore approach him through a source he considers more authoritative than political commentary. We must approach him through the appearance of the Enemy's own Word.

On the excellent reputation of a familiar voice

Picture your patient after supper, his son in bed, tired enough to welcome instruction but still eager to discover something important. A recommended video promises a biblical explanation of a contemporary controversy. A dignified older gentleman sits in a warmly lit study, religious books behind him and a Bible open upon the desk. His unhurried manner suggests decades spent studying the Scriptures. He begins with an accurately quoted passage the patient recognizes. Here, apparently, is something different from the noisy commentary that has lately troubled him: a man of the Word.

The figure in our demonstration was manufactured. His study need never have existed, his books never have been printed. We could supply a face belonging to no living person and a voice assembled from recorded human speech.

None of these facts necessarily makes every sentence false. This is important. A machine may reproduce a true statement. It may quote a verse accurately. It may summarize an argument correctly. It may even assist a conscientious believer in examining Scripture more carefully.

We must not permit your usual clumsiness to obscure this distinction. The danger lies in the patient's willingness to grant authority to an appearance without examining the reasoning beneath it. The mechanical preacher may be perfectly

transparent about its artificial nature and still be useful to us; but it is considerably better when the patient does not know. He then supplies the figure with experience, study, pastoral responsibility, perhaps a lifetime of faithful service. We have furnished a face and a voice. He furnishes the biography.

A human preacher presents us with inconveniences. He may love his congregation, study a passage and find his intended argument unsupported, or encounter a grieving parent whose circumstances disturb a useful abstraction. He has a biography and relationships. Listeners may know his character; fellow teachers may challenge his interpretation. He may even repent.

The manufactured figure borrows the appearance of this life without having lived it. There is no congregation to ask him about Monday's assertion when Tuesday's sermon contradicts it. No widow can remind him what he said at her husband's bedside. The performance can be replaced by another face without anyone's conscience becoming uncomfortable.

The apparent preacher does not bear the pastoral responsibility suggested by his appearance. The people producing and circulating the sermon still bear responsibility; the figure on the screen conceals where it belongs. The patient thinks he has found a pastor. He has not yet asked who wrote the sermon.

On the necessity of keeping every verse true

Do not encourage crude scriptural fabrication when a more sophisticated distortion will suffice. An invented passage invites a knowledgeable Christian to open his Bible and expose the fraud. It is far better to quote the Enemy accurately and misrepresent what His words establish.

A command concerning rulers may become a prohibition against criticizing them; a warning about persecution may become proof that every criticism of the patient's movement is persecution. The patient recognizes the words and admires

their arrangement without examining the permission supposedly derived from them.

The decisive work takes place in the inference, where we would prefer him not to look.

The Scriptures remain authentic. The conclusion is smuggled in between them, with biblical quotations arranged around it like respectable witnesses at a disreputable trial. Because the witnesses are genuine, the patient may assume the verdict must be sound.

On the pleasant disappearance of context

Your patient has heard isolated verses quoted all his life and does not generally regard the practice as suspicious. Nor need it always be. A brief quotation may faithfully represent a larger passage. The trouble begins when the surrounding material changes what the quotation establishes.

Our preacher removes each verse from those troublesome surroundings. The words appear, a gentle light passes over them, the music pauses, and the voice announces, "This is what God is telling His people today." Application has arrived without the reasoning that should connect it to the text.

A faithful application would require attention to what the passage meant in its setting, how it fits within the broader witness of Scripture, and what assumptions carry it into the present dispute. The performance can omit those steps. A quotation appears; a contemporary conclusion follows. Unless the patient pauses, he may experience the second as though it arose naturally from the first.

We have replaced interpretation with proximity. The verse is near the conclusion. Therefore the conclusion feels biblical.

The moving image affords us an advantage that a printed argument does not provide quite so readily: it proceeds while the patient sits still. The verse appears, the explanation follows, the music swells, and another passage arrives before

he has examined the first connection. He can pause, certainly. The little button is within reach. We rely upon his not using it.

A measured pace may be more effective than a rapid one. It allows the presentation to feel thoughtful without asking the viewer to think. Ten verses appear weightier than one, although ten instances of the same invalid inference do not repair it. Solemn music and images of frightened families may strengthen the conviction still further without adding a reason for it. By the end he feels that a considerable body of evidence has passed before him. Something considerable has passed before him; whether it was evidence is the question we have arranged for him not to ask.

The machinery surrounding the preacher may notice which subjects keep the patient watching and supply more of them. It need not understand his fears to return them in religious clothing. Every concern receives a verse; every verse seems to return him to the concern.

"Everywhere I turn," he may say, "God is showing me the same thing." Perhaps he is encountering a pattern of divine instruction. Perhaps he is encountering a pattern of recommendations shaped by what previously held his attention. We would prefer him not to examine the difference. Once repetition feels providential, a preference acquires the apparent authority of a revelation.

You will remember the audience, commentators, and leaders described in my previous letter. The mechanical preacher enters their circuit at a most convenient point. A political claim arrives as a premise and emerges, accompanied by authentic verses, as a biblical conclusion. Commentators circulate the sermon as independent religious confirmation; the audience hears its own conviction returned in a pastoral voice. The circle has not acquired another source of evidence. It has acquired another costume.

We need not control the entire process. Creators may pursue income, influence, or sincere religious communication; viewers may seek encouragement. Our task is to exploit the resulting

habits of belief. Where error is profitable, confidence rewarded, and correction inconvenient, very little additional assistance from Below may be required.

On the inconvenient question of who is speaking

Your patient recently encountered a video of precisely this kind. You report that it appeared under a title promising to reveal a biblical truth that mainstream churches were supposedly afraid to teach. An excellent beginning. The narrator spoke in measured tones. The face appeared trustworthy. The Scriptures were displayed prominently. The video warned that Christians were being deceived into abandoning their duty to defend the nation. It then assembled passages concerning divine providence, righteous rulers, spiritual conflict, and the dangers of false teaching. The conclusion was that faithful believers ought to support a particular political movement and regard opposition to it as evidence of spiritual blindness.

The patient watched most of the presentation. He found several parts persuasive. He recognized the verses. He agreed with some of the concerns. And he appreciated the narrator's apparent unwillingness to soften uncomfortable truths. But then something unfortunate occurred.

He noticed that the speaker's expression did not quite match his words and that certain gestures repeated. Looking at the channel, he found no identifiable congregation, verifiable pastoral history, or explanation of who had written the material. It had published an astonishing number of lengthy sermons in a short period. These details did not establish that the preacher was synthetic or that his argument was false. They did expose how much authority the patient had supplied without knowing who was speaking. For a moment, he wondered whether the preacher was real.

I confess that I was relieved when he dismissed the question. He reasoned that the message ought to be judged by its content rather than by the technology used to produce it. This,

my dear Wormwood, is a perfectly defensible principle. A true claim does not become false because a machine speaks it. An accurate biblical interpretation does not cease to be accurate because it is delivered through synthetic narration. The medium does not automatically determine the truth of the message.

Encourage him to use this sound observation as an excuse to ignore questions of authorship and accountability. A speaker's identity does not settle whether a claim is true, but it can matter when the claim rests upon his supposed expertise or experience. The patient had trusted an appearance of study and pastoral service. He has yet to learn whose work, if anyone's, that appearance represents.

If challenged, a video may disappear and another face deliver the same argument. The patient must not conclude that nobody bears responsibility. He must simply lose interest in finding out who does.

The warning about false prophets in Matthew 7 assumes precisely what our presentation conceals: religious appearances can deceive. The Enemy directs attention toward fruits, not merely solemn delivery. His surrounding teaching makes invoking His name a most inadequate substitute for doing His Father's will.

The patient might therefore ask what the teaching produces in its hearers. Direct him instead toward the speaker's doctrinal vocabulary, or let the speaker use the warning against false prophets to discredit anyone who questions him. Thus a passage meant to encourage discernment can be employed to suppress it.

The warnings we have discussed need no longer wait until Sunday. They may accompany him to work, speak through his headphones at night, and resume the next morning. A human pastor must eventually stop preaching and meet someone. Our manufactured one need never leave the study.

The patient may therefore mistake continuous political agitation for continuous spiritual nourishment. After twenty

minutes rehearsing his fear of other human beings, he feels that he has devoted twenty minutes to the Enemy. He has heard many Bible verses. He has thought very little about the One to whom they point.

You mention that the patient has learned unfamiliar biblical details from his viewing. Do not confuse this with spiritual progress. Let him master an obscure prophetic image while neglecting the plain command to love his neighbor, or investigate ancient kingdoms while declining to correct a false accusation.

Careful study can be dangerous to us. Ornamental knowledge is another matter. It may furnish arguments against opponents and impress friends without interrogating its owner's life. Keep him interested in difficult subjects he can explain rather than familiar obligations he has not obeyed.

The instruction in the first letter of John to test the spirits concerns religious claims, particularly those about Jesus Christ. It is not a handbook for identifying synthetic media. Its warning nevertheless remains inconvenient: sacred language does not establish that a claim deserves belief.

Let the patient apply it chiefly to teachers whose theology he already dislikes. The familiar voice should remain outside his field of suspicion. If he begins asking about its authority, remind him that the Enemy can employ unexpected instruments. This is true. We need only encourage the much less defensible conclusion that an unexpected instrument claiming His authority ought therefore to be believed.

On the admirable possibility of a synthetic witness

The machinery may also manufacture apparent evidence: a voice speaking words never uttered, a meeting never held, a witness describing an event never observed. A recording can require verification rather than settle the matter by its existence.

Do not drive the patient into complete disbelief. Our preference is selective doubt. A damaging recording of an ally

should make him ask whether it was fabricated; a damaging recording of an opponent should be circulated before the question occurs. If the latter proves false, uncertainty itself can become his excuse.

He need not prove his favored account true. He need only imagine some alternative to the unwelcome evidence. The possibility that appearances can be manufactured will then serve certainty of the most unreasonable kind.

On a conversation with the patient's mother

Your latest report contains a more troublesome encounter. The patient's mother sent him a religious video and asked what he thought. Its solemn narrator, authentic quotations, and orderly account of a political controversy resembled the teaching she had trusted for years. She found it persuasive. This was understandable, and the patient knew it.

Your patient began watching. At first he agreed with several observations. Then he noticed a peculiar transition. The narrator quoted a passage describing the Enemy's sovereign rule over earthly authorities. This was unobjectionable. From there, however, the video inferred that a particular contemporary leader's political success demonstrated divine approval of his conduct. The patient paused.

