

Sunday, February 27, 2022

Temptation and Evil

(Series: "Lord, Teach Us to Pray")

(Message Eight)

Scripture:

*⁹ "This, then, is how you should pray:
'Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread...
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."
(Matthew 6:9-13)*

Message:

The story is told of four men sharing their struggles in their small group.

The first said, "My biggest temptation is lust. I'm embarrassed to admit how much I look at pornography." The second guy said, "My struggle is gambling; I'm really tempted to sneak off to the casinos. I've lost a bundle of money." The third guy chimed in, "My temptation is alcohol. I've often had more to drink than I should have." The last man said, "Guys, I'm sorry to tell you this, but my greatest temptation is to gossip. And, if you'll excuse me, I need to post a few things on Facebook."

So often, this is what we think of when we think of temptation.

We have been studying the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Today we'll focus on the sixth and final petition, "*Do not bring us to the time of trial but rescue us from the evil one.*"

This petition (also) comes full of challenges:

First, the word often translated "temptation" can also be understood as "trial" (e.g., NRSV) and, although they are often used interchangeably, the subtle differences are significant. Either way, we wonder, "*Why would God be leading us into temptation or trials so that we have to ask him not to?*"

Second, most of the time we pray this petition, we are really thinking “*lead me away from temptation and deliver me from evil...*” (But that’s not what the text says, it says “us.”)

And then, like the previous petition, it is connected to the previous petition by the word “and.” So how is this petition linked to the previous petition(s)?

Meanwhile, **temptation** is fairly easy for us to understand – we all have **experienced** it. We’ve all been tempted. We’ve all yielded. We’ve all experienced the consequences. It is all part of our human - sinful - condition.

Temptation is the internal **luring** or wooing, often fed by others, by marketing, or by Satan himself, to say, think or **act** in a way(s) that is morally **wrong**, harms others, and is not **healthy** or helpful for us.

Sometimes temptation results in our doing something wrong (commission); sometimes temptation results in doing nothing at all when we should be doing something (omission). We are often tempted to overconsume (**gluttony**), to not care (**sloth**), to want more (**greed**), to be (inappropriately) affirmed (**lust**), to want what it not ours (**envy**), to blow up at one another (**anger**), and to act as if the world revolves around us (**pride**). These are known as the seven deadly sins because their consequences are disastrous.

We are tempted with seemingly minor infractions like breaking our diet with a double dip of ice cream to life-altering transgressions like engaging in an affair that destroys marriages and families. Every temptation begins in our **heart** and mind long before we **act** out on them.

The question is not “Will we be tempted?” The question is “How will we respond when the temptation comes?” – because it always does...and so we pray...

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION OR TRIAL...

So why would God lead us into a temptation that we need to ask him not to do it? And if there is a good reason for him to do so, then why would we pray that he doesn’t?

Apparently, some of Jesus’ early followers were asking similar questions, because James addresses it:

“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” (James 1:13)

The Psalmist reminds us, “*God leads us in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.*” (23:3b). God doesn’t lead us into temptation, he leads us into righteousness.

So what is going on here? Let’s look at a few different understandings...

First, Kenneth Bailey, a late 20th century middle eastern scholar who taught in Jerusalem and the Middle East his whole life, reminds us that when taking a long camel trip into the Middle Eastern deserts, it is helpful - mandatory, if you're new - to have a **guide**.

A guide knows how to reach the destination in the safest, most efficient way because without that information and guidance, the travelers will die.

Selecting the right **guide** must be done with great care. The traveler must completely trust that the guide knows where he or she is going and is capable of coping with any emergency encountered on the journey because their life is at stake. If the guide doesn't know the way, or gets lost, everyone dies!

As travelers, we think, "*Don't get us lost!*" and we mean, "*We don't know where we are going. If you get us lost, we all die. We have placed our complete **trust** in your leading.*" We're not thinking, "*We **don't** think we can **trust** you; we're nervous about your leadership; so, don't screw up.*" If that were the case, we never would have left the hotel room.

This petition in the Lord's Prayer expresses the confidence an earthly pilgrim places in their divine guide: "*Lead us. Don't get us lost; we trust you with our lives...as we face the challenges of life.*"

The journey of life requires the journeyer to affirm daily (and sometimes hour by hour or minute by minute), "*Lord, we trust you to guide us. We don't know the way; we trust you, and you alone, know the way we must go.*" This affirmation of the trusting traveler reflects the confidence of the community that prays this prayer.

