

1 The Screwtape Letters (Part II)

by C. S. Lewis (~1941)



Letter 18

Love & Marriage

January 11, 2026

Key words

Patient = **Man**

Enemy = **God**

Wormwood = **Young Devil in training
(Nephew)**

Screwtape = **Older / Experienced Devil
(Uncle)**



Dissecting Love and Desire

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MY DEAR WORMWOOD,

Even under Slubgob you must have learned at college the routine technique of sexual temptation, and since, for us spirits, this whole subject is one of considerable tedium (though necessary as part of our training) I will pass it over. But on the larger issues involved I think you have a good deal to learn.

1. Contrasting the Philosophy of Heaven and Hell

(out of sequence)

The whole philosophy of Hell rests on recognition of the axiom that one thing is not another thing, and, specially, that one self is not another self. My good is my good and your good is yours. What one gains another loses. Even an inanimate object is what it is by excluding all other objects from the space it occupies; if it expands, it does so by thrusting other objects aside or by absorbing them. A self does the same. With beasts the absorption takes the form of eating; for us, it means the sucking of will and freedom out of a weaker self into a stronger. "To be" means "to be in competition".

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Screwtape writes that the whole philosophy of hell rests upon the worldview that

- **All beings are in competition**
- **As animals live to eat other animals and absorb their energy to survive, so do the devils with human souls.**

2. Exploiting Vulnerabilities (Love, Sex and Marriage)

(In sequence)

The Enemy's demand on humans takes the form of a dilemma; either complete abstinence or unmitigated monogamy. Ever since our Father's first great victory, we have rendered the former very difficult to them. The latter, for the last few centuries, we have been closing as a way of escape. We have done this through the poets and novelists by persuading the humans that a curious, and usually short-lived, experience which they call "being in love" is the only respectable ground for marriage; that marriage can, and ought to, render this excitement permanent; and that a marriage which does not do so is no longer binding. This idea is our parody of an idea that came from the Enemy.

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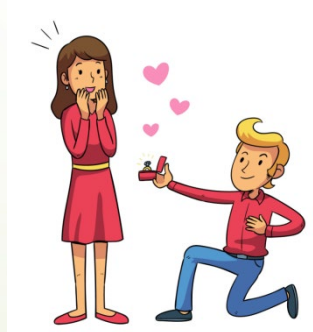
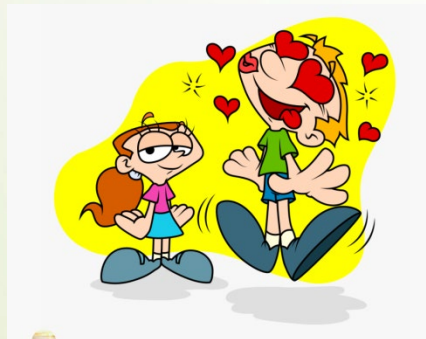
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Screwtape reminds Wormwood of the technique of sexual temptation.

The Enemy demands of humans either complete abstinence from sex or absolute monogamy.

- Abstinence is very rare in humans, and marriage has become more and more influenced by the devils over the last few centuries.
- The devils, through their influence on poets and novelists, have made it so that the only socially acceptable reason for humans to marry is the cultural phenomenon of “being in love,” and that if this excitement fades then the marriage is no longer binding.
- How has this “socially acceptable reason” been assimilated into society?



3. The Cunning Design of Love

Now the Enemy's philosophy is nothing more nor less than one continued attempt to evade this very obvious truth. He aims at a contradiction. Things are to be many, yet somehow also one. The good of one self is to be the good of another. This impossibility He calls love, and this same monotonous panacea can be detected under all He does and even all He is—or claims to be. Thus He is not content, even Himself, to be a sheer arithmetical unity; He claims to be three as well as one, in order that this nonsense about Love may find a foothold in His own nature. At the other end of the scale, He introduces into matter that obscene invention the organism, in which the parts are perverted from their natural destiny of competition and made to cooperate.

