

Introductory quotes

I can resist everything except temptation. Oscar Wilde.

Having no vices doesn't make you live longer, it just seems like it! 107 year old gave up smoking age 103 in order to live a long life and see the grand kids grow up. She is estimated to have consumed 1.3m cigarettes in life.

The trouble with sin is it can be enjoyable, at least the wanting it – it's not so much fun having the forbidden fruit and the after effects can be devastating. Giving in to temptation is to believe a lie, and the devil is the Father of Lies.

The caricature of sin, hell and the devil

The arts have portrayed the devil

in a variety of ways throughout history - pitchforks, horns, cloven hoofs, pointed tail or perhaps a little voice on our shoulder goading us to have another cream cake – naught but nice captured the nation's mood for a generation – it's all a bit of fun, quite comical to most of us now, not very believable – Halloween is just a chance for a laugh, harmless pranks for the kids.

Some people think of hell

as a place to indulge and party and at least their friends will be there. Heaven on the other hand constitutes sitting on a cloud playing a harp wearing a long white gown and having to give endless praise to the big man upstairs in the white beard; I wonder if we perpetuate the notion that Christianity is about losing out, having no sense of humour, having no enjoyment, whereas Satan – he represents naughtiness, indulgence, cheeky antics.

All these characterisations

of heaven hell and the devil are lies, falsehood, and unlike the fiction of the X-files this is a genuine conspiracy. The devil paints God and his kingdom as something less than we deserve and that there is more fun, more reward, more pleasure out there to be had than God is willing to allow us to share in. 'Join forces with me, in fact worship me,' says Beelzebub, 'and you too can be on a par with God and enjoy the knowledge of good and evil.'

We don't any longer speak of fire

and brimstone – we're too advanced too sophisticated too rational a civilisation. It's all rather mediaeval and primitive. We've thought our way out of that; the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution and the advances in science have propelled us out of subsistence in rural hamlets and into cosmopolitan life.

One might deny the portrayal

of the devil as a person, but who would deny that evil exists? We might want to argue that perpetrators of evil have some overwhelming uncontrollable psychotic tendency that is merely a chemical imbalance that can only be overcome with medication. That will be true in a few cases but mostly, our fallen world is such because each of us fails to trust God.

Surely the problem is religion?

Our society has no desire

for patriarchal ancient religions used to manipulate the masses and maintain the privilege of the ruling class and the priesthood. It dismantles every institution, questions all authority and places individual freedom as the ultimate guiding principle, its idol, its god. Feelings are the only moral

compass; relativism helps us steer clear of bigotry. Not only do politicians say things like 'we don't do God'; but we deny the concept of sin, relegating it to flavours of Magnum ice cream and explaining it away as an inherited predisposition, chemical imbalance, traumatic childhood or mental deficiency – anything but personal responsibility will do.

Yet despite our sense of sophistication

and post modernity, even though we live comfortably and safely here in the UK, we seem to be less and less free, and more and more fearful. When rampant individualism and the endless pursuit of happiness and distraction fail to deliver, the adrenalin high, the emotionally charged experience, the ultimate bucket list, holiday of a lifetime - these have to be raised to ever higher extremes.

Who we are is never enough

Whatever our current status

we are under massive pressure to be something other – younger, better-educated, thinner, fitter, wealthier, wittier. Who we are won't do, whereas striving will pay off and win admiration. That's the lie – our value is measured not in our adoption as sons and daughters of God but as economic units or in evolutionary terms, our function is to propagate the gene pool, to ensure the future survival of the race.

God is a cosmic spoilsport

Ever since Adam doubted,

or rather chose to believe a lie, mankind has kept forgetting the goodness of God. We have failed to trust God for our safety, our protection, our food, our health, our families. If we don't know God how will we recognise his handiwork, see His fingerprint on life, see glory with unveiled faces, discern with spirit-filled eyes, tell others of His wonders.

In Deuteronomy 26,

God is providing land, making crops grow, dwelling among His people, inhabiting the name 'the Lord your God', listening to the cries of the exiles, having compassion, rescuing from bondage, exercising power, guiding into safety. He still is today, that is doing these things, the present continuous, not a once upon a time fairy tale but active now. But, do you believe that, really believe that [pause] or do you feel the need for a Plan B – have a back-up in case God doesn't quite come through for you?

When we fail to trust God

and entertain immoral thoughts that creep into our consciousness, when we believe the devil instead of God, that is sin. Every time we sin we join the crowds in nailing Jesus to the cross, we added to his burden there at Calvary. In can't prevent thoughts entering our head but it's whether or not we allow them to settle. It's also true what comes into our head will be affected by our lifestyle.

To test God is like saying,

'Go on I dare you! You say you will protect me so I'm just going to do something reckless like throw myself off this temple and IF – there's that question again IF you are the protector, the shield the strong tower you claim to be then you'll have to catch me! The problem with this approach is that we don't get to question God, we don't examine God to see whether or not He's trustworthy. It is always we who are on trial not Him. Many people expect God to justify Himself – how can He allow suffering? If I were Him, ..., ah yes but we're not are we, we'd just like to be! At least we want to be the centre of the universe.

Job made the mistake

of insisting God justify Himself and explain just exactly why he was put through all his suffering. After 37 chapters of railing at God, the answer came back,

1Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm. He said: 2“Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? 3Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. 4“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand.

In other words, ‘when you can build a universe we’ll do coffee! Besides I’m God and you answer my questions, not the other way around.’

What then shall we say?

Shall we go on sinning that grace may abound?

The Father of lies casts doubt

on Jesus’ identity as the Son of God and urges Him to prove it. Here on top of the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus’ authority is questioned. Three times there’s the word, ‘if’ ... and at the cross this same question reappears ‘If you are the Son of God save yourself’.

Jesus was fully human

and after forty days of fasting would certainly have been enticed by the idea of some bread. He shared our humanity that we might partake of his divinity. Notice that smutty face first appeals to Jesus hunger – a very basic physical need we all share. Then, Jesus is encouraged to enjoy the glory and authority over all the kingdoms of the world – the lust for power is strong in many people. Finally, the Father of Lies attempts to use the very words of scripture – Jesus’ weapon of choice – and twists them.

When temptation bites,

Jesus is confident of three things - his own identity, the scriptures and the author and perfecter of life, the provider of every good thing. When temptation bites you – how do you handle it? This affects us all, but only the power of the Spirit working in us will have a lasting impact on our ability to resist.

We are at war,

there is a spiritual battle raging and Jesus demonstrates masterfully how to fight the good fight with the armour of God. The only offensive weapon in the armoury is the sword, which is the Word of God. We see Jesus using scripture to cut through the arguments put forward by the Father of Lies. Jesus responds to the taunts, with the confident phrases, ‘It is written’ and ‘It is said’.

When tempted

10:13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

We aren’t tempted beyond what we can bear. The trick is not to dwell on the negative, to give smutty face any air time, nor for that matter the misuse of scripture that we can’t or shouldn’t or mustn’t – rather remind ourselves that God has always wanted the very best life for us for us to fulfil all that He intended for us to live fully alive to flourish to use our gifts for His glory. When we focus

on God and give Him the glory the Spirit can use and mould and shape and change us from glory into glory as we become more like Jesus. And when we do fail Him, that's when not if – as Paul says,

¹⁵*I do not understand my own actions...*

For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Someone entered a church and saw the Ten Commandments written either side of the altar and was so excited because he read it as a promise – thou shalt not. One day there will be no more sin no more suffering no more death. Until that day let us consider how we might spur one another on to love and good deeds and let's refuse to give the Father of lies any air time. Amen.