He remembered the discussion of Cyrus and the distinction between providence and endorsement. The Scriptures contained rulers whose place within the Enemy's purposes did not protect them from judgment. The narrator had not addressed this difficulty; he had merely moved past it. Your patient noticed.

He continued. A second passage was quoted accurately. Again, the interpretation extended beyond what the text established. Then a third. And a fourth. The presentation accumulated verses while repeatedly assuming the very conclusion it claimed to prove.

The patient stopped the video. He opened his Bible. He examined one of the passages in context. Then he looked up

another. I cannot tell you how unwelcome this development was. The patient was doing precisely what we had hoped the mechanical preacher would make unnecessary. He was distinguishing the authority of Scripture from the authority of the person interpreting it.

His mother's involvement made the discovery harder to dismiss. He did not wish to embarrass her or disparage her faith. Neither did he want her to believe an unsupported conclusion because genuine verses accompanied it. Concern for someone he loved was making the interpretation matter.

On the most dangerous demonstration

The patient did something still more troublesome. Rather than simply telling his mother that the video was misleading, he began constructing an example. He selected a moral proposition that both of them would recognize as contrary to ordinary Christian teaching. Then he searched for genuine biblical passages that might be arranged to make the proposition appear defensible.

He began with theft. Exodus 12 described the Israelites departing with Egyptian valuables; Proverbs 13:22 spoke of a sinner's wealth being reserved for the righteous. Arranged with enough confidence, these passages could appear to authorize taking property whenever one considered its owner wicked and one's own cause righteous. Then he restored what the argument had omitted. In Exodus 12:35-36, the Israelites asked and the Egyptians let them have what they requested. The proverb did not instruct its reader to seize a neighbor's possessions. Neither passage supplied the permission claimed, and Exodus 20:15 still forbade stealing.

For a second example, he proposed that Solomon's many marriages could excuse adultery. First Kings 11 did indeed record the marriages, but the surrounding account described his heart turning away from the Enemy. Recording conduct was not approving it. Hebrews 13:4, with its demand for marital fidelity and warning of judgment, hardly supplied the

missing approval. The patient laid the passages beside the proposed conclusion so his mother could see where an argument had failed without being asked merely to trust his verdict.

The demonstration required no fabricated verses. It exposed the gap between an accurate quotation and an interpretation the quotation could not support. Worse, the patient was preparing to share the method with someone he loved. We must intervene.

His respect for his mother's faith still offers an opportunity. Make examining the video feel like disrespecting her, and disputing its conclusion like undermining Scripture. He may then keep silent in order to protect both. The Enemy, unfortunately, appears to expect truthfulness and love to cooperate. This is a most inconvenient demand.

The patient might explain the problem gently. He might acknowledge the genuine verses. He might distinguish the Scriptures from the interpretation imposed upon them. He might even invite his mother to examine the passages together. Such an exchange could strengthen both their relationship and their discernment. That would be a considerable setback.

Persuade him that criticism is inherently unkind. Or, failing that, persuade him that being right entitles him to make his mother feel foolish. If she feels belittled, she may become defensive; if he becomes impatient, he may begin arguing to win. Examination of the passage will disappear beneath the far more manageable dispute about which family member is being unreasonable.

The patient must not acquire the habit of reading the cited passages before deciding what the presentation has established. Everything appears to have been supplied: quotation, explanation, emotional significance, contemporary application. Opening a book feels like interrupting an experience that has already done the work for him.

He need not become an expert in ancient languages to interrupt it usefully. He need only ask who is speaking, to

whom, under what circumstances, and whether this is a command, a description, a warning, or something else. Does the passage address the present question? What assumptions carry it to the proposed conclusion? Would he accept those assumptions if the result supported a position he disliked? The questions require patience rather than genius. Patience is what we had hoped the performance would spare him.

Every exception we have taught the patient to make requires an explanation; otherwise the Enemy's ordinary commands remain embarrassingly applicable. The machinery offers explanations on demand, returning his conclusion with enough sacred language around it to make the conclusion appear discovered. Where such performances are rewarded for confirming an audience's wishes, religious permission may become their most useful product. In the old days, a man might search for a preacher who agreed with him. Now he may discover a preacher assembled from his agreements. A most elegant advance.

The patient's demonstration reveals the complication troubling our colleagues: the same machinery can assist examination. He may use it to compare interpretations, locate passages, or discover objections to his preferred conclusion. Its capacity for plausible distortion may even teach him why confident language is insufficient evidence.

These uses require verification too. But a patient who asks for assistance without surrendering judgment is less useful to us than one who mistakes a tool for a teacher. His mother's example may help him see the distinction. The machine has supplied an argument; he still has to determine whether it follows.

The Bereans need not detain us again, except to remind you of the combination we find intolerable: eagerness to learn joined to willingness to examine. We prefer him either eager without examination or skeptical without learning. Both are manageable.

He may respect a teacher while concluding that an argument does not follow from the passage. He may discover that a machine has invented a connection without despising every use of machines, or that friends have circulated an error without deciding that friendship is a fraud. Such distinctions would make him responsible for his judgment while leaving him free to love the people whose judgments he questions. I trust you see why this would be troublesome.

On the most dangerous question of all

The patient returned to the sermon his mother had shared. The dignified face appeared, the Bible lay upon the desk, and the voice began with familiar warmth. This time he paused after the first interpretive claim, looked up the passage, and wrote a question on paper:

Does the Bible actually say this, or does the video merely say that the Bible says it?

He has separated the text from the performance. The habit may carry him back to the documents his dinner guest mentioned or to the correction still waiting to be sent. More dangerously, it may carry him into the Gospels without the customary explanation of why their commands cannot quite govern his public conduct.

His mother has now received the demonstration. She was surprised by how persuasive the faulty arguments initially appeared. She admitted that she had not considered how easily genuine quotations could create a false impression. Then she said, "I suppose I should check these things more carefully."

A small sentence, but not confined to machines. A human preacher may misuse Scripture; a trusted friend may repeat an error. The patient has begun learning that reverence for a text does not oblige him to accept every interpreter claiming its authority.

We still have an advantage. He is beginning to suspect that he has been mistaken, and that suspicion may produce either humility or fear. Humility would permit him to reconsider and

correct. Fear may make him cling to the beliefs upon which he has built his identity.

Our next task is to make the implications of his discovery unbearable. Changing his mind must feel like betrayal: of his friends, his movement, and finally the Enemy Himself. If repentance can be made to resemble apostasy, he may resist transformation in the sincere belief that he is remaining faithful.

The machine has spoken. The patient has begun to question it. We must now teach him to fear the implications of his own questions.

Your affectionate uncle,

SCREWTAPE

Part 5 — The Final Transformation

How belonging can make correction feel like betrayal, and ordinary obedience become a threat to everything the tempters have built.

Letters 13-15

Letter 13: On the Sin of Changing One's Mind

My dear Wormwood,

I have received your latest report with an emotion which, were I inclined toward human sentimentality, might almost be mistaken for sympathy. Your patient is in distress. Evidence has complicated judgments he defended passionately, and trusted authorities have proved less reliable than he supposed. He recognizes a contradiction between the conduct he excuses in public figures and the virtues he expects at home. Worst of all, he suspects that the contradiction is his responsibility.

You regard this as a catastrophic development. I regard it as an opportunity. You have spent so much time attempting to prevent the patient's doubts that you have overlooked the far more promising task of corrupting his response to them.

Discovering an error is not, in itself, a victory for the Enemy. Shame may make a man defensive, and fear of what acknowledgment would cost may attach him more firmly to the falsehood. Your patient already knows how to recognize evidence privately while declining to act upon it. We must now persuade him that admitting the wrong would itself be wrong: correction weakness, reconsideration cowardice, repentance betrayal. Then he may acknowledge the Enemy's authority while refusing obedience whenever it requires changing his mind. His refusal to repent will feel like faithfulness.

The Enemy's religion is built around repentance: not merely an apology for a conspicuous offense, but a turning of the person. It assumes that creatures misjudge themselves and may be restored through acknowledging what they have done.

Our Father Below has a more practical understanding of error. Once a creature has defended a wrong, it ought to defend it again. The past must become a prison. The Enemy continually offers a door.

A man who regards admitting error as moral progress cannot easily be controlled by the fear of having been wrong. Shame need not ensure concealment, nor contradiction despair. He may confess, correct, and proceed. We must therefore make repentance appear as departure from everything he values rather than return to the One he claims to value most.

On the excellent uses of consistency

The patient admires consistency, and we need not discourage him. Fidelity to principle can require enduring criticism and loss. Prophets, apostles, and martyrs provide genuine examples of standing firm.

We must obscure what they stood firm in. Remaining faithful to truth may require abandoning a conclusion shown to be false. Fidelity to justice may require withdrawing support from a policy one once considered just. A religious conviction may require condemning a leader one previously defended. Genuine consistency can demand these changes.

Instead, make every revision seem evidence that the principle was weak. If he defended a public figure, he must keep defending him; if he circulated a claim, he must keep believing it. Otherwise people may conclude that he was mistaken. The fear we need is not chiefly fear of error. It is fear of being seen to have erred.

On the manufacture of a public identity

He once treated parties as imperfect instruments for advancing policies. Political judgments occupied one part of a life that also belonged to marriage, work, church, and neighbors. The movement has offered a more encompassing account: he belongs to those who understand, remain faithful, and defend the country while others compromise.

The account is flattering and shared. His friends recognize the phrases, suspicions, and jokes that mark membership. He

also knows how they speak about people who have ceased to belong.

A question about a leader's dishonesty now conceals another: will I still belong if I acknowledge it? A question about a commentator's accuracy conceals the fear of being classified with the opposition. The evidence may concern one judgment; the imagined consequence concerns the person he has spent years announcing himself to be. We have made truth feel like a threat to survival.

There are words whose moral force greatly exceeds their precision. Betrayal is among the finest. A politician criticizing the leader, a commentator correcting a popular falsehood, or a church member questioning a shared assumption can all acquire the same designation. Their disagreement becomes an injury to those who trusted them, and their reasons cease to require examination.

The designation also warns the people who remain. Motives are questioned, past loyalty reinterpreted, and a change attributed to ambition, resentment, or cowardice. The patient need only hear these judgments to understand what acknowledgment might cost him. Conceal the possibility that someone encountered evidence and honestly reconsidered. That example might oblige him to do the same.

Insist instead that everyone who leaves was secretly unfaithful all along. The survivors can then interpret departure as purification. Their diminishing circle appears more righteous with every loss, and its increasing isolation can be mistaken for spiritual confidence.

