

Read any newspaper or watch a news bulletin and you will know the reality of this world – evil exists. So, should we just accept it – is that how life is? Or is there anything we can do to make a difference? Well, in his letter to the Romans, Paul answers that very question:

*“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”* Rom 12:21

How is that possible? I don't know if you've ever noticed, but if you add one letter to the word 'God' you get 'good'. The word gospel translates as good news. At the same time, if you add one letter to the word 'evil' you get 'devil'. The claim of the New Testament is that just as behind goodness lies God, behind evil in the world lies the devil – or the enemy or Satan or the evil one – the names are fully interchangeable.

Our Old Testament reading of Adam, Eve and the devil in the guise of the serpent reveals the devil's tactics – lies, creating doubt, distraction, deception and the one I'm going to concentrate on today – temptation.

Let's think about the gospel story we have just heard – the story of Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness. It is often said that temptation is strongest when you are at your weakest but maybe we can see in this story that Jesus' growing physical hunger is in contrast to a spiritual hunger within him which is more than satisfied by Jesus remembering God's blessing on him at his baptism when he is tested by the devil.

*Very well, whispers the voice in Jesus' head if you really are God's son, surely he can't want you to go hungry when you have the power to get the food yourself? Surely you want people to see who you are? Why not do something really spectacular? You can do it if you are God's son!*

The enticing whispers that would have echoed around Jesus' head were designed to distract him from his central vocation; to stop him carrying out God's work here on earth; to break the bond between him and God; to sever, if you like, the umbilical cord of love that united them as one.

We are unlikely to be tempted in exactly the same way as Jesus but the truth is we will be tempted at some time; St Paul makes reference to *when* you are tempted, not *if* you are tempted.

Temptation always begins with a thought and it is how we process that thought which establishes how we respond and deal with the temptation.

Here's a little scenario I found myself playing out recently. It's late at night and I can't get to sleep and a thought pops into my head...I'm hungry.

A little voice whispers in my ear – *there's a piece of that lovely chocolate cake in the fridge*

And in my other ear I hear – *you don't need that, you've already had two slices this evening*

*Go ahead – you know you want to; you can't get to sleep because you're hungry*

*If you eat that it will go straight to your waist*

*It's either going to your waist or it will go to waste*

And then the killer punch

*It's a crime to let food go to waste when there's so much starvation in the world*

And if I give in to temptation once; I will almost certainly do so again when a similar situation arises. Most people who smoke don't actually want to smoke, it just becomes a habit they can't break. Those who struggle with internet pornography regularly beat themselves up and are really really sorry....until the next time they hear that little voice saying *just this one last time*.

Or the serial dieter who gets weighed after two weeks hard grind and says *wow! I've lost six pounds, that's a cause for celebration....*and having eaten two slices during the evening remembers late at night there's a piece of that lovely chocolate cake in the fridge.... I think you get the point.

If you think my chocolate cake scenario didn't strike true then let me show you this short clip. It's taken from the 2015 Channel 4 documentary series, "The secret life of five year olds". The series looks at what life is like through the eyes of twelve, five year olds who have been brought together for one week. **CLIP**

Immediately after the boys deny outright that they have eaten any cake and spin a whole web of lies to try to convince themselves as well as the teachers that they are telling the truth.

The same is true for everyone. You start by allowing yourself the apparent luxury of doing something small which you know you shouldn't but which you think doesn't matter; with repetition it becomes a habit until eventually you stop thinking it's wrong at all. If the question is raised, you are ready with rationalizations: everyone does it; there's no harm in this; there's no good in being a killjoy.

And that in a nutshell is what the devil is all about: using any means: lies, distortion, distraction, deception, anything to corrupt what is good, not only in this world but also in us.

And yet, there are two pieces of good news:

1. It has been scientifically proven by neurological research that the temptation thought process lasts between 2 and 7 minutes. What that means is if we can find a way of not responding, not giving in to that temptation for just 7 minutes – and maybe even less than 7 minutes – we will have defeated the enemy siren call.

7 minutes, why I can listen to Jon droning on for double that time without any problem so surely I can hold out for just seven minutes when temptation calls!

Let's go back to the my chocolate cake scenario: If I just think *no I don't want the cake, no I don't need the cake, no eating the cake is wrong, eating cake will break my diet.....* what am I doing?

All I'm doing is constantly reminding myself about cake. By resisting with a 'no' I'm actually reinforcing the temptation. Much better is to ignore the temptation by switching my mind to other good thoughts. You defeat bad thoughts by thinking of something better. You overcome evil with good and this is where the second piece of good news comes in.

2. The bible contains a get out of jail free card and you don't even have to wait until you land on the community chest space to get it. Jesus didn't respond to the devil by continually saying no, or by attempting to argue with him which would merely have reinforced the temptation as I mentioned earlier. No he quoted scripture back to the devil.

By doing so Jesus was switching his thoughts to the most precious and good thing he knew – his Father God. Jesus immediately quoted scripture and the moment he did so, the devil was in trouble and went away.

Now you might think that it's alright for Jesus; he knew his scriptures inside out, but you don't need to know huge amounts of scripture off by heart. I certainly didn't when I first became a Christian and truth be told, I still have difficulty today, but what I have learnt to do is remember two very small pieces of scripture. And they can't get much shorter than this:

*“Jesus wept”*. John 11.35

It reminds me that Jesus wept tears just as I have at times in my life but it also reminds me of the good news immediately after when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. Good overcomes evil.

The second is just one word longer:

*“God is love”*. 1 John 4

It reminds me of why I am a Christian, it reminds me why I am talking to you today; that love is at the heart of all relationships. Good overcomes evil.

Being focussed on these two scripture passages really does make time fly; seven minutes of temptation....easy peasy....Good overcomes evil..... at least, until the next chocolate cake appears.

Amen