Second, Joachim Jeremias, an early 20th century New Testament scholar, looks at this petition through language rather than culture by focusing again on the Aramaic behind the Greek of the New Testament.

The Greek, *eisphero*, is translated "**lead us**;" its Aramaic equivalent is *nisyon*. *Nisyon* has two shades of meaning. One is **causative** and the other **permissive**.

With the *causative* understanding, the petition would read, "*Do not **cause** us to go into temptation,*" i.e., do not lead us into temptation. James reminds us, God **doesn't** do this.

But with a *permissive* understanding, the petition would read, "*Do not **permit** us to go into temptations or trials,*" i.e., hold us back, keep us from them; **protect** us; lead us away from them!

On our faith journeys, we often turn aside toward temptations, get distracted by sin's enticements, and find ourselves dealing with trials, so Jesus teaches us to pray, "*Lord, hold us back, don't let us take the wrong path, guide us in paths of righteousness...*"

This view is underscored in Mark's account of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus says to Peter, "*Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.*" (**Mark 14:38**) Jeremias suggests this petition is a request for God's help in avoiding our **self-destructive** tendencies and easy acquiescence to temptations.

John Calvin writes: "*In brief, being conscious of our own weaknesses, we ask to be defended by God's protection, that we may have an impregnable position against all devices of Satan.*"

Third, Father Matta al-Miskin, a late 20th century monk from Egypt, suggests we go back to the story of Job for the appropriate context to this petition.

Job was a righteous man who was severely tested by Satan *with God's permission*. (Satan's name means "the accuser" and in the book of Job we see him at work.)

Then, Jesus, days before his death, warns Peter: "*Satan wants to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith might not fail.*" (**Luke 22:31-32**)

Jesus doesn't promise Peter there will be no time of trial or temptation. Peter, in response, pledges his loyalty even unto death – but falls asleep in the Garden while trying to pray; Jesus wakes him and admonishes him to "*watch and pray lest he enter into temptation.*" (**Mark 14:38**) Peter fails to pray and soon fails in his time of trial by denying Jesus three times.

So, this is a prayer for protection from Satan **testing** and **temptations**, a reminder we should never underestimate the power of temptation or our inability to resist it.

This now becomes, like bread and forgiveness, a **daily** request; we need God's strength and protection to combat temptation each day. Satan is not prevented from his work as the accuser; Jesus' disciples are called to pray specifically for **deliverance** and **protection** from the trials and temptations that evil brings.

Fourth, Pope Francis, in his book on the Lord's Prayer, concludes we have been praying this petition wrong; he suggests, as others also have, that we have placed the **comma** in the **wrong place**.

He notes that we typically pray this petition: "*Lead us not into temptation...*" He suggests we pray, "*Lead us, (pause) not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*" (Now the emphasis is on "lead" as Kenneth Bailey also suggested.)

Jesus is inviting us to ask our Father to lead us, while it is the tempter who leads us into temptation. So, lead us, not into temptation as the tempter, or we ourselves, might lead, but deliver us from evil."

So, we are again acknowledging our **dependence** on **God** – for bread, for forgiveness, and from God’s leading and protection – and need to pray daily.

Four facets of one significant truth: The focus is on God leading us. We need a trusted guide who can safely lead us through life.

BUT DELIVER US FROM (THE) EVIL (ONE)

We can translate this phrase as “*deliver us from the evil one*” or “*deliver us from evil*.” (The Greek and Aramaic can be understood either way.)

The Syriac translation, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and New International Version (NIV) chose “*evil one*.” The King James Version (KJV) and Revised Standard Version (RSV), chose “*evil*.”

The Bible personifies temptation, the internal lure of sin and evil, by speaking of the devil, also known as Satan, the adversary, the accuser, the tempter, and the enemy.

C.S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters* talks about the “*wiles of the devil*” (as Paul describes them in **Ephesians 6**). Lewis suggests the devil’s favorite strategy for tripping Christians up is to convince people that he **doesn’t** really **exist**, that sin is not really that **bad**, and that the pleasures we can experience are worth the possible **consequences**.

Truth is, Satan is no match for God’s **power**; he is no match for the Spirit’s **leading** if we are consciously and continuously asking God to lead us. If we’re not, he is great at tripping us up.

Truth is, we don’t need the devil’s help, we are quite capable of leading ourselves into temptation. Truth is, the devil can’t make us do anything; he does have the power of suggestion and he seems to know our weaknesses. But we are the ones who allow his influence to define our actions and lives. That influence never turns out well.