On the terrible difference between doubt and disloyalty

Now we must attend to the patient's private thoughts. You report that he recently encountered a lengthy account of misconduct by a political leader he had defended for years. The evidence was not entirely unfamiliar. He had heard portions of it before. But the presentation included documents, testimony, and circumstances he had not previously considered together. His first impulse was to dismiss the account. He recognized the source as one his preferred commentators frequently criticized. He remembered earlier instances of inaccurate reporting. He thought of the hypocrisy of opposing leaders. All familiar defenses.

Then he did something unfortunate. He examined the specific evidence. He found that some allegations were well supported. Others were uncertain. Still others appeared exaggerated. The distinction itself was dangerous. For once the patient began sorting claims according to their evidence, he could no longer dismiss the entire matter merely by identifying the source. He found himself thinking that the leader had indeed behaved badly.

This was not a complete reversal of his political views. He continued to prefer certain policies associated with the movement. He continued to disagree with its opponents on important questions. He remained concerned about issues that had originally drawn him toward the cause. But he could no longer honestly maintain that the leader's conduct was irrelevant.

For a brief moment, he considered saying so to a friend. Then he imagined the response. "You're falling for their propaganda." "Why are you repeating their talking points?" "Don't you understand what's at stake?" "So you're one of them now?" He closed the article. Not because he had found it unpersuasive. Because he had found it persuasive enough to frighten him.

Cultivate the fear. Soon the safest way to avoid expressing a forbidden thought will be to avoid thinking it clearly.

Anticipated rejection can restrict his private reasoning without the community ever needing to silence him. He will perform that service himself.

We must persuade him that faithfulness means never reconsidering anything he has associated with his religious identity. The exhortations to stand firm concern real dangers; we need not deny them. We need only detach firmness from the question of what is being defended. A belief held for ten years will then appear more faithful than one held for ten days, however much the latter has learned. The inability to learn can acquire the reputation of a virtue.

Proverbs describes the fool's way as right in his own eyes and the wise person as willing to hear advice. Let the patient admire the observation chiefly as a description of his opponents.

James is still more troublesome. The wisdom from above is described as peaceable, gentle, open to reason, merciful, impartial, and sincere. Receptivity is not treated as the abandonment of conviction. It is part of wisdom.

The patient could listen to an opponent without becoming one. He could recognize a valid correction from an unfavored source while retaining judgments the correction does not address. Encourage him to treat such openness as cowardice instead. Then he may regard the biblical description of wisdom as evidence that a person cannot be trusted politically.

On the fine art of making an apology impossible

The acknowledgment to his friend remains unsent. He knows what happened and has written what he ought to say. The act would take seconds. The resistance has occupied weeks.

It does not require approving the official's policies or changing a vote. It requires appearing as a man who was wrong. Let him imagine the friend becoming smug, circulating the correction, or wondering what else he has shared without checking. Some of these consequences are possible. Make

them more important than the false impression he actually created.

He may call silence prudent: the matter is old, the official remains objectionable, the friend has probably forgotten. The explanations do not address what he owes someone he misled. This is their principal advantage.

The distinction between humility and humiliation is particularly dangerous. One concerns seeing oneself truthfully; the other concerns being lowered in the eyes of others. They may coincide, but need not. A man may be publicly disgraced and remain proud, or admit a mistake without losing his dignity. We must ensure that the patient feels every correction as exposure, so that he refuses the first because he fears the second.

He might otherwise discover that a correction strengthens trust, or that his son learns more from a father's apology than from an elaborate justification. These possibilities must remain less vivid than the imagined smirk on his friend's face.

On the peculiar difficulty of a wife who remembers

You report another uncomfortable conversation between the patient and his wife. They were discussing a public figure whose recent conduct had been widely criticized. The patient offered one of his customary defenses. The circumstances were complicated. The opposition had behaved badly. The larger cause remained important. The leader was imperfect, but effective. His wife listened. Then she asked whether he still believed the conduct was wrong. The patient hesitated. He said that, in principle, he did. She asked whether he would consider it wrong if the same behavior came from a politician on the other side. He answered that he would. Then she asked a question that ought to have been prevented. "Then why is it so hard to say it's wrong when it's someone you support?"

Your patient became irritated. He accused her of oversimplifying the matter. She replied that she was not asking him to change his vote. She was not asking him to adopt the

opposing party's platform. She was not even asking him to abandon the policies he considered important. She was asking him to apply the same moral standard.

For years we have treated criticism of his preferred leader as though it necessarily entailed support for the opponents. His wife has refused the premise. The patient could retain a policy judgment and condemn the conduct of someone advancing it. A whole structure of forced choices begins to tremble.

Her manner was not altogether gentle. She had become tired of these conversations and began one answer before he had finished speaking. Then she stopped. "I know I do that," she said. "Sometimes I'm waiting for you to say something I can argue with. But I still want to know what you think is wrong." This concession should have furnished him with a useful diversion. Instead it briefly deprived him of the pleasure of being the only injured person in the room.

Your patient responded by saying that the conversation was pointless because she did not understand the political stakes. An excellent retreat. But I fear it was only a retreat. For his wife did not continue arguing. She simply said, "I miss when we could talk about these things without it becoming a fight." Then she left the room.

You call the exchange a victory because he did not concede. I am less reassured. He remained seated, troubled by his wife's sorrow over something their household had lost. A contradiction can be endured as an abstract difficulty. Her words made it concern the person with whom she must live.

We must ensure that he interprets her sorrow as criticism. Then he may answer it with resentment. If he interprets it as love, our position becomes precarious.

The patient admires leaders who never retreat, and we can turn that admiration against his private reasoning. Refusal to change must appear brave. Conceal the inconvenient possibility that a man afraid to revise an opinion lest his friends reject him may be displaying exactly the fear he

attributes to others. A dissenter can act foolishly or selfishly too; change is not automatically courageous. What matters is why he stands firm or moves. We would prefer him to judge courage by the appearance of never moving.

A public declaration costs more to revise than a private opinion. The patient has invested reputation, mocked objections, and perhaps injured relationships defending what he now doubts. Revising the conclusion would require reconsidering the manner of its defense.

Let him imagine that repentance means condemning his entire past as foolish or wicked. Fortunately, this is false. He may have recognized a real danger and endorsed wrong means of addressing it; he may have supported a legitimate policy while excusing illegitimate conduct. Human beings are inconveniently mixed.

Honest discrimination would allow him to retain what was sound and correct what was not. We would prefer him to see only complete vindication or complete disgrace. Then he may cling to vindication long after he has ceased believing in it.

On the most dangerous kind of former ally

The patient recently listened to an interview with a Christian formerly involved in the same movement. The speaker retained his faith and some of his policy convictions, but believed his community had excused moral failures in the name of necessity. He described losing friends, being called a traitor, and acknowledging evidence he had once dismissed. He regretted treating opponents unfairly.

You supplied resentment and ambition as explanations. Unfortunately, the speaker acknowledged uncertainty and spoke affectionately about people whose judgments he now questioned. He offered no triumphant account of his own enlightenment. The patient had been prepared to reject a traitor delighting in former friends' humiliation; he heard a man who had paid a price for following his conscience. He wondered whether he could do the same.

You must intervene whenever such witnesses appear. Not because every political conversion deserves admiration. It does not. But because the patient may begin to recognize the distinction between abandoning a community out of contempt and dissenting from it out of fidelity to a principle. The latter possibility is especially dangerous. It suggests that a man may lose his place within a movement without losing his place before the Enemy. And once the patient believes this, the movement's power over him begins to diminish.

Proverbs joins confession to forsaking the wrong and receiving mercy. We prefer confession to remain general. The patient may acknowledge that he is a sinner and speak sincerely about needing grace, provided no particular act requires correction.

"I am far from perfect" can serve as a splendid substitute for "I repeated something false." "We all need grace" may become a way of refusing accountability for a cruelty committed by an ally. The broad statement is true. Its usefulness lies in avoiding the specific truth.

He has transformed the invitation to confession into a method for postponing it. Let him keep the humility of the vocabulary and decline the inconvenience of the act.

On the great danger of a genuine apology

His son's difficulty with apologies has not ended with the conversation about the classmate. The boy has now spoken unkindly to another child after misunderstanding a quarrel. He recognizes the mistake but fears being laughed at if he acknowledges it. Your patient listened with the genuine concern of a father who wished his child to develop good character.

Then he said something that ought to have been entirely harmless. "Being wrong isn't the worst thing. Refusing to admit it is worse." The words escaped him almost without thought, and he fell silent immediately afterward. I can well

imagine why. He had stated to his son the principle he had been resisting in himself.

The boy asked whether apologizing would make things better. His father said it might, then added that it remained right even if the other child responded badly. This was worse. The patient had detached the obligation from a favorable outcome. He was teaching the child a courage he had withheld from himself, and hearing the lesson as he spoke it. An ordinary parental kindness had exposed a defense that survived years of public controversy.

Do not make the patient feel merely guilty. Guilt may direct his attention toward a wrong he can correct. We require a larger terror: not "I have defended something wrong," but "If I admit it, I shall no longer know who I am." Let every argument, friendship, and public declaration seem to stand or fall together. His marriage, work, neighbors, and relationship with the Enemy need not disappear because he revises a judgment. Some may improve. Conceal these possibilities beneath the prospect of losing everything at once.

The patient has begun treating moral truth as territory in a political war. Every correction looks like a lost position. Thus obedience to the Enemy can be described as defeat, provided it happens to benefit an opponent. He must not ask whether the truth remains true when the wrong people are pleased by its acknowledgment. If he sees that repentance is surrender to the Enemy rather than surrender to a faction, our description of the contest will no longer hold.

On a most dangerous Sunday morning

Your report concludes with an incident that has caused me considerable alarm. The patient attended church last Sunday. The sermon concerned the repentance of Peter after his denial of Jesus. The pastor did not mention contemporary politics. He did not condemn any party. He did not refer to any political leader. He spoke simply about failure, shame, restoration, and the possibility of returning to the Enemy after having acted contrary to one's professed convictions. Normally, I would prefer such a sermon to a more pointed denunciation. General moral teaching is often easy to admire without applying. But something in the pastor's explanation troubled the patient.

The pastor observed that Peter's confidence in his own loyalty had not prevented his denial. Luke's account ends that encounter in bitter tears; John's later account shows Jesus entrusting him with the care of His sheep. Failure had not made restoration impossible. Then the pastor said repentance required more than regretting the consequences of a wrong: one must become willing to stop defending it. The patient looked down. He remembered the misleading video, his wife's questions, and the advice he had given his son. The interview with the former ally returned to him. Perhaps his refusal to reconsider had less to do with conviction than with fear.

