

26 The fight against sin - Coping with temptation

Jesus gave a different answer to each temptation, but they all came from a common source. This suggests that Jesus' prior study had helped prepare him to cope with each of these temptations when it came. Matthew 4:1-11

The record of the temptation of Jesus suggests that he confronted in advance some of the major temptations which would face him during his ministry. Our position is different from his in that we do not possess the gifts of the spirit as Jesus did, and we therefore do not face all the same temptations.

The lesson of Jesus' temptation is nevertheless well taken. Hold your finger an inch in front of your eye. It will loom very large, but you will not see it clearly. It is out of focus because it is too close. Temptations are a bit like that. If we never think about something before it happens, we will find it hard to think clearly in assessing the rights and wrongs when we are intimately involved in a situation.

Take note

What is the right thing to do if you find a £20 note in the street?

- Keep it?
- Take it to a lost property office or the police station?
- If your school is collecting money to help with the effects of a natural disaster somewhere, could you put the money towards that?
- Could you spend it to buy flowers for your mum?
- If a friend is badly in need of money, could you give them the £20 to help them out of their problem?
- If you are badly in need of money, could you keep it to help yourself out of your problem?

Help in the Bible

Can you find Bible passages which give guidance on practical situations such as:

- What to do when you find money in the street.
- What to do when you have an opportunity to cheat in an exam.
- What to do when the conversation turns crude.
- What to do when offered illegal drugs.
- What to do when Jesus is ridiculed.

Try to think of your own examples, but if you need some help, you could look up these passages and think which situations they apply to.

Exodus 22:7; Judges 13:4; Psalm 36:1-4; Proverbs 6:30-31; Proverbs 31:6; Isaiah 5:11,22, 56:12; Luke 22:59-62; Ephesians 4:22; Ephesians 4:29, 5:3-4; Colossians 3:8

How can you avoid temptation?

We may decide in our minds what is best for us to do, but our bodies have powerful appetites and desires which may pull in the opposite direction. It is sometimes possible to avoid the situations in which the temptations to fulfil such appetites arise.

- The temptation to get drunk.
- The temptation to neglect Bible reading.
- The temptation to misbehave sexually.
- The temptation to be unkind to people.
- The temptation to be unhelpful at home.

Again, you may find these passages helpful:

Genesis 39:7-10; Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Psalm 19:11; Proverbs 5:1-8, 6:23-29; Proverbs 19:17; Isaiah 5:11,22, 56:11-12; Isaiah 58:7:10; Hosea 4:6; 1 Corinthians 6:15-19; 1 Timothy 4:5,8; James 1:25.

Fill the vacuum

The difficulty is that however perceptive or even cynical we may be about other people's motives, however hard to convince, we tend to be able to deceive ourselves very easily. No-one else will be taken in, but we alone will be convinced of the uprightness of our motives. If only we could step back and take a more detached look, we should be able to see how ridiculous is our stance. But that is not possible. The next best thing is to think about the commandments, and to think through how they apply in everyday situations, so that we know what to do when the time comes. Knowing what to do is the first part of dealing with temptation.

A man was a compulsive gambler. He squandered all his wages on betting, occasionally winning but more often losing, and his family went hungry. He got into debt, believing that a big win was just around the corner, and then he could give up gambling for ever. Of course, it never came. When the man met the Gospel and was converted, he came to realise that gambling was evil, that it was based upon a love of money, a greedy desire to be rich and a trust in wealth rather than in God. He decided never to bet again. He made the conscious decision to abandon that part of his past life. But gambling was an addiction for him, and it was no easy matter to give it up.

(Read Romans 7:15-24. Paul describes the same problem. His head decided upon one course of action, but his body seemed almost to have a mind of its own as its desires and appetites dragged him towards a totally different course. There was an internal conflict between the part of him which wanted to do God's will, and the part which wanted to fulfil his own desires. Anyone who has ever tried to follow a slimming diet or give up a bad habit is all too familiar with the syndrome.)

The reformed gambler was determined not to get caught up again in the spiral of hope, disappointment and debt from which he had escaped, but his addiction did not let go easily. He missed the excitement of the gambling den, and he decided to go to the betting shop just to soak in the atmosphere and enjoy the spectacle of the races on the monitors. He would not place a bet. At least, he did not intend to. But of course,

he did. Once he was over the threshold, there was little doubt that he would fall. The excitement seized him, a friend tipped him off about a 'dead cert', and the bet was placed almost before he knew what he was doing. The horse came second, a sure sign that the tip had not been entirely worthless. He had come so close to winning a fortune that it seemed natural to place just one more bet, because the next one was almost certain to win; or the next one; or the one after that ... A wise old man once said that you should not hang around at the door of your secret sin.

Jesus told a parable (Matthew 12:43-45) about a man out of whom a demon was cast. The man remained empty so that the demon was able to return bringing with it seven other demons more virulent than itself. The man was worse off in the end than at the beginning. Our story about the gambler is another version of this same parable. After his conversion, he did not fill his life with wholesome activities. Instead, he returned to his old haunts. He was an inevitable victim to his addiction. A better way for him to tackle his problem would have been for him to spend his spare time visiting someone who was sick or lonely instead of visiting the place of his temptation.

There is also the example of the bad apple. One bad apple in a box of fruit can quickly spread disease through the whole box. Our man would have been better to have sought the company of people who would bring out the best in him rather than his old gambling mates who would pull him down. The worst possible way to cope with temptation is to place yourself in the most dangerous environment.

A life from which self destructive influences have been driven is prey to further and even more damaging influences if nothing replaces the originals.

What activities and influences will be helpful?



Inevitably, we all yield to temptation. All is not then lost. What should we do?

. Luke 15:18-22

What can you do to fill your life with good things?