

Screwtape's Tactics

Of all the bits of C.S. Lewis wisdom that have formed my practical theology, The Screwtape Letters is the most memorable for me. In this little book Lewis reveals the devil's strategies for tripping up us humans. He does it by means of notes sent from a senior devil Screwtape to his protégé Wormwood.

Intentional Reversal: As a reader I'm kept on my toes by Lewis' use of intentional reversal in the cosmic drama. Screwtape speaks of 'the Enemy' who is opposed to 'Our Father Below', while 'the patient' is the mortal to whom Wormwood has been assigned.

Lewis calls his readers upfront to "remember that the devil is a liar". Occasionally during a read I find myself saying, "Hey wait, that couldn't be what he means!" but with some thoughtful re-engagement, I realize that the words ring true. I also recognize myself having been caught, many times, in the clutches of these lies.

Hypocrisy & criticism: After Wormwood loses 'his patient' to 'the Enemy', Screwtape's advice is geared toward winning the man back or, at the very least, hindering his growth as a Christian. Few tactics work better to this end than breeding discontent over the hypocrisy he sees in his fellow Christians. This approach breeds his own pride as well as a blindness to his own faults. As I read, Lewis holds up a mirror and I recognize my own pride and quickness to see in others what I don't see in myself.

Another tactic is to breed criticism toward the people the Christian is called to love. "Nurture a habit of 'mutual annoyance' and the cause will be nearly won." Then, with a masterful look at human nature, Screwtape advises, "Make sure his prayers are very 'spiritual'. In this way he'll focus on what he regards as her sins which, with a little guidance from you, he can be induced to mean any of her actions which are inconvenient or irritating to himself." Ouch, master Lewis. Could my prayers really be so blindly self-righteous? Yes I know it's true.

Distraction: The tactic of distraction is so very relevant to our culture, and is worth quoting. Here Screwtape is describing how he used this tactic with an atheist who was being drawn into the dangerous ground of conversation with 'the Enemy':

"One day, as he sat reading, I saw a train of thought in his mind beginning to go the wrong way. The Enemy, of course, was at his elbow in a moment. Before I knew where I was I saw my twenty years' work beginning to totter. If I had lost my head and begun to attempt a defense by argument I should have been undone.

But I was not such a fool. I struck instantly at the part of the man which I had best under my control and suggested that it was just about time he had some lunch. The Enemy presumably made the counter-suggestion (you know how one can never quite overhear what He says to them?) that this was more important than lunch. At least I think that must have been His line for when I said “Quite. In fact much too important to tackle at the end of a morning”, the patient brightened up considerably; and by the time I had added “Much better come back after lunch and go into it with a fresh mind”, he was already half way to the door. Once he was in the street the battle was won.... (Letter 1)”

Hmm, I don't have to think long to recount many times when I've been distracted from a conversation with Jesus - by a much lesser thought than a call to lunch. Lewis' keen insight into human nature and the traps our enemy uses to keep us from our high calling are as relevant today as they were 75 years ago.