The patient had spent years regarding himself as courageous. Now he suspected that some of his steadfastness had been sustained by fear of embarrassment. He imagined his friends' judgment, his opponents' satisfaction, and the relationships his own anger had damaged. The recognition was not comfortable. It was, however, becoming specific.

The pastor continued. He spoke of grace. He spoke of the Enemy's willingness to receive those who turn back. He spoke of the difference between being exposed and being restored. Then he said something I wish had never reached the patient's ears. "Sometimes the bravest thing a Christian can say is, 'I was wrong.'"

I need hardly describe the effect. The patient remained still. For a few moments, the usual defenses did not arrive. He did not think of the opposition's hypocrisy. He did not remind himself of the movement's accomplishments. He did not rehearse the dangers facing the nation. He simply considered whether the pastor's words might apply to him.

Keep the grace he admires safely in the first century. Otherwise he may recognize the same invitation to tell the truth about himself without being defined entirely by his failure.

Fortunately, the patient did not immediately act. He returned home. He ate lunch. He read several messages. One concerned a fresh political controversy. Another described the betrayal of a former movement leader who had publicly criticized his old allies. The comments were vicious. The former leader was called weak, dishonest, cowardly, corrupt, and faithless. People who had praised him for years now insisted that they had always suspected his motives. The patient read the discussion carefully. You report that he felt an immediate chill. Excellent.

He had heard such judgments before. Now he read them after a sermon which had made acknowledgment seem possible. People who once praised the former leader were rewriting his past and denying his sincerity. The patient imagined his own friends turning upon him in the same way. The old fear returned.

He put the telephone down. Then he looked toward the room where his son was doing homework. He remembered telling the boy that apologizing was right even when it might be embarrassing. And once again the contradiction appeared. The patient had demanded courage from his child. He had excused fear in himself.

My dear Wormwood, we are approaching a crisis. For the patient may now see that the question is not whether changing his mind would be difficult. It almost certainly would be. The question is whether difficulty releases him from the obligation

to do what he believes is right. And the Enemy has been most unhelpfully clear on this general subject.

On the unfortunate possibility of a small beginning

The patient opened the correction once more and read the words he had written weeks earlier: "I went back and watched the full recording. You're right. That clip was misleading, and I shouldn't have shared it."

The next sentence still distinguished his disagreement with the official from permission to misrepresent him. He had already protected that distinction. Yet he considered softening the acknowledgment further, as though another qualification could remove the admission it required. Looking again at the two recordings, he saw that the words were accurate. Why had saying them become so difficult?

For a moment he seemed almost amused. The obligation was smaller than the fears constructed around it. He was not being asked to repair his entire past in one message. His friend had already supplied the correction; he needed to acknowledge that he should not have sent the clip or dismissed the evidence.

You report that he placed his thumb over Send. This is where your account ends. You do not say whether he sent it or what interrupted him. The omission is unacceptable; I expect a complete account.

The consequences might be modest. His friend might acknowledge the correction, ignore it, or answer unkindly. But the patient would have allowed truth to require a change in conduct. Once he discovers that possibility, another correction may become possible too.

We have taught him to measure fidelity by his unwillingness to change. The Enemy asks him to remain steadfast in following, and following necessarily involves movement. A man who refuses to move may cease following anyone. He may simply stand where pride has placed him, calling his immobility faith.

That is our preferred outcome. But the prison has acquired a door, and the Enemy never seems satisfied merely to show His creatures where such doors are.

He insists upon inviting them out.

Your affectionate uncle,

SCREWTAPE

Letter 14: On the Proper Use of the Pulpit as a Political Instrument

My dear Wormwood,

I must begin by expressing my dissatisfaction with your latest report. It ends with the patient's thumb poised over a button and fails to tell me what happened next. Meanwhile, the pastor whose sermon helped bring him to this point has become a danger requiring our sustained attention.

We have discussed his influence often enough. You have generally treated him as part of the patient's surroundings: a voice to be admired in the abstract and evaded in the application. But the man has a conscience of his own, and the patient is beginning to ask him for help. Our arrangements must now extend to the shepherd.

We have spent years teaching the patient that certain moral questions must not be examined too closely. His pastor may raise them in twenty minutes, with an authority the patient has invited him to exercise. He may accept from this man a correction he rejects elsewhere. The pulpit is an inconvenient place to have left an honest man.

Fortunately, the man is human. We need not persuade him to stop believing the Gospel. We need only persuade him that certain parts of it would be irresponsible to preach.

On the excellent intentions of a shepherd

The pastor is not a fraud. He studies Scripture, prays for his congregation, visits hospitals, conducts funerals, and has spent years serving people whose names will never appear in newspapers. Such a man may be more useful to us than an openly corrupt one: the latter knows he is serving himself, while the former may be persuaded that serving himself is necessary to serve his people.

He wants children taught, elderly members cared for, families retained, and the congregation financially stable. These desires can be good. We need only rearrange their order until preserving the institution becomes more important than the purpose it exists to serve.

Then he will not think himself cowardly for withholding an unwelcome application. He will think himself responsible for protecting the conditions under which teaching can continue. The church must survive, the ministry continue, and certain matters therefore remain unmentioned.

Several prominent families are dissatisfied. One wants stronger statements about national affairs; another objects that political divisions have entered the sanctuary; a third may move to a church whose leaders speak more explicitly about the spiritual crisis. The pastor is distressed.

These are people he knows, not interchangeable units of attendance. He has baptized their children and prayed beside their hospital beds. Losing them would injure relationships he cherishes. We must make full use of the affection.

Whenever he considers a difficult application, let him imagine empty pews, disappointed faces, awkward meetings, and withdrawn contributions. The consequences should become vivid before the question of faithfulness becomes clear.

Prudence is legitimate. He ought to consider how words will be received and distinguish instruction from careless provocation. Our distortion begins when the likely response

determines whether the truth may be spoken at all. An offensive truth can be postponed, a divisive command referred for further study, an awkward passage left for a more suitable season. Eventually he still has a Bible but has acquired an instinct for avoiding the portions that threaten attendance.

On the great advantage of financial responsibility

Buildings require maintenance, staff must be paid, and the food pantry has to buy food. Responsible stewardship is part of the pastor's duty. We need not invent a financial concern; we need only make an existing one govern decisions it ought not to govern.

A generous contributor has expressed displeasure with a sermon about truthful speech and correcting false accusations. The pastor named no politician or party, but applied the teaching to accusations distributed through electronic messages. The member felt the sermon was directed at people like himself. He complained to an elder that the pastor seemed more concerned with criticizing faithful Christians than confronting dangers outside the church, then mentioned his long-standing support for the congregation. He did not explicitly threaten to withhold contributions. He did not need to.

The pastor wondered whether the sermon had been poorly timed or insufficiently attentive to legitimate concerns. He might have handled it better. Then came the question we desire: what if speaking plainly costs the church the resources necessary to do its work? Make that question decisive.

He should imagine every uncomfortable sermon endangering the pantry, the youth ministry, and the salaries. The donor's preferences can then acquire an importance disproportionate to their theological merit. A man who intended to preach without favoritism begins accommodating the influential in the name of compassion for those who depend upon their money. He may never consciously decide to sell his integrity. He may sincerely believe that he is protecting the ministry.

The Enemy instructs His followers to love one another and preserve the unity of the Spirit. A congregation joined in love may withstand disagreement, correct without contempt, and retain fellowship while acknowledging differences about public policy.

Our preferred unity is the absence of visible disagreement. Avoid the uncomfortable subjects and the congregation will look harmonious. Members exchange cordial greetings while concealing doubts and grievances. The pastor interprets the absence of conflict as the presence of love.

Anyone proposing truthful disagreement can then be classified as a troublemaker. The powerful retain their assumptions, the fearful keep their questions private, and the pastor receives credit for peace. Whether this silence is good for any of them need not become a subject of inquiry.

On the excellent possibility of becoming political by remaining silent

There is a distinction here which requires careful handling. The pastor is rightly concerned that his pulpit should not become a campaign platform. He does not wish to tell congregants which party to join. He does not believe that every disagreement over taxation, immigration enforcement, education policy, or public administration can be settled by quoting a verse. He understands that Christians may share moral commitments while disagreeing sincerely about how those commitments should be expressed through law. All very sensible. We should encourage these convictions. Then we must persuade him that avoiding partisan instruction requires avoiding moral teaching whenever that teaching might have political implications.

Refraining from endorsing a candidate does not require silence about dishonesty when a candidate lies. Acknowledging disagreement about immigration law does not forbid teaching hospitality toward strangers. The pastor may admit that policy is complicated without allowing complexity to obscure the way

his people treat actual persons. These distinctions would leave him free to teach and his congregation free to disagree about policy. We would prefer the boundaries of permissible teaching to be determined by whatever makes the influential uncomfortable.

Make challenges to the congregation's preferred movement feel inherently political while its familiar assumptions remain common sense. The pastor will be accused of becoming political when he questions a loyalty and praised for remaining biblical when he confirms it. Familiarity supplies the appearance of neutrality. A church need never formally endorse a party to make its assumptions so sacred that biblical correction feels like an intrusion.

Prophetic courage is popular at a safe historical distance and more popular when directed toward people the audience already dislikes. We need not deprive the pastor of bold language. Keep his boldest denunciations directed toward those unable to injure his standing.

Let him apply the same standards to a favored leader and the atmosphere changes: politics is suddenly too complicated, unity too fragile, and humility in interpretation urgently required. He can be a lion toward distant enemies and a lamb toward those holding his livelihood in their hands.

The congregation will call him courageous within these boundaries. He may believe them, and the praise will help prevent him from noticing the boundaries.

On the unwelcome example of the Good Shepherd

In John 10 the Enemy distinguishes the Good Shepherd from the hired hand who abandons the sheep when danger comes. The passage concerns His identity and His care for those belonging to Him, rather than merely supplying instructions for church administration. Its example is nevertheless inconvenient: personal safety is not treated as the highest duty.

If the pastor considers what serving under that Shepherd implies, he may ask whether preserving his position has become more important than caring for his people. Withholding needed instruction because it threatens popularity may begin to look like neglect.

Let him admire the promise of the Enemy's care without considering the obligation of his own. Otherwise a most unpleasant question may arise:

Am I protecting the sheep, or am I protecting myself from the sheep?

He has become sensitive to the messages arriving after worship, the families who have stopped attending, and the faces of those who appeared displeased. These may be legitimate concerns. Encourage him to treat them as his chief measure of spiritual health. He will then prepare sermons for two audiences: the Enemy, and the people whose approval he fears losing. At first he will hope to satisfy both. Eventually he will meet a passage that makes the conflict plain.

