

What the Devil Would Like to Whisper in Your Ear During the Pandemic

How would a senior devil tell you to handle the current situation of the coronavirus pandemic?

Based on the famous book *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis, where senior devil Screwtape advises a junior devil how to best tempt a human and steer him away from “the enemy,” which is what he calls God, we dive into the dark side of life’s current narrative to shed light on the enemy’s tactics.

The first piece of advice is easy to follow: Worry as much as you can. Fill your mind with reports of how the COVID-19 virus is crippling economies and rapidly taking lives. When you’ve fed your anxiety with daunting statistics, move on to the personal stories of loss. Make sure not to read it to gain compassion, or to pray for those who lost a loved one. Keep reading until this compassion is overtaken by a sense of hopelessness.

Screwtape says, “There is nothing like suspense and anxiety for barricading a human’s mind against the ‘enemy.’ [God] wants men to be concerned with what they do; our business is to keep them thinking about what will happen to them.”

For maximum effect, replace any sermons about faith with endless news cycles, and replace time in the Word with time in the newspaper. An added benefit: no scriptures also means no unhelpful reminders not to worry, like Philippians 4:6-7, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with gratitude, make your requests known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will protect your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

Screwtape explains, "It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds: in reality, our best work is done by keeping things out." According to this senior demon, the worst thing you could do is meditate on passages that describe the character of God—like 2 Thessalonians 3:3, "But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one."

To continue, Screwtape advises that instead of remembering when God came through for you, make a mental list of past disappointments, regrets and tragedies you've experienced. With this list from the past, you're ready to tackle the future. Avoid any verses like Jeremiah 29:11 that might convince you the future is filled with goodness. Also steer clear of people who tell you how God restored their lives, or how He provided everything they needed. That only leads to a troublesome thing called hope, which is much more contagious than the coronavirus. To prevent this hope-virus from infecting your mind and spreading to those around you, apply this powerful antidote: Believe that you're alone, that God doesn't care and that all your darkly stained "what if" scenarios will come true.

Gary S. Selby says, "Screwtape would urge us to avoid the simple pleasures and beauties all around us." After all, "It's the sensual bursts of pleasure that are the problem, distracting us as they do from our full plate of anxieties."

You might have heard people say that this quarantine serves as a Sabbath: an opportunity to rest and spend time with God. They say the temporary decrease of distractions in the form of overconsumption, materialism and constant busyness help you focus on what truly matters.

Screwtape would tell you not to listen to such nonsense. Even with social events postponed, stores closed and work hours reduced, you can still find ways to stay busy. Netflix binge, online shop, watch porn, mindlessly scroll through Instagram,

participate in heated Facebook discussions: There's plenty of opportunity to occupy your mind.

The goal is to fill your days with noise because noise "defends us from silly qualms, despairing scruples and impossible desires." According to Selby's explanation of *The Screwtape Letters*, "If time passes and you didn't even notice, you're doing it right."

Now lastly, some relational tips. You obviously don't want the result of this quarantine to be a deeper connection with your family, an improved marriage and countless precious memories with your children. Sure, you could call a friend and have a long, inspiring conversation or write an encouraging note to a sick coworker. But it's infinitely more effective to ignore the needs of your and other people's hearts in this turbulent time and kick "social distancing" into high gear.

"Whoever the person is you're stuck with, obsess over his or her most irritating behavior... Remark frequently to yourself that you would never do such things and speculate on their possible motivations," writes Selby. "Don't, under any circumstances, think about the fears and insecurities that might have brought the other person to this moment in time."

Whether it's an imperfectly loaded dishwasher or a stray sock, any tiny annoyance can escalate to a great conflict if you add enough frustration and anxiety to the mix.

However, if you are one of those stubborn "enemy followers," you might refuse to listen to Screwtape's advice. Exposure to the way and wisdom of the enemy, also called the Prince of Peace, demolishes the most clever tactics of Screwtape and his crew.

"We should acknowledge our fear, ask God for help, and then to pray as Christ taught us, 'Thy will be done,'" writes Selby. "When we do that, an amazing thing begins to happen. The power that fear holds over us, if not eliminated, is at least

diminished and we find the strength to carry on.” {eoa}

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