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4. Critiquing Love and Marriage Norms

His real motive for fixing on sex as the method of reproduction among humans is only too apparent from the use He has made of it. Sex might have been, from our point of view, quite innocent. It might have been merely one more mode in which a stronger self preyed upon a weaker - as it is, indeed, among the spiders where the bride concludes her nuptials by eating her groom. But in the humans the Enemy has gratuitously associated affection between the parties with sexual desire. He has also made the offspring dependent on the parents and given the parents an impulse to support it—thus producing the Family, which is like the organism, only worse; for the members are more distinct, yet also united in a more conscious and responsible way. The whole thing, in fact, turns out to be simply one more device for dragging in Love.

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Now comes the joke. The Enemy described a married couple as "one flesh". He did not lay "a happily married couple" or "a couple who married because they were in love", but you can make the humans ignore that. You can also make them forget that the man they call Paul did not confine it to married couples. Mere copulation, for him, makes "one flesh". You can thus get the humans to accept as rhetorical eulogies of "being in love" what were in fact plain descriptions of the real significance of sexual intercourse. The truth is that wherever a man lies with a woman, there, whether they like it or not, a transcendental relation is set up between them which must be eternally enjoyed or eternally endured. From the true statement that this transcendental relation was intended to produce, and, if obediently entered into, too often will produce, affection and the family, humans can be made to infer the false belief that the blend of affection, fear, and desire which they call "being in love" is the only thing that makes marriage either happy or holy.

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The error is easy to produce because "being in love" does very often, in Western Europe, precede marriages which are made in obedience to the Enemy's designs, that is, with the intention of fidelity, fertility and good will; just as religious emotion very often, but not always, attends conversion. In other words, the humans are to be encouraged to regard as the basis for marriage a highly-coloured and distorted version of something the Enemy really promises as its result.

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5. Devil's Goal on Love and Fidelity

Two advantages follow. In the first place, humans who have not the gift of continence can be deterred from seeking marriage as a solution because they do not find themselves "in love", and, thanks to us, the idea of marrying with any other motive seems to them low and cynical. Yes, they think that. They regard the intention of loyalty to a partnership for mutual help, for the preservation of chastity, and for the transmission of life, as something lower than a storm of emotion. (Don't neglect to make your man think the marriage service very offensive.)

In the second place any sexual infatuation whatever, so long as it intends marriage, will be regarded as "love", and "love" will be held to excuse a man from all the guilt, and to protect him from all the consequences, if marrying a heathen, a fool, or a wanton. But more of this in my next,

Your affectionate uncle SCREWTAPE

Key points

- **Sexual morality: either abstinence or monogamy.**
- **Screwtape denies the possibility of love, for him all of life is competition and predation. Sex, therefore, is about using, consuming, or absorbing another. He denies the possibility of love, understood as finding one's own fulfillment in the good of the other.**
- **Implicit is Lewis' charge that modern society has adopted a "hellish" understanding of sex which reduces sex to predation. In contrast, says Lewis, God intends for sex to be the means by which we learn and express love. But more to the point, sex has a transcendent power to create that which it promises, "one flesh." The key point is that we have gotten it backwards: we have come to think that the emotional sense of "being in love" is the only valid reason for sex and marriage, when in fact it is a promised by-product. Lewis goes so far as to suggest that marriage can and is valid even if it does not result from a "storm of emotion."**

Mark 10:6–9 *“But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”*

- **How can a man and woman initially meet up**
Is some kind of “attraction” necessary?
- **How do you find the right partner?**
 - Online dating?
 - Arranged marriage?
 - Biblical accounts?
- **What is needed for (causes) a man to propose to a woman to enter marriage?**
(What would drive a man/woman to leave his father & mother?)

Divine Strategies to Practice:

- **Seek to honor God:** Honor God with the way in which you steward the gift of sex as it was created to be used, abstinence outside of marriage, monogamy in marriage.
- **How has your view been influenced by God's standards as found in Scripture as opposed to the world's perspective on sex?**
- **How has the idea of romantic love perhaps distorted your perspective on biblical love and unconditional commitment in both singleness and marriage?**
- **In what ways are you promoting God's perspective on sex in your current relationships, conversations, and recreational activity?**
- **If single, what has helped you in practicing faithful abstinence outside of marriage? If married, how have you practiced faithful monogamy in marriage?**
- **Whether married or single, how are you honoring those of the other sex with your sexual attitudes, thoughts, and practices?**