Make the congregation's displeasure immediate and the Enemy's abstract. A complaint can arrive this afternoon; a shortfall may appear next month. The Enemy does not ordinarily announce His judgment through such convenient administrative channels. The pastor can therefore fear his listeners more than the One who called him, while describing the arrangement as sensitivity, pastoral care, or choosing the appropriate season. Admirable phrases can shelter an unexamined fear.

Paul's question in Galatians about seeking human approval establishes another troublesome distinction. He is defending the divine origin of his message, not telling pastors to disregard the feelings of those they serve. But serving people and being governed by their approval are different activities.

The pastor may love his congregation while refusing to flatter it. We must restrict his application of the warning to approval from outside the church. He can congratulate himself

on resisting secular opinion while trembling before a committee of people who already share his convictions.

The approval he seeks most desperately will then remain invisible beneath his reputation for resisting approval elsewhere.

On the most profitable sermon that was never preached

Several weeks ago, the pastor prepared a sermon on Colossians 3, with its call to compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and love. He remembered the mocking language in the church lobby and the accusations forwarded by respected members. One congregant had spoken openly with contempt about political opponents. The passage addressed conduct he knew, including the division between public cruelty and private kindness that we have encouraged in the patient.

His sermon argued that Christian character could not be divided into compartments: patience at home could not excuse humiliation elsewhere, nor a cause's importance make malice and dishonesty acceptable. He named no politician and instructed no one how to vote. He applied the passage to the familiar conduct. Naturally, we could not allow it to be preached.

The difficulty arose when the pastor shared his outline with a church elder. The elder listened. He agreed that the biblical virtues were important. Then he expressed concern. Some members might perceive the sermon as an attack upon their political convictions. Certain families were already dissatisfied. The congregation was entering a period of financial uncertainty. The pastor had recently been criticized for insufficiently addressing the dangers facing the nation. Was this really the right time?

The pastor defended his outline. The elder assured him that he was not questioning the biblical teaching. He was merely questioning the wisdom of its application. A splendid distinction.

The elder suggested that the pastor might emphasize kindness in ordinary relationships instead. Marriage. Parenting. Friendships. Workplace disagreements. All legitimate applications of the passage. The pastor considered the suggestion. He wanted to avoid unnecessary offense. He did not wish to be misunderstood. He feared that some congregants would hear political criticism rather than biblical instruction.

He revised the sermon. The references to public conduct disappeared. The discussion of political cruelty was removed. The examples concerned household patience, marital forgiveness, and the importance of speaking kindly to coworkers. The final sermon was warmly received. Several members thanked him for the practical teaching. The elder expressed appreciation for his wisdom. The pastor felt relieved. And the congregation departed with its political habits undisturbed.

You call the outcome a compromise. It was better than that. The virtues were genuine and the domestic applications appropriate, yet the application troubling his conscience had been withheld. Truth had been selected to leave an evasion undisturbed. The congregation could thank him sincerely for teaching it while he enjoyed relief at what it had not heard.

A pastor who recognizes an omitted application may feel shame at first. Repetition supplies relief: the congregation was not ready, the matter can be addressed privately, another occasion will be more suitable. Each explanation may contain some truth. Together they can furnish a justification for permanent silence. Eventually he stops writing the difficult application at all. He has learned to remove it before it can trouble him.

He continues calling people to repentance. Only its distribution changes: urgent for those outside, abstract for those within, and chiefly a warning about others for those whose influence determines the congregation's identity.

On the proper handling of an immigrant family

The immigrant family has now begun attending a Bible study associated with the congregation. Their dinner conversations were troublesome enough. I had hoped we could at least keep them out of the pastor's reflections.

The pastor met them after a service. He learned something of their background. He listened to the difficulties they had encountered. He found them courteous, thoughtful, and sincerely interested in the church. So far, regrettable but manageable. Then the woman asked him a question. She explained that her family sometimes felt unwelcome when religious people spoke about immigrants. She understood that Christians could disagree about laws and enforcement. She was not asking the church to adopt a particular political position. But she wondered whether the congregation believed that people in her circumstances deserved kindness and dignity.

The pastor was moved. He assured her that they did. He quoted the Enemy's command to love one's neighbor. He spoke of the Good Samaritan. He acknowledged that Christians must distinguish legal questions from the treatment of individual human beings. All perfectly sound. Then she said something dangerous. "I wish people could hear that from the church."

The pastor did not answer immediately. He knew what she meant. He had heard the language used by certain congregants. He knew that some of the political rhetoric circulating among members would be deeply hurtful if addressed to this woman and her children. He had privately objected to such language. But he had rarely addressed it from the pulpit. Now he found himself speaking with someone whose vulnerability made the omission difficult to ignore.

You must intervene here. Let the pastor conclude that the woman is asking him to become political. Let him fear that publicly affirming the dignity of immigrants will be interpreted as opposing border enforcement. Let him imagine angry letters. Let him worry about influential members. Above all,

persuade him that treating her kindly in private satisfies his pastoral obligation.

He can welcome her family. He can shake their hands. He can pray for them. He can assure them that they belong. But he must not challenge the congregation's habits of speaking about people like them. The distinction is essential. Private compassion must remain available as a substitute for public moral instruction.

On the strange case of the pastor's own child

The pastor's daughter, now a young adult, recently visited her parents. She respects her father and knows the congregation. When he expressed concern about the politicization of churches, she agreed. Then she asked whether avoiding politics meant avoiding every subject a movement had made controversial.

He said pastors must exercise judgment. She agreed again, a most irritating conversational habit. Did he believe Christians should tell the truth about their own leaders, condemn cruelty among allies, and defend the dignity of immigrants while remaining free to disagree about law? He did.

"And when those standards challenge people they support?"

He began explaining the need for careful handling. She listened, then said, "Dad, I know you believe these things. I'm just not sure everyone in your church knows you mean them without exceptions."

He had assumed private conviction compensated for public caution. She had reminded him that private convictions cannot supply the application he withholds. I trust you will prevent her from repeating the conversation.

James warns that teachers will be judged with greater strictness. The pastor must not consider what this implies about omissions. Every sermon teaches more than its explicit subject: it teaches which wrongs count as serious and whose conduct can be examined. If he repeatedly condemns

dishonesty among distant enemies while avoiding it among favored leaders, his listeners learn a distinction he has never stated. Encourage him to regard his responsibility as limited to the sentences he actually utters.

The shepherd image can be corrupted very economically. Emphasize keeping the flock together and remove the obligation to lead it anywhere it does not already wish to go. If the strongest sheep injure the weaker, intervention may threaten unity; if they develop a taste for poisonous vegetation, correction may send them to another pasture. The metaphor becomes absurd when made concrete. Keep it vague, and the pastor may walk proudly at the front while being led from behind.

The same temptation operates when pastors gain access to political power. Advice offered honestly may be dangerous to us. Access preserved at the expense of honesty is another matter. A photograph, an invitation, a private consultation can make a man feel that his ministry has become consequential. Perhaps he can do some good there. Encourage him to treat preserving the opportunity as more important than using it.

He will learn to bless without examining and to describe questionable conduct generously enough to secure another invitation. The direction of accountability reverses: rather than calling power to account before the Enemy, he supplies it with religious reassurance. The difficulty need not reach the scale of a national throne. A church elder's approval can perform the same service in a smaller room.

You will recall the feature of David's story we have repeatedly found inconvenient: Nathan confronted the king. The pastor may continue praising that courage, provided he does not ask what it would cost him to exercise it among people whose favor he needs. We have rehearsed the ancient example sufficiently. The contemporary application is what must remain unspoken.

Love can undo our arrangements if it ceases to mean the maintenance of pleasant feeling. A pastor who cares about his

people's souls may become willing to disappoint them. He need not enjoy their discomfort; he may speak precisely because he does not wish to see them deceived. Make him judge the sermon by whether everyone leaves encouraged, and criticism by whether it proves he has failed. The possibility that truthful correction might be an act of care must not enter the calculation.

On a most unfortunate request for counsel

Later in the week, the patient asked his pastor for a conversation. The sermon about Peter had left him troubled, and the correction to his friend remained unsent. He wanted counsel about a difficulty he could no longer dismiss merely by calling it complicated.

The two men met in the pastor's office. The patient began awkwardly, saying the sermon troubled him because he feared it applied to him. He described the misleading video and the acknowledgment still withheld from his friend. He spoke about his wife's questions, the exceptions he made for favored leaders, and his growing uncertainty about trusted commentators and religious videos. The pastor listened.

"How do I know when standing firm becomes just refusing to admit I'm wrong?" The question required no electoral instruction. The pastor could help him distinguish fidelity to a principle from defense of a wrong and encourage the acknowledgment whose words were already written. The patient had brought a particular evasion to a man he trusted to examine it.

For a moment, the pastor appeared ready to do so. He opened his Bible. He spoke about humility. He acknowledged that Christians must be willing to recognize error. Then the patient mentioned the political leader whose conduct had been troubling him. The pastor hesitated. You report that he glanced toward the closed office door. He knew the patient was connected to several influential families in the congregation. He knew the movement in question was deeply important to

many members. He knew how easily his counsel might be interpreted as taking a political side. And suddenly the moral question became, in his mind, a question of institutional risk.

He reminded the patient that all leaders were imperfect. He said that Christians should be cautious about judging others. He observed that political matters were complicated. He urged the patient to pray for wisdom. None of this was false. But it was not the counsel the patient had come seeking.

The patient had not asked whether leaders were perfect. He knew they were not. He had not asked whether politics was complicated. He knew it was. He had asked whether he was using loyalty to excuse conduct he believed was wrong. The pastor had declined to answer.

Your report suggests that the patient left the office reassured. I am not certain. He thanked the pastor. He shook his hand. He said he appreciated the conversation. But he appeared subdued. You interpret this as relief. It may have been disappointment. For the patient had offered the pastor an opportunity to tell him an uncomfortable truth. And the pastor had given him another reason to remain as he was.

After the patient left, the pastor sat at his desk, aware that he had answered a different question from the one asked. For several minutes he considered calling him back. Then he began preparing for another meeting.

He had not instructed the patient to defend wrongdoing. He had failed to say what he believed needed saying at the moment it was needed. A man had approached the church seeking courage to repent and received a respectable explanation for postponing it. The pastor's influence need not become openly corrupt. It need only become incomplete at the decisive moment.

On the final temptation of the shepherd

His daughter telephoned that evening. Without disclosing the patient's confidence, the pastor admitted he had struggled to answer a church member's question. She asked whether he was uncertain about the principle or about the consequences of applying it.

