

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION
(Lord, Teach Us to Pray, Part 7)

James 1:12-15; Matthew 6:13; 4:1-11

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on September 17, 2017]

I

Of all the petitions in the Lord's Prayer, this one is the hardest.

It is the hardest to preach because it raises all of the questions about the presence of evil in the world,
 why God allows it,
 and how we are deal with it.

It is also the hardest to understand because most of us have a healthy instinct to avoid the subject of evil.

Our faith calls us to focus on the positive realities of God and God's love—
 not on the negative realities of temptation and evil.

But evil is real,
 temptation is ever-present,
 and so we must deal with the sixth and final petition of the Lord's
 prayer—
 *"Lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from the evil one."* (NIV)

II

One of the things that makes this petition so difficult is the Greek word that is usually translated "temptation."

It is the Greek word *peirasmos*, and it is found in the New Testament with two different meanings.

First, it means to invite or seduce a person to sin.

If that is the meaning in this petition—
 "Lord, do not entice us into sin"—
 then it almost sounds as though God is in league with the devil.

If that is true, then we have much to worry about.

But not to worry, says James in his epistle.

James 1:13 reads:

"No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one."

God is not the source of temptation,
 nor would God ever seek to seduce a believer into sin.

James goes on to name the source of temptation in the next verse:

"But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it."

A little boy sat on the backyard fence eyeing the apple tree next door. Seeing the boy, the neighbor came out of the house and said, "Johnny, are you trying to steal one of my apples."

To which Johnny replied, "No sir, I'm trying not to."

James says we are lured and enticed by our own desires to commit sins.

If you are old enough to remember Flip Wilson's comedy routine, you recall how the Deacon would ask Sister Geraldine why she had done something he didn't approve of, and she would answer, "The devil made me do it!"

And we smiled at that because we saw ourselves in Sister Geraldine.

We've all known times when we were in the wrong,
 and yet we rationalized our actions and said,
 "It wasn't my fault...don't blame me...I'm not in charge."

But James says we are in charge...of ourselves!

We're no better off blaming the devil any more than we are blaming God.

We are the ones who are responsible when we fall into temptation.

III

There is a second definition of the word *peirasmos*—
to put a person into a situation that is a test or trial of their faith.

This is the meaning of *peirasmos* that is found in the Lord's Prayer.

The Christian life is no safe harbor,
secure from the storms of life and the dark night of the soul.

So Jesus has us pray that God would keep us from testing,
and that when we are tested—
as we inevitably will—
we will be delivered from the power of the Evil One.

Matthew 4 tells the story of how Jesus was tested in the wilderness.

It was a test of what kind of Messiah he would be.

Would he give in to the temptation...
to satisfy the crowd with miraculous bread...
to dazzle the people with signs and wonders...
to seek the power of earthly rulers...?

It was the severest possible test,
taking place, as it did, in the loneliness of the desert,
after 40 long days without food.

And in the midst of that experience of testing,
Jesus found God to be faithful,
and he found the strength from God's word to meet the test.

Another test is recorded in Matthew 26.

In the Garden of Gethsemane,

just minutes prior to his arrest,
 Jesus was on his knees,
 struggling with the purpose for which he came to earth.

*"My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want
 but what you want."*

Luke tells us, "In his anguish he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like
 great drops of blood falling down on the ground."

Jesus could have gotten up and walked away.

He could have returned home to take care of his mother,
 to carry on the family business,
 to marry and have children.

Jesus faced the ultimate test and overcame it.

And out of his experience he teaches us to pray,
"And do not bring us to the time of trial, but deliver us from the evil one."

IV

There are times, Brothers and Sisters, when God deliberately places us in...
 ...a situation in which we may fall,
 but are not meant to fall;

...a situation which may be our ruin,
 but is not meant to be;

...a situation which could destroy us,
 but out of which we are meant to emerge
 spiritually strengthened and enriched.

Sometimes temptation comes as a test of desire and passion,
 for the lust of the eye and of the heart.

Sometimes temptation is a test of power,
 seeking to control other people's lives and manipulate events in ways that
 benefit the privileged few.

their spirituality,
 their generosity,
 or their commitment.

Sometimes temptation is a test of complacency,
 to be as we are—and no more,
 to stop striving for improvement,
 to fail to develop and use the gifts God has given us.

Sometimes the temptation is to run away from people and problems
 instead of having the integrity to face life squarely.

Sometimes temptation comes to us as a test of self-sufficiency
 which pulls us away from trust in God
 and dependence on the grace and mercy of God.

Sometimes we are tempted to set easy goals and take the easy way out.

Sometimes temptation is the test of easy religion,
 a religion that demands nothing,
 costs nothing,
 and promises nothing.

Sometimes temptation is a personal struggle—
 like Jesus in the wilderness,
 we are confronted head on by the enemy,
 and the only way out is to wrestle with our adversary.

V

Listen friends: the Evil One always intends temptation and trial to result in our destruction.

God always intends it to result in our salvation.

As William Carl reminds us, sometimes God tests us at the very point of our greatest strength.

Have you ever noticed this?

Have you noticed how your greatest strength,
when pushed too