

Chapter Five



YOU REALLY DO HAVE AN ENEMY

Years ago, when I was in Franciscan formation at the seminary in Loretto, Pennsylvania, I became fascinated by *The Screwtape Letters* written by C. S. Lewis.

In the course of my part-time work as seminary librarian, I came across this odd book by Lewis, an Oxford literary critic who had a modest reputation as a Christian apologist. The book was a seemingly light-hearted literary fantasy. Lewis imagined that each human being has an individual devil assigned to lead him astray (the reverse of the Christian tradition that an individual guardian angel protects us). He further imagined that more experienced devils supervise the

work of younger demons and tutor them in demonic techniques.

What, he asked, would the letters of a master devil to an apprentice be like? What would he tell the novice tempter about the way human beings think? What “works” from the devil’s point of view? What “fails”?

My academic work at the time was very demanding: theology and philosophy with Latin texts primarily, plus a heavy regime of spiritual reading and many hours of prayer and meditation. But soon I was spending less time deciphering Latin texts and instead reading the letters of Screwtape to Wormwood.

Wormwood’s job was to gain the soul of an Englishman for “Our Father Below.” Screwtape’s job was to guide Wormwood’s work. Screwtape’s amusing letters taught me as much as anything I ever read about the way the devil operates to bring trouble to our lives.

I imagined that Screwtape would show his pupil how to tempt his human in serious, spectacular sins—lust, theft, murder, and the like. Not at all. Screwtape thought pride and independence were more promising defects. He urged Wormwood to strive to make the man feel self-satisfied and complacent. Humans, he thought, were closer to the kingdom of darkness when they felt good about themselves than when they were restless and unfulfilled. The goal was to make them feel that they didn’t have to serve or follow anyone, that they

didn't have to be under anyone's authority, and that they didn't have much to learn.

Screwtape assured his student that an egotistical and self-satisfied human will eventually mature into a full-fledged rebel against God.

It's hard to write and talk about the role of evil spirits in our lives; harder still to sort out the specific details of demonic activity in my own life or anyone else's. The devil's work is usually very subtle, a gossamer web of Screwtape-like thoughts and desires and inclinations that exploit our defects and drain our strengths. We can stumble into evil while pursuing the good. We can be undone chasing worthy goals and taking pride in legitimate accomplishments. We can stare at the mixed motives that lie behind almost everything we do and be genuinely unable to disentangle the work of the evil one from the corruption of the world, the rebelliousness of the flesh, and the darkness of our own sinful hearts.

The devil exists; I know he does. He is at work in your life and mine. Scripture assures us that he is, and a little reflection will show you how he is at work. Yet not everything that goes wrong is caused by Satan. Seeing devils everywhere can be as great an impediment to holiness as anything else.

Satan makes use of this ambiguity as well. As Lewis points out elsewhere in his writings, the devil

disguises his presence in two ways: by blinding us to his work, and by inducing us to see it everywhere.

Here I will share some things I learned about Satan's work in the lives of mature Christians. I hope to give you some tools for discernment and some weapons for the fight.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Satan's work in our lives can be compared to a jazz ensemble taking turns playing variations on a theme. You've probably heard it or even seen it. The group will lay down a basic theme and rhythm; then each musician will come forward and play an individual improvisation. The saxophone, drums, the clarinet, bass—all sound different and are played by musicians of different talents and temperaments. But the underlying theme is the same throughout the piece.

Most of the troubles in our lives are variations on a theme. Their particular manifestations are unique, unusual, opportunistic. But the underlying trouble is the same. The basic lie from the evil one is the same lie that the serpent whispered into the ear of Eve: God's warning doesn't really apply to you. You are special. You are a better judge than he is of what is good for you.

"You shall be like gods" (Genesis 3:5), Satan said. The first man and woman liked this idea; it was a lie, but they fell for it. When they decided to eat the

forbidden fruit, they made a fateful decision to strive to be like God himself. This is the Bible's way of describing a fundamental flaw in our human natures.

Sin is a decision to put oneself above and apart from God. Our spirits are receptive to such opportunities. We like it. Every temptation is a variation on the theme, "It would be a good idea to be like God."

Our temptations usually cluster around our natural dispositions. Are you task-oriented, energetic? You'll see in yourself an inclination to impatience. Then you'll find opportunities to become angry, frustrated, and resentful.

Are you clear-sighted, realistic, practical? You may well become prone to discouragement as you plainly discern the difficult realities of life. Discouragement can become depression; depression can feed on self-pity.

