

Lent 1, 2017 MATTHEW 4:1-11 Rationalise or Resist?

A young Christian couple made a New Year's resolution to spend less money during the coming year, so they could save up for a new car.

But one day, the wife was out shopping, and found the dress of her dreams. It cost way too much – but she just had to have it.

When she showed her husband he said, “How could you do that? We're supposed to be saving money!”

She replied – “The devil made me do it”

“Why didn't you say ‘get behind me Satan’, like Jesus did?” said the husband

“Well, I did!” she exclaimed, “But he said the dress looked amazing from the back....”

You've all heard the expression “The devil made me do it!” It's a bit of a cop out, isn't it? People say it to pass the buck, to shrug off the responsibility for giving in to temptation.

What exactly IS temptation? Essentially, it is the strong urge or desire to do something we feel we shouldn't do. It is the urge to do something that is contrary to our values.

Our values can be different, depending on what culture we are born in, and how we are brought up within that culture. For instance, the Sawi tribe in New Guinea consider treachery and betrayal to be virtues. Children are brought up to see these as attributes a something to aspire to! We, on the other hand, would see treachery and betrayal as negative values, and would teach our children NOT to be like that.

In Australia, as in all Western countries, the values of our culture find their basis in the Ten Commandments. And if we were to go back as recently as the 1950's, most of those commandments were reflected in the laws of our culture.

However, our culture is increasingly questioning those values. Where once, ‘you shall do no murder’ meant you did not intentionally kill another human being, now those values are being questioned in relation to abortion and euthanasia. Where once ‘you shall not commit adultery’ meant marriage was viewed as a lifelong, sacred commitment, now a marriage can be dissolved as soon as one partner tires of the other. Where once blasphemy was viewed as offensive - and in some countries a punishable by law - these days no one bats an eyelid.

The changing of values has led to the changing of laws. So over the decades, Sunday trading has emerged. The Sabbath is no longer observed. Adultery and divorce have become commonplace, with our laws providing the ability to dissolve a marriage at will. Both parties no longer even have to consent, provided they been separated for the prescribed length of time.

Young families experience this problem in microcosm. Family values come under constant pressure from the media, schools, the community, and the children's peers.

I remember when our first two children started school, we attempted to steer them away from sweets and junk food. The children took healthy food to school for recess and lunch. But by the time we got to children three and four, the school canteens and supermarkets pushed an array of convenient, tasty snacks and our children were tucking into chips and bars like all their friends! Thankfully there is a swing back to healthy tucker in some schools now, but the market for rubbish food in school lunchboxes is still huge. Even families can find their values squeezed.

In a changing culture, how do we hold on to our Christian values, and how are we to deal with the temptation to abandon them when the pressure is on?

As Christians, if we are serious about our faith, our values must continue to be informed by the Scriptures. We need to take the Ten Commandments seriously - as Jesus did.

But in our increasingly secular culture, that is not easy. I really feel for Christian young people today. The Scriptures hold that marriage is sacred; that sex is beautiful, but is something that should be reserved for marriage.

How is a young person to remain chaste when EVERYTHING in our culture tells them that sex outside of marriage is the norm and that intimate relationships are disposable?

Back in the 50s, people married in their late teens and early 20s. Now, people generally don't marry till their late 20s or 30s. Kids are maturing sexually in their mid teens. That's a long time to expect a young man or woman to remain a virgin! It's a problem, isn't it?

And that's only one of many temptations we face in our culture. How do we do when it comes to coveting, for instance? That's the desire to want something that belongs to someone else. Advertising media mercilessly exploits our covetousness in order to sell their wares.

Jay and I have family in both Melbourne and Brisbane that are quite well off. When we visit, we are spoilt rotten – it's very nice. Their homes and lifestyles are the stuff of vogue magazine. But it's hard not to become just a little desirous of such luxury - or covetous, which is probably a more honest description.

How do we do when it comes to having no other gods in our life? That means making God (with a capital G) our number one priority in life –above family, above friends, above leisure – above anything else.

How do we do with taking God's name in vain? One of the most common expressions in use today is "Oh My God"? or OMG for short?

How do we do with keeping one day in seven as set apart for God?

Jesus summarised the Ten Commandments into two: You shall love God with all your heart, mind, soul & strength; and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

How do we go with temptation?

The Christian life is a call to great joy and fulfilment, but it is also a call to constant struggle - struggle with temptation – but it does not have to be a losing battle.

In our reading this morning, Jesus gives us some clues about overcoming temptation. If we look at his experience in the wilderness, we can see something of how the devil operated, and how Jesus responded.

At Mainly Music yesterday one of our little guys was playing with something his mum didn't want him to have. She attempted to take it away from him and the child started howling. She knew her boy had a fondness for the little iced cakes we have at MM, so she grabbed one off the table and waved it under his nose. He reached for the cake, losing interest in the toy altogether.

Oddly enough, that's exactly how the devil tempts us. The lure of wealth or fame or pleasure distracts us and lets him take from our hearts our trust in God.

Our physical needs and desires shout loudly. If we are not alert to the devil's schemes, we can very easily find that we are diverted from God, and we end up focussing on things that draw us away from him.

How did Jesus combat the devil? He had two simple strategies.

The first was recognising the temptation for what it was! Jesus was human as well as divine. After fasting for 40 days, he would have been weak and hungry. The devil targeted Jesus' physical weakness, and suggested he use his divine power to turn stones into bread to feed himself.

Now at this point, Jesus could have rationalised, and thought to himself, "The Father has certainly given me the power to do this if I want to. Surely he would want me to get my strength back so I can get on with what he has called me to do...." Jesus could have talked himself out of seeing this as a temptation at all – but he didn't. He **recognised** the devil's attempt to get him to trust in himself and his own judgement, rather than trusting in God. He was able to recognise this as temptation, because he knew the Scriptures, and he knew his Father.

The second strategy was to resist. To say no. The devil, obviously knowing the important part the scriptures played in Jesus life, misquoted them to him, in an attempt to divert him from God's plan – but Jesus knew the scriptures well enough to interpret them correctly, and to retaliate. Jesus didn't just defend himself, he went on the offensive. He attacked. "Get behind me, Satan! It is written...." Too often we are passive. We give in without a fight.

James 4:7 tells us, “Submit yourselves to God; resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

These two simple strategies will ensure our own victory when we are tempted. We simply need to **recognise temptation** for what it is & then **resist it**. When we engage in the battle rather than surrendering, the power of God within us comes into play, and we find we have the strength to overcome any temptation.

Paul tells us 1 Corinthians 10:13

“No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

So be encouraged – we can win this fight! Temptation itself is not sin. It only becomes sin when we give in to it. We can overcome temptation in God’s strength. Our part is to give God the tools to use when those temptations come upon us: Determine to focus on God and be faithful to him. Make sure we KNOW the scriptures. And then aggressively use them to dispatch the devil when he slides up beside us.

There is never any excuse to say “the devil made me do it!” Instead, we should exclaim, “I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me.”

Let’s pray