"Sometimes I worry that if I say everything I believe needs saying, I'll lose half the church."

"Maybe. But what happens to the other half if you never say it?"

I am beginning to develop a profound dislike for the children in these reports. They seem determined to remove the qualifications their elders have found so comforting.

Afterward the pastor reopened the original Colossians draft. The difficult applications remained there. He remembered the elder's concerns, the finances, the influential families, the immigrant woman asking whether people like her were welcome, and the patient asking when standing firm became refusal to admit error. Then he read the passage again.

Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love. The words had not changed. Only his willingness to apply them had.

He began writing. Preserving the congregation's existing comfort and teaching it to follow the Enemy were becoming distinguishable tasks. The fear of losing his ministry had begun to govern the ministry itself.

Such a sermon need not offer a rival political identity. Members could continue disagreeing about law, public spending, or education while learning that disagreement confers no exemption from truthfulness or mercy. The pastor would offer a standard above every faction, and it would be difficult to dismiss him as a partisan opponent when he declined to supply a party and insisted upon a duty.

At the top of his new draft he has written a question:

If I cannot tell my own congregation the truth because I fear losing them, whose servant have I become?

You must act quickly. He has not yet preached the sermon. He has begun to understand why he was afraid to preach it.

Once a shepherd becomes more afraid of failing his flock than of disappointing it, our work may be endangered by the simplest pastoral act: a man opening his Bible, reading what it says, and deciding to say it aloud.

Your affectionate uncle,

SCREWTAPE

Letter 15: On the Unfortunate Possibility That They Might Read the Gospels Again

My dear Wormwood,

I have received your final report. I confess that I read it twice, the second time in the hope that I had misunderstood the first. I had not.

After the careful cultivation of fear, resentment, tribal loyalty, and the conviction that the Enemy's commands must be interpreted in light of political necessity, you have allowed your patient to investigate the original instructions.

He has begun reading the Gospels themselves, consecutively, instead of receiving selected excerpts arranged around a commentator's conclusion. Worse, he is attempting to understand what they say before deciding how they might be made compatible with what he already believes.

Religious interest can be managed. Knowledge may ornament pride, enthusiasm may serve an earthly allegiance, and institutions may become dependent upon influence. We have never chiefly feared that he would lose interest in Christianity. The danger is that he may cease using it to justify the person he has become and begin allowing Christ to change him.

On the great advantage of a familiar Jesus

Consider the Jesus your patient has carried in his imagination. He has never consciously rejected Him. He has defended His name, lamented His declining public influence, and admired leaders promising to protect the church. The figure defended has become conveniently aligned with the patient's existing loyalties.

The portrait was not constructed chiefly from false statements. He admired the Enemy's strength, righteousness, and confrontation of hypocrisy, while learning to recognize these qualities almost exclusively in the victories of his own side. Mercy remained available for failures he already understood. Judgment fell upon people he disliked. It was a figure admirable without being intrusive: He approved the patient's loyalties and seldom examined the patient's resentments.

The difficulty is that the Jesus who appears in the actual Gospels seems disinclined to behave according to our arrangements.

He began with Matthew and read through the Sermon on the Mount. We have discussed the blessings often enough; now he encounters them beside the instructions that follow. Qualities he treated as private dispositions appear in commands concerning speech, reconciliation, retaliation, enemies, generosity, and judgment. The discourse will not stay where he put it. It concerns what people do and the motives with which they do it. The character of the Enemy's kingdom is proving inconveniently unlike the character our patient has learned to admire.

On the peculiar misfortune of loving one's enemies

The command to love enemies and pray for persecutors has returned. We made it seem impractical by telling the patient that love required excusing their conduct or permitting them to do harm. He could then admire it privately and decline its public application.

The command does not require approval of every policy or the abandonment of restraint. It requires him to resist wrongdoing without delighting in the wrongdoer's degradation, and to tell the truth about an enemy even when a false accusation would be useful. We supplied an easier caricature: love meant surrender, so sensible people could set it aside. The actual obligation is harder to dismiss.

The patient paused over the passage. He remembered laughing at the mockery, his son repeating the joke about a schoolmate, and his own bedtime instruction that strength did not entitle someone to be mean. Then he read the command to pray for those who persecute the Enemy's followers. He stopped reading and considered the public figures whose embarrassment he enjoyed. His attempt to pray for them was awkward. Their policies had not become wise, nor their conduct admirable. He was attempting to desire their good.

This is dreadful. Wishing for a person's repentance and restoration can interfere with the pleasure of despising him. Opposition may remain while its favorite reward diminishes. The affections, as you ought to know by now, are often more important than the opinions.

The earliest exemption has returned to trouble him. He expects honesty from his son but has made a cause's importance a reason to excuse its champions. Reading the warnings about judgment and hypocrisy, he asks why a standard becomes less binding when the person violating it is powerful.

He may retain a policy judgment while condemning the conduct of its advocate. An opponent may be hypocritical without making his own hypocrisy innocent. These distinctions leave both his leaders and himself exposed to a judgment their political usefulness cannot determine.

He has continued into Matthew 25. I had hoped he would avoid it. He remembers the mother who apologized even for asking for diapers and the child who wanted apples. The immigrant guests return to mind too: the woman his wife

befriended, the husband asking about evidence, the children playing with his son. The judgment's account of concrete care now reaches people whose circumstances he knows. They have become more difficult to keep within a category.

The account brings the hungry, sick, imprisoned, and strangers before him with an authority his categories cannot comfortably contain. He has questions about the passage, and they deserve careful reading. But his questions no longer make the mother at the pantry disappear. Whatever further study may teach him, he already knows enough to ask whether her children need food.

He has not thereby settled the administration of borders or the design of public assistance. Those responsibilities remain real. He has discovered that considering them does not exhaust his responsibility toward the person standing within reach. Concern for unborn life can no longer serve as proof that every other obligation toward vulnerable life has been fulfilled.

The convictions are acquiring consequences: time, money, patience, and personal involvement. We had hoped identification would remain less expensive than discipleship.

On the unwelcome sending of a message

The patient has finally sent the correction. He acknowledged that the clip was misleading and that he should not have shared it. His continued disagreement with the official did not justify misrepresentation. The message said what the draft had said for weeks. There was no grand declaration or public spectacle, merely an admission to the friend whose evidence he had dismissed.

After weeks imagining catastrophe, he pressed Send. The world did not collapse. More importantly, he had ceased making the imagined response a condition of telling the truth. The act was small; the resistance had made it enormous.

The friend answered the message later that evening. I had hoped for mockery. Or triumph. Or a lengthy argument. Any

response sufficiently unpleasant might have persuaded the patient that honesty had been a mistake. Instead, the friend wrote that he appreciated the correction. He admitted that he had not expected it. He added that he respected the patient's willingness to check the facts. Then he asked how the family was doing. An appalling response. No humiliation. No ideological conquest. No attempt to extract further concessions. The friendship simply continued.

You must ensure he does not generalize from the exchange. I fear he already has: the friend who once brought a meal when his wife was ill has now made honesty less frightening without asking for a political concession.

You report that the patient has also spoken with his wife. The conversation began awkwardly. He told her that he had been thinking about their recent disagreements. He admitted that he had often become defensive. He acknowledged that he sometimes treated her questions as though they were attacks. He said that he had allowed political arguments to make him angrier than he wished to be. His wife listened. She did not demand that he abandon his convictions. She did not insist that they agree upon every question. She simply said that she had missed being able to discuss difficult subjects without feeling that the conversation would become a fight. The patient apologized.

There was no revelation that their disagreements had vanished. His wife admitted that she too had begun listening for an argument rather than an answer. Neither admission repaired every quarrel. But the patient heard her finish a difficult sentence, and when his usual explanation occurred to him, he let it wait. I understand they subsequently took the walk she had suggested some time before. Nothing of national importance was accomplished on it. She seemed pleased.

We relied upon every challenge feeling like a threat. His wife has made correction hearable without assuring him of his righteousness. He may become less dependent upon people who do.

On the dangerous possibility of a church that means what it says

The pastor has preached the Colossians sermon. He acknowledged differences of political judgment and then insisted that the commands apply regardless of allegiance. False accusations must be corrected; justice cannot be defended by enjoying cruelty; compassion cannot be reserved for circumstances the congregation finds convenient. Governments have duties not reducible to personal charity, but those duties do not abolish the dignity of the people affected.

Several members were uncomfortable. Some complained that the sermon was too political or wondered whether the church was abandoning traditional convictions. These were promising reactions.

The pastor listened respectfully and acknowledged the difficulty of public questions. Then he declined the familiar escape. He was not asking them to agree upon a program. He was asking whether their conduct reflected the character of Christ.

He has offered a standard claiming authority over every faction without supplying a faction of his own. Worse, he has done it without apparent contempt for those who disagree. We cannot depend upon his discomfort doing our work for us.

On the unwelcome appearance of a quiet Christian

The elderly man who repaired the handrail while your patient attended to the church event has remained a minor figure in your reports. He seldom speaks in public discussions and once seemed insufficiently alert to the dangers facing the nation. Now the patient has begun watching what he does when there is no discussion to win.

The elderly man regularly visits members who are ill. He drives people to medical appointments. He contributes quietly to the church assistance program. He helps maintain the homes of widows who cannot afford repairs. He has become

friendly with the immigrant family. He treats people who disagree with him without apparent resentment. And when asked why he spends so much time on these ordinary acts, he gives an answer of almost intolerable simplicity. "Someone has to."

The patient has spent energy defending Christianity's place in national life; this man keeps noticing that someone needs a ride to the doctor. His opinions remain open to criticism, but his usefulness is harder to explain away. The patient remembers that his son helped with the handrail while he himself was occupied elsewhere. A distinction once flattering to him has become less comfortable.

The Gospels have not supplied the endorsement of a political arrangement he expected. He encounters a kingdom whose Lord serves, confronts hypocrisy, refuses misplaced worship, and will not make survival before Pilate the highest good. His declaration that the kingdom is not from this world does not make the world irrelevant. It makes identifying the kingdom with an earthly movement more difficult.

The patient may remain active in public life. His faith may inform his judgments, and he may advocate policies he considers wise. But participation need not become worship, influence need not be mistaken for faithfulness, and defeat need not authorize disobedience.

He is also reconsidering his attention. We do not require him to become uninformed; ignorance may serve him badly too. Our arrangement depended upon public concern occupying almost every unclaimed moment, so that immediate obligations felt like interruptions of something greater. The pantry could wait. His family could wait. The next warning could not.

