

Three Ways We ‘Screwtape’ Our Families

[The Screwtape Letters](#) by C.S. Lewis is quite possibly one of the scariest books I’ve ever read.

Not that it’s at all “scary” in the typical sense of the word. In fact, although the collection of letters is written as though it were authored by a demon named Screwtape, it also happens to be sarcastic, ironic, insightful, and even a little funny. What makes it *scary* is that it revealed to me countless personal faults that I didn’t even know were there.

After reading it several times, I’m now pretty convinced that I serve as the humanoid embodiment of sewer sludge.

You too can experience this amazing feeling – just read the book!

Or just read these three bullet-points from the first chapter (in which the demon, Screwtape, details for his fellow-tempters how to ruin a man’s family life).

Method 1: Keep his mind on his inner self.

Apparently, Screwtape wants you to make your religious life a lot harder than it has to be. Like a kid who fails Algebra 1 because he spent all his time studying astrophysics, he wants you to attempt incredible works of religious contemplation whilst failing in your everyday religious basics.

“Keep his mind off the most elementary duties by directing it to the most advanced and spiritual ones,” says Screwtape.

Furthermore, Screwtape advises his fellow-demons to, “...bring [the patient] to a condition in which he can practice self-examination for an hour without discovering any of those facts about himself that would be perfectly clear to anyone who has ever lived in the same house with him or worked in the same office.”

In other words, as long as you’re so busy doing penance for forgetting your morning prayers, you’ll never notice the fact that you picked a fight with your spouse that same morning.

Slick.

Method 2: Make him stew on the tiniest irritations from others.

Okay, this one really doesn't need much explanation.

You know that *one* person and the way that they [insert normal human action such as chewing, snoring, sneezing, breathing, driving, etc.] that just makes you want to shank them with an egg beater?

Yeah, that person.

Well, Screwtape (or his boss, the Devil) loves to expound upon your irritation with that person, and so tries to stave off, for as long as possible, the moment when you actually tell them they're annoying you. You never do end up telling them because they **MUST** know already. They **HAVE** to know this – it's so obvious! There is **NO WAY** a human could do this annoying thing and **NOT** realize that it's making you want to blast them off to a neighboring galaxy.

"And, of course," laughs Screwtape, "never let him suspect that he has tones and looks that similarly annoy [others]."

Method 3: Play the double standard game.

Screwtape comments, "In civilized life domestic hatred usually expresses itself by saying things which would appear quite harmless on paper (the *words* are not offensive) but in such a voice, or at such a moment, that they are not far short of a blow to the face."

Unfortunately, I am my own prime example for this particular pitfall. I didn't even realize how good I am at this one until I read *the Screwtape Letters* for the first time and realized the whole sewer-sludge thing.

Here's how it worked: As a nine-year-old, I would do some irritating thing (usually aimed at my older sister). She, being a twelve-year-old hormone geyser, would instantly grow red in the face and start yelling at her annoying little twerp of a sister. I, however, would continue to maintain a stoic calmness as I continued to do my annoying thing and (in between her yells) throw little daggers of carefully phrased insults. She would then blow up and hit me, push me down, or

upend a nearby table. Mom would then show up on-scene, and my battle was won.

You see, I had the physical evidence of a slap, a push, or the remnants of the table, while my sister had nothing but my own words which, delivered by anyone but myself in the moment I said them, sounded completely harmless.

Victory!

I was such a little snot.

As explained by Screwtape, the Devil has a multitude of subtle ways to make you hate and oppress those you live with, without you ever realizing what you're doing. The fact is, no matter how hard you think your family life is, you yourself are a contributing factor to that domestic misery – both internally and externally.

What would happen if we all practiced a little self-awareness? If we each took on a little personal responsibility for our domestic problems, my guess is demons like Screwtape wouldn't stand a chance.

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