So the Greek, *rhyomai*, for *deliver* comes with a sense of urgency or *rush* (this English word comes from *rhyomai*) to rescue us, or snatch us out of the hands of evil (one). So we pray with some **passion**: *Deliver us from evil. Protect us from harm.*

Peter, who knows a little about temptation, writes: “*Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith...*” (1 Peter 5:8-9)

Once again, we are invited to play a role in answering our prayers: prayer, submitting to God’s leading, and ignoring the voice of the tempter is the key strategy for being “delivered” from evil.

There are two forces constantly vying for our heart – the voice of the Good Shepherd and the voice of the accuser; the question is, who do we listen to?

This petition is for more than just overcoming a desire to sin; it is for more than just (personal) protection from evil and evil one. This is a call to arms. This is a call to **defeat evil** and the evil one that seeks to maliciously influence our lives, to destroy the church, and to sideline God's Mission in this world. This is a call to remain **steadfast** in the middle of the world's mess, to overcome evil with good, to bring the world under the leadership and lordship of Jesus Christ!

Only God can deliver us from temptation; only God can protect us from evil. Jesus invites us to pray about it...daily; to **surrender** to his leading...daily; to **trust** in his protection...**daily**. And as God answers our prayers, his name is honored, his kingdom comes, and his will is being done on earth as his will is being done in heaven.

CONCLUSION

We usually think about temptation in personal terms, but once again, Jesus teaches us to pray **our** and **us**, not *me* and *mine*.

Sins and temptations seem to come in bunches; there is a demonic energy that breaks out in people, societies, and **nations** that unites them in **promoting evil** agendas. We have seen it throughout history.

We know some of the names of former perpetrators from our study of Scripture: Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Romans.

But Christians are not off the hook: there were the crusades; anti-Semitism and the holocaust (94% of Germany professed to be Christian!); the Rwandan genocide of 1994 (92% of the population were Christians); the treatment of the Native and African Americans by proclaimed followers of Jesus. Both our **participation** in evil and our complicit **silence** are sinful.

The rationale that *"everyone is doing it"* seems to make evil "good" for many and allows them to actively participate in it. But the results are devastating.

"Lead us, Lord, not into temptation as we are so prone to go, but deliver us from evil."

Where are Christians embracing **darkness** today? What lies are we accepting as true? What rationalizations are we embracing? Christians tend to answer these questions differently depending on where they live, their education and socioeconomic status, their race, their age and their politics.

But the polarization we're experiencing throughout our nation (and world?) leaves us ripe for what Paul called "the devil's tricks." We tend to believe the worst about those we don't see eye to eye with.

Sadly, the world's crowd often seems more impactful than the followers-of-Jesus-crowd which is why unity was so high on Jesus' list. We need to come together.

The unity Jesus prayed for in **John 17** isn't about looking alike, dressing alike, thinking alike or talking alike; it is about living alike – living like Jesus.

Anything less has devastating effects – a marital affair ruins multiple marriages and families, our disunified living leads hundreds and thousands astray, and our ungracious and unforgiving spirit delays the Kingdom's coming and His mission being fulfilled.

Some ancient texts add an affirmation of praise to this prayer Jesus taught his disciples that reads something like, "For yours is the **kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."**

This add-on statement appears to be an **abridgement** of **1 Chronicles 29:11-13**. In Jesus' day many Jews would conclude the classic, rote prayers of their tradition and then add a personal petition or acclamation of praise.

Maybe the early Church followed this Jewish practice and added these final words. Maybe an early scribe thought the prayer incomplete and added them.

A few early manuscripts contain these words, most do not. So, translators have not included them in the NIV in Matthew or Luke except in a footnote. (so there will be no message on them next week ☺)

It is an appropriate ending, a final **ascription of praise, and likely a **doxology** of the early church, and worthy of use.**

We need to pray this prayer – personally, as we strive to be disciples of Jesus, as we listen and follow the voice and leading of his Spirit.

We need to pray this prayer – as the body of Christ, God's people, so we will not be deceived, but courageously follow Jesus together into his preferred future.

But in the times in which we live, the world needs us not only to **pray** this prayer but to **live** out this prayer...every day...

Let us pray this prayer together...

*Our Abba, Father, in the heavens,
Holy be your Name.*

Let your Kingdom come.

Let your will be done...here on earth as it is in heaven...

Provide us daily with the essential bread we need that doesn't run out...

*Forgive us our debts and sins, because we already have forgiven those who
have sinned against us and are indebted to us.*

Do not bring us to the time of trial; but deliver us from evil.

For the Kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours... now and forever.

Amen.