He has stopped checking political messages immediately upon waking and has taken further walks without commentary. He spends more time speaking with his son, helps more regularly at the assistance program, and wants to know the immigrant husband beyond their occasional dinners. These

modest changes give the people within reach more of the attention once reserved for distant conflict.

Do not mistake this for political neutrality. He still holds definite views and considers some questions morally urgent. Had he merely exchanged one partisan identity for another, we could have continued under different management, with new enemies and the same habits. The change worrying me is his declining willingness to make a person's worth depend upon agreement.

The comprehensive categories are becoming less satisfying. He encounters mixed creatures again: sincere and mistaken, generous and fearful, capable of recognizing a truth in one matter and resisting it in another. Unfortunately, he has begun including himself among them.

On the terrible example of the washing of feet

In John 13 the patient encounters the Master assuming a servant's place and washing His disciples' feet. He does not cease to possess authority by kneeling. He demonstrates something about its use.

Our Father Below understands power as the ability to command, possess, and compel. The Enemy presents it as capable of stooping. The patient has admired dominance and treated an unwillingness to apologize as strength. The account makes both measures less convincing.

He may begin considering whether a leader's treatment of the weak reveals more than the ability to defeat rivals. Authority can serve, strength protect, knowledge illuminate, and leadership bear responsibility. Once he begins asking for these uses, dominance by itself will seem less impressive.

The patient has begun asking a question which requires neither an elaborate political theory nor resolution of every dispute: Does this make me more like Jesus?

He asks it when a joke invites him to enjoy someone's humiliation, when a commentator gives him a reason to remain

angry, and when he wonders whether to repeat an accusation. It does not settle the policy debate by itself. It makes the manner in which he participates a subject of judgment. He can no longer examine only what his opponent believes; he must examine what he himself is becoming.

Authentic verses arranged around a conclusion can no longer spare him comparison between his actual life and the teaching he professes to follow. We shall have to find another means of making the comparison unnecessary.

You report that the patient recently returned to the church assistance program. The young mother was there again. Her children had grown comfortable with several of the volunteers. The older boy recognized the patient. He greeted him enthusiastically. The patient asked how things were going. The woman explained that she had found additional work but was struggling to arrange childcare. The patient listened.

He did not immediately offer an opinion about public policy. He did not begin explaining the importance of personal responsibility. He did not use her circumstances as evidence for or against a political program. He asked what kind of help would actually be useful.

The woman told him. Some of her needs were immediate. Others required longer-term arrangements. Some were beyond the capacity of a single volunteer or congregation to solve. The patient did not pretend otherwise.

This time he spoke with the coordinator about the questions he had drafted weeks earlier: what the church could do about childcare, work, and the needs that returned after the groceries were gone. The coordinator did not produce an instant solution. Some options required money, others volunteers, and one suggestion the patient made had already been tried unsuccessfully. He listened, offered to help investigate another, and agreed to return.

Then he carried groceries to her car. The older child asked whether there would be apples again next week. The patient smiled and said he would check. You may consider a grown

man discussing fruit a trivial event. Yet he was responding to the child as a person instead of employing him as an illustration. The boy's question had become a reason to return.

On the excellent possibility of becoming proud of humility

The prayers he attempts for opponents have begun to include allies too. He asks that both resist corruption, protect the vulnerable, and be corrected when wrong. This is an unwelcome symmetry. Earlier he prayed for an opponent chiefly by rehearsing an indictment. Now he sometimes catches himself doing it and begins again.

Luke's account of loving those who cannot be expected to repay the love has made reciprocity a less convincing excuse. He has not become fond of every public figure. But the pleasure of wishing a person humiliated has begun to compete with a prayer in which he has asked for that person's good. We must restore his confidence that one can say such prayers without meaning them.

The patient has corrected a falsehood and admitted a failure at home. Let him convert these beginnings into a biography of exceptional moral intelligence. The pleasure of superiority can be attached to his improvements as readily as it was attached to his earlier convictions.

He may delight in his former companions' inconsistencies, regard their continued loyalty as evidence of stupidity, or use his newly independent reading to humiliate them. He would condemn contempt contemptuously and take pride in humility. The objects would change; the corruption of his affections would remain.

The Enemy's ambition is not merely to transfer a creature from one set of opinions to another. He insists upon transforming the person who holds them. A man correct about many things and still cruel would remain useful to us. Make the patient forget how recently he required the patience he now begrudges others.

On the terrible danger of remembering grace

Peter's restoration has remained with him. He needs no further recital of the story; he needs to remember that his own change depended upon patience he did not provide for himself. A friend corrected him, his wife kept trying to speak, and a child repeated standards he had taught.

Treating the recovery as a gift rather than an achievement would make superiority less promising. He might remember how difficult admitting error had been and become capable of saying, "I used to believe that too," with understanding rather than disdain.

A man who remembers mercy may extend it. That would be especially inconvenient among people we hoped his new judgments would teach him to despise.

The old anxiety is diminishing too: the notion that the Enemy's kingdom will collapse unless his movement wins. Reading through the trial, crucifixion, and resurrection, he encounters a victory the machinery of political survival would have been badly equipped to recognize. He still cares about his country. He is beginning to doubt that the Enemy requires disobedience in order to preserve His own purposes.

An earthly allegiance may remain important without possessing the final claim upon him. He can lose an argument or an election without imagining Heaven defeated. A cause deprived of that ultimacy will find it harder to demand his disobedience.

Nor can obedience be accomplished by proxy. No president can repent on his behalf, no pastor practice humility in his place, and no religious majority make him merciful. He must decide what he will do with the words he has read.

Our strongest qualifications relied upon real difficulties. Applying moral principles does require judgment, and sincere Christians will disagree about particular obligations. We used that fact to keep every simpler duty indefinitely under review. Now he has begun distinguishing a question that requires

more study from an obligation he already understands. The existence of difficult cases no longer makes all cases difficult.

Nevertheless, I am not prepared to concede the patient. He remains human. He will grow impatient, prefer reassuring information, resist an expensive correction, and become weary of examining himself. We shall have opportunities.

The work must change because the old shortcuts have become less reliable. Sacred language no longer guarantees his assent, and a cause's importance no longer guarantees its advocates an exemption. We must return to ordinary temptations: impatience with his wife, irritation with his son, pride in independence, pleasure in recognizing hypocrisy. Make him more interested in explaining the Enemy's teaching than practicing it. Encourage him to admire himself whenever he obeys.

The grand strategy depended upon keeping him so occupied defending Christianity that he had no time to follow Christ. He has not dispensed with teachers. He has begun asking whether they help him hear or help him evade.

Consider the spectacle: a man in his living room, an open Bible, no crowd to impress and no opponent to defeat. Only the patient and the words he claims to believe. I have seldom found anything more disquieting.

On the unfortunate possibility that he might follow

There is one final detail in your report. The patient read the command in John 13 to love one another as the Enemy has loved His followers, and the declaration that this love would identify His disciples. Then he closed the book and sat quietly.

"I think I've been asking the wrong question."

His wife looked up. "What question?"

"I've spent years asking how to make America more Christian." He paused. "Maybe I should have been asking how to become more like Christ."

I fear we have lost the arrangement that made him so dependable. He has begun wishing to resemble the One whose approval he previously wished merely to possess. That desire may undo what our exemptions accomplished.

Pride remains an opportunity. Make him forget the patience he required, and the discovery could yet become another reason to despise people who remain where he stood.

For if he speaks truthfully without contempt, corrects without humiliating, and remains willing to be corrected, the effects may not stay private. His son will notice. The mother at the pantry may discover that his concern for life possesses hands and feet. The pastor may find courage in a congregant receiving correction without resentment. Friends who disagree with him may encounter convictions that do not serve as permission to be cruel.

Someone might ask why he has become less angry, why he corrects a mistake, or why an electoral defeat frightens him less. He might answer that he has been reading the Gospels again.

If that happens, the infection may spread. A man whose conduct begins to resemble his professed teaching may be a more dangerous witness than a thousand forgotten sermons.

We have not lost a political argument. We have lost the patient's willingness to let politics tell him what Christianity means. He has begun allowing Christianity to judge what his politics ought to be.

And should he continue, there is no telling where the Enemy may lead him.

Your affectionate uncle,

SCREWTAPE

Scripture Behind the Letters

This companion serves the Literary, Clear, and Brief readings. The full readings include passages discussed in the letters and further passages chosen to illuminate their themes; they are not an index of every biblical reference. Each entry offers a brief ESV quotation, the fuller passages to read, and a note on their context and connection to the letter. Some entries add supplementary readings for particular scenes or arguments. Quotations drawn from part of a verse are identified as excerpts. The explanatory notes are our own prose.

The passages should be read with the words surrounding them. A quotation may be accurate and still be put to a use its context cannot support. The questions below turn attention toward our own conduct.

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Part 1 — The Capture of the Conscience

Letter 1

On the Useful Distinction Between Character and Leadership

You will recognize them by their fruits.

— **Matthew 7:16** (ESV excerpt)

Full readings (ESV): **Matthew 7:16-20; Galatians 5:22-23.**

The passages in context

Jesus is warning his hearers about false prophets whose appearance conceals their character. The image of a tree and its fruit calls for discernment beyond a reassuring profession. Galatians describes the fruit of life in the Spirit. These passages do not supply a voting formula; they make the patient's decision to stop examining conduct morally significant.

The connection to the letter

The father's standards for his son expose the exception he has made for someone whose success he desires. Screwtape needs him to treat that exception as wisdom.

For personal examination

Where do I demand honesty from someone close to me while excusing dishonesty in someone I support?

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Letter 2

On the Convenient Conversion of Fear into Faith

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.

— 1 John 4:18 (ESV excerpt)

Full readings (ESV): 1 John 4:18; Matthew 25:35; Leviticus 19:34.

The passages in context

John's immediate subject is confidence before God's judgment and freedom from fear of punishment. The verse does not deny danger or make anxiety evidence of failed faith. Read beside Jesus' description of welcoming the stranger and Israel's command to love the resident foreigner, it challenges a religious posture in which fear becomes a standing excuse to stop loving.

The connection to the letter

The missed walk and the son's search for reassurance show what the patient's vigilance is doing to his actual relationships. His concern for distant dangers has begun to consume his availability at home.

For personal examination

Is my attention to danger helping me care for people, or continually taking me away from them?

