

## TEMPTING ADVICE

Scripture: Genesis 3:1-13

### Introduction

One of my favorite books by C. S. Lewis is called *The Screwtape Letters*. Screwtape is like a department head or under-secretary in the devil's hierarchy of tempter's, or should I say lower-archy. *The Screwtape Letters* purport to give Screwtape's advice to his nephew Wormwood on how to tempt people—how to divert them from a relationship to God and from the life God wants them to have. In a backward way, C. S. Lewis uses these letters to tell us something about how to avoid temptation and how to nurture a relationship to God.

For today's sermon I have written my own new Screwtape Letter based on the story we just heard in Genesis 3. I call it "Tempting Advice."

### Letter

From: Screwtape, Under-secretary of infernal affairs

To: My dear Nephew Wormwood

Greetings.

Your letter came as a great surprise. It has been a long time since I heard from you. I was beginning to think you had forgotten your old uncle Screwtape, especially after all the help I have given you. You have come a long way down in the organization, Wormwood, but you will never reach bottom if you forget those who helped you along the way.

Now to your question. You asked about my greatest temptation. Naturally, many come to mind. Your uncle has had a fairly illustrious career, if I say so myself. But the greatest temptation—that would have to be the first one.

It was a difficult situation: two innocent people living happily together in a garden that God created to provide them with everything they need. Really, you young tempters have it so easy. Centuries of greed, exploitation, and violence have given you so much to work with. But at the beginning we had nothing to work with. Everything was good: happy marriage, clean environment, plenty of food, fulfilling work. It was disgusting.

A lesser tempter might have given up, but I saw possibilities. You see, Wormwood, even good things can be twisted if you know how to do it. That is the key to temptation. Almost nothing is evil in itself. It becomes evil only when it is twisted from its intended purpose.

Take sex, for example. Sex might have been a disaster for us. God gave it tremendous power for drawing people together and uniting them in a family where children would grow up in an environment of love and commitment. Sex could have been awful for us. To be useful, sex had to be twisted. We did it by separating sex from its most important component: commitment.

Once we separated sex from commitment, we produced one of our greatest emotional triumphs: jealousy. With jealousy we created many other delightful experiences: suspicion, mistrust, fear, anger, resentment, and vengeance. It was delightful. Really, we have done such a good job with sex hardly anyone associates it with something holy.

Yes, Wormwood, anything good can be twisted into something bad, if you know how to do it. That is what I did at the first temptation. In the garden of Eden the only thing had I to work with was freedom. Now freedom is another of those nauseatingly good things that God concocted. Imagine giving those funny little human beings a freewill. What was God thinking? Didn't God know that humans could use their freedom to reject God just as easily as to love God?

That gave me my opening. I approached the woman first. No particular reason. The man proved just as gullible. The key was to approach them one at a time. People are much less likely to do something stupid if they have to talk it over with someone else first.

I approached the woman and said, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" Of course I knew that was not true. So did the woman. Immediately she answered, "What are you talking about? We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden." Suddenly the woman was defending God. You may think that is a bad thing for us, when a human being starts defending God. But it isn't. For in the very act of defending God the woman discovered that God can be questioned. She realizes, perhaps for the first time, that her freedom to enjoy God is also a freedom to put herself over God—to become God's judge.

I did not even need to mention the forbidden fruit. The woman brought it up herself. She said, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, except for this one tree..."

Isn't it delightful how the human mind works? You put two children in a room full of toys, and the only toy they want is the one held by the other child. God had given the woman a world full of fruit to enjoy, but the one she could not stop thinking about was the one God prohibited.

Do you know why people are like that, Wormwood? I hope they are teaching you something in that school. People crave power. It irked her that God would restrict her freedom by prohibiting this one tree. I played on this by suggesting that God might be jealousy. I said to her, "Perhaps God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Actually, this was partly true. Half-truths are much better for deceiving people than complete lies. What I said was partly true. In a sense they would become like God. Eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil meant taking into their own hands the power to decide good and evil. Rather than listening to God, they would decide for themselves what is good and evil or right and wrong.

I never actually suggested eating the forbidden fruit. The woman thought of that on her own. We do not have the power to make people do evil. The decision must come from the people themselves. But I could see that already in her mind the woman was rationalizing the decision. She looked at the fruit and saw that it was good. Of course it was good. Everything God made

was good. The question was whether the humans would use the good things according to God's intended purpose.

The ending was delightful. The man and woman ate the fruit to become like God, and they ended up ashamed of being human. They hid from God in the bushes, like a snake. Having tried to rise above their humanness, they sank below it. Having tried to assert their freedom, they now scrambled to avoid responsibility. The man blamed the woman, and the woman blamed me. I can still hear her: "The devil made me do it."

Well, Wormwood, I hope you have learned something from this story. You will never succeed at creating evil. We do not have that power. We must take things that God created and use them for our purposes. Even something like food, so good and healthy in its own right, can become our tool if it becomes an obsession, if it becomes the focal point of a person's life. The same is true with work, recreation, sports; even family life can be twisted if it becomes the most important thing in a person's life—if it becomes their god.

I have always had great success with this approach. There was that one time when it did not seem to work. I still have not figured out why. We offered that guy from Nazareth everything: wealth, power, prestige—everything. But he turned it all down so he could go out and let himself be nailed to a cross. I just could not understand. Sometimes I think that failure may come back to haunt us.

But let us think of happier things. The world is still full of gullible people, just like Adam and Eve. There are limitless possibilities for temptation, Wormwood, so go for it. You have nothing to lose but your soul.

- Ken Onstot  
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