Proud of your gifts and accomplishments? You find endless opportunities to be complacent, self-satisfied, disdainful of others, independent-minded.

In the 1930s, while Europe was descending into the nightmare of World War II, the *London Times* asked prominent Englishmen to answer the question, "What is wrong with the world?" The answers weren't much different from what a survey of eminent people would say today. The professors, politicians, journalists, physicians, and businessmen of the time wrote little essays pointing the finger of blame at poverty, capitalism,

socialism, greed, ignorance, militarism, the arms race, fear, superstition, and all the other ills we deplore so much.

One reply stood out. It was that of G. K. Chesterton, the noted Catholic writer. To the question, "What is wrong with the world?" Chesterton responded with two words. "I am," he said.¹

And of course he was right. If I could be the person God wants me to be, the world would be a better place. It would be better if *you* were the person God wants *you* to be. The problem with the world is that neither of us is the person God wants us to be—and neither is anyone else. If we are looking for the fundamental problem with the human race, we need to look no further than the pride in our own hearts.

I have struggled through my life with "pride of life," being proud of what I could accomplish, undertaking a challenge. This was dramatically illustrated twelve years ago when I was skiing in Colorado. I took the ski lift up to the highest mountain run. As I looked down the slope, I noticed a group of skiers going very carefully and slowly down the steep slope. I was feeling confident, and so I started down at a brisk pace. As I whisked by them, I reflected that my skiing would impress them.

I reached the group quickly, did a sharp christie and started to pass them. At that point, my right ski

caught on something, and I tumbled head over heels into the snow. There I lay, covered with snow, as they slowly passed by me. Later, I reflected on the Bible proverb "Pride comes before the fall" (Proverbs 16:18). I repented, and have recalled that verse many times when I had the thought that other people would be impressed by something I was going to do.

THE HAZARDS OF WORKING FOR GOD

Screwtape and his evil assistants are especially busy when we experience spiritual renewal or become involved in significant service to others. This seems counterintuitive. A time of renewal is supposed to be an occasion when we move away from Satan's snares, not fall into them. The same is true of service. When we get involved in a ministry of service in our parish or community, we are advancing God's cause, not the devil's. Yet the advice of spiritual masters throughout the ages is clear and consistent. Times of spiritual change seem to be times to take special precautions against the enemy. The risk is that we are prone to believe that God is behind whatever lands in our minds. At a time of spiritual change, evil spiritual forces can start their work along with virtuous ones. Another stream can start flowing alongside the stream of grace, a stream that says, "I know better," or "That's not for me," or "I'm not like other people." This stream can muddy the pure

waters of God's grace and turn our spiritual interests to destructive courses.

These attitudes can have destructive consequences when we are working together with other Christians to accomplish something for God. The primal temptation to declare "I know better" presents itself in Christian ministry as it does in any other organization involving human beings. But here normal human disagreements and differences in approach can quickly escalate into battles over who is more faithful to God. "I know better" gets expressed as "I know what God wants." Anyone who disagrees with me is thwarting the will of God himself.

If the stream that says, "I know better," is flowing strongly, we can find ourselves swiftly dismissing the spiritual ideas and commitments of other people.

"That's just an erroneous interpretation of Scripture. I don't need to believe that."

"Those people are heretics."

"That was for ignorant people two thousand years ago, recently baptized pagans. It doesn't apply to our modern culture."

"They don't respect the pope."

"That's just a teaching of the church. Human beings made it, not God."

"That's legalism."

“People who really know the Lord don’t have to listen to a lot of teaching from others.

“They know from within. Doesn’t Scripture say that they will no longer need men to teach them, that God himself will shepherd and teach them?”

Remember the teaching of Genesis: Adam and Eve were not born with original sin. They walked with God in the garden. They saw him face to face; they spoke with him; they knew him. Despite this incomparable gift, they were deceived and they fell. We start with original sin, darkened intellects, and weakened wills. How much easier is it for us to be wrong.

This idea should make us humble. We never need this humility more than when we are in the midst of a new and exciting spiritual experience.

SERVICE MEANS TROUBLE

The psalmist’s lament, “Troubles without number surround me,” (Psalm 40:12) applies especially to Christians deeply involved in ministries and service programs. The danger is especially pronounced when people get wrongly placed in leadership roles. Students of management talk about “the Peter Principle.” This says simply that in an organization you rise to the level of your incompetence. In other words, if you are doing a good job in your company or business, you’ll get promoted until you get a job that you can’t do well.