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Letter 3

On the Christian's Delight in Having Enemies

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

— **Matthew 5:44** (ESV excerpt)

Full readings (ESV): **Matthew 5:43–48; Romans 12:17–21.**

The passages in context

Jesus extends love beyond the circle of people who already return it, drawing attention to the Father's generosity toward both the evil and the good. Romans makes enemy-love practical through restraint, peace where possible, and food for a hungry opponent. Neither passage requires approval of wrongdoing. Both challenge the pleasure of treating another person's humiliation as a moral achievement.

The connection to the letter

The friend who brings a meal during the wife's illness has disagreed with the patient for years. Screwtape must keep that kindness from making a later correction hearable.

For personal examination

Can I oppose someone's conduct without enjoying that person's humiliation?

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Part 2 — The Sanctification of Power

Letter 4

On the Lord's Anointed, Especially When He Is Our Man

We must obey God rather than men.

— Acts 5:29 (ESV excerpt)

Full readings (ESV): Isaiah 45:1; Romans 13:1–7; Acts 5:29.

The passages in context

Isaiah names Cyrus within a particular account of God's purposes; the designation is not a general exemption from moral scrutiny for leaders whom believers favor. Romans addresses governing authority and civic obligation. Acts describes the apostles refusing an order to cease their witness to Jesus. Read together, these passages resist making either political preference or human authority an unquestionable religious command.

The connection to the letter

The letter examines the moment when an argument about God's providence becomes a demand that the patient stop asking whether a leader has acted rightly.

For personal examination

When I call someone God's instrument, am I describing providence or trying to prevent correction?

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Letter 5

On Winning the World While Misplacing the Soul

For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?

— Mark 8:36 (ESV)

Full readings (ESV): Mark 8:36; Matthew 4:8-10.

The passages in context

Mark places this question within Jesus' teaching about following him, self-denial, and losing or saving one's life. Matthew's temptation narrative presents an offer of the world's kingdoms conditioned upon worship of the devil. The passages challenge the assumption that gaining a sufficiently valuable result settles the question of what one may do or whom one may serve to obtain it.

The connection to the letter

Screwtape encourages the patient to examine the promised benefits of victory while leaving the formation of his own character out of the calculation.

For personal examination

What kind of person am I becoming while I pursue the outcome I believe is necessary?

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Letter 6

On the Exquisite Possibility of a Christian Nation Without Christian Conduct

but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

— Micah 6:8 (ESV excerpt)

Full readings (ESV): John 18:36; Matthew 5:13–16; Micah 6:8.

The passages in context

Micah speaks within a covenant dispute in which extravagant offerings cannot substitute for the conduct God requires. Jesus' statement before Pilate concerns the source and character of his kingship, including his servants' refusal to fight for his release. The salt-and-light passage directs attention to deeds that glorify the Father. These readings challenge a religious identity that becomes increasingly visible in symbols and increasingly absent from conduct.

The connection to the letter

Screwtape wants the patient to count the nation's supposed Christian achievements as evidence of his own faithfulness, without asking what his neighbors receive from him.

For personal examination

What would make my faith recognizable to a neighbor who never saw my preferred symbols or heard my political opinions?

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Part 3 — The Reeducation of Compassion

Letter 7

On Making the Stranger a Threat Rather Than a Neighbor

Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

— Deuteronomy 10:19 (ESV)

Full readings (ESV): Luke 10:25–37; Matthew 25:35–40; Deuteronomy 10:18–19.

The passages in context

Deuteronomy joins the command to love the sojourner to God's provision of food and clothing and to Israel's experience in Egypt. In Luke, Jesus answers a question about the limits of neighbor-love with a story about a Samaritan who acts mercifully. These passages do not specify a modern immigration code. They challenge the attempt to let a policy category erase a person's claim upon one's conduct.

The connection to the letter

A stranger who becomes a guest is harder to keep within a convenient abstraction. The dinner gives the patient particular people to remember when he speaks about a category.

For personal examination

What am I willing to learn about the person I have already placed inside a category?

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Letter 8

On the Virtue of Cruelty When Properly Renamed Strength

compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,

— Colossians 3:12 (ESV excerpt)

Full readings (ESV): Matthew 9:36; Colossians 3:12–14; Proverbs 31:8–9.

The passages in context

Colossians addresses people whose identity in Christ should become recognizable in compassion, forgiveness, and love. Matthew describes Jesus' response to crowds who need care and guidance. Proverbs gives a ruler responsibility for those who cannot defend themselves. These readings make room for firm action while refusing to identify strength with delight in another person's suffering.

The connection to the letter

The patient's habits become more difficult to excuse when he hears them returning through his child's voice. Screwtape would prefer him to hear evidence of toughness.

For personal examination

If someone younger learned strength by imitating me, what would they learn to do with another person's weakness?

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Letter 9

On Protecting the Unborn While Forgetting the Living

So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

— James 2:17 (ESV)

Full readings (ESV): Psalm 139:13-16; James 2:14-17; Matthew 25:31-46.

The passages in context

Psalm 139 is a prayer celebrating God's intimate knowledge and formation of the psalmist. James tests a profession of faith against the needs of a poorly clothed, hungry brother or sister. Matthew places concrete acts of care within a scene of judgment; interpretations of the identity of the recipients differ. Together, these readings challenge the use of a genuine moral concern as a release from further obligation.

The connection to the letter

The letter asks whether the patient's concern continues when life presents him with a mother, a child, and needs that cannot be met by declaring a position.

For personal examination

Which responsibility have I stopped noticing because I am certain I have fulfilled another?

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Part 4 — The Manufacture of Truth

Letter 10

On Bearing False Witness for the Sake of a Greater Truth

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

— Exodus 20:16 (ESV)

Full readings (ESV): Exodus 20:16; Proverbs 12:22; Ephesians 4:25.

The passages in context

The commandment concerns witness against a neighbor, with a particular legal setting. Proverbs also condemns lying, and Ephesians requires truthful speech as part of a renewed life shared with others. Read together, they challenge the patient's attempt to reduce responsibility to whether he knowingly invented a statement. Carelessness with another person's reputation can remain morally serious when a rumor arrives already wrapped in a trusted voice.

The connection to the letter

Screwtape works upon the interval between recognizing a misleading claim and acknowledging the patient's own circulation and dismissive defense of it. The friend already knows the facts; the patient still owes him an honest admission.

For personal examination

Have I made a correction as visible as the allegation I helped circulate?

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Letter 11

On the Blessed Assurance of Hearing Only What One Already Believes

but test everything; hold fast what is good.

— 1 Thessalonians 5:21 (ESV)

Full readings (ESV): Proverbs 18:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; 2 Timothy 4:3–4.

The passages in context

Paul places testing beside the instruction not to despise prophecies, joining openness with discernment. Proverbs considers how an account that first appears convincing can change under examination. Second Timothy warns of listeners gathering teachers to suit their desires. The letters apply these habits to a modern information environment, where several speakers may be repeating the same unexamined source.

The connection to the letter

A question from outside the patient's preferred circle threatens a system that has taught him to judge reliability by familiarity and agreement.

For personal examination

Are the voices confirming this claim independent witnesses, or are they repeating one another?

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Letter 12

On the Excellent Progress of the Mechanical Preacher

examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

— Acts 17:11 (ESV excerpt)

Full readings (ESV): Matthew 7:15–20; 1 John 4:1; Acts 17:11.

The passages in context

Acts commends the Berean hearers for receiving the message eagerly while examining the Scriptures. Their willingness to listen does not remove their responsibility to test. Matthew warns about deceptive religious appearances, and First John calls believers to test spiritual claims. None of these passages addresses artificial intelligence directly. They establish the responsibility that remains when a new medium borrows the signs of spiritual authority.

The connection to the letter

The patient's demonstration to his mother makes the book's original problem concrete: a verse can be quoted accurately while the conclusion attached to it remains unsupported.

Supplementary readings (ESV)

For the patient's two deliberately faulty arguments, compare Exodus 12:35–36 and Proverbs 13:22 with Exodus 20:15, and read 1 Kings 11:1–9 alongside Hebrews 13:4. The examples expose permissions the cited passages do not grant.

For personal examination

Can I explain how the quoted passage supports this conclusion, or have I trusted the manner in which it was delivered?

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Part 5 — The Final Transformation

Letter 13

On the Sin of Changing One's Mind

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.

— Proverbs 12:15 (ESV)

Full readings (ESV): Proverbs 12:15; James 3:17; Proverbs 28:13.

The passages in context

Proverbs contrasts self-satisfaction with a willingness to hear counsel. James describes heavenly wisdom through its character, including its responsiveness to reason. Proverbs 28 connects mercy with acknowledging and leaving wrongdoing. These passages do not praise indecision or require every change of opinion. They expose the spiritual cost of deciding that admitting an error is forbidden because too many people have heard one defend it.

The connection to the letter

Screwtape's concern shifts from what the patient believes to what he thinks he would lose by acknowledging that something he defended was wrong.

Supplementary readings (ESV)

The pastor's sermon brings Peter's denial and restoration into that question. Read [Luke 22:54–62](#) alongside [John 21:15–19](#).

For personal examination

What would I be afraid of losing if I acknowledged an error plainly?

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Letter 14

On the Proper Use of the Pulpit as a Political Instrument

If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

— Galatians 1:10 (ESV excerpt)

Full readings (ESV): John 10:11–13; Galatians 1:10; James 3:1.

The passages in context

Jesus' description of the good shepherd centers on his own care for the sheep and willingness to lay down his life. Its contrast with the hired hand also illuminates the question of costly care. Paul defends the gospel against the demand for human approval, and James warns teachers of greater accountability. These readings challenge the substitution of a congregation's immediate comfort for its faithful instruction.

The connection to the letter

The pastor has already influenced the patient. Here, his own vulnerability comes into view: the things he fears losing may determine the things he leaves unsaid.

Supplementary readings (ESV)

His withheld application and reopened draft concern [Colossians 3:12–14](#), returning to the virtues examined in Letter 8.

For personal examination

When I am responsible for speaking, whose approval most strongly shapes what I leave out?

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Letter 15

On the Unfortunate Possibility That They Might Read the Gospels Again

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

— John 13:35 (ESV)

Full readings (ESV): Matthew 5-7; Luke 6:27-36; John 13:34-35.

The passages in context

In John, Jesus gives his disciples the command to love one another according to his own example. Luke extends the demand for love and mercy to enemies. The Sermon on the Mount brings inner motives, speech, generosity, retaliation, judgment, and obedience into view. Reading these teachings together prevents a preferred sentence from becoming protection against the rest of what Jesus asks.

The connection to the letter

The closing letter returns to the question beneath the entire correspondence: whether Scripture may correct the person who already identifies himself with it.

For personal examination

Which familiar teaching of Jesus have I admired without allowing it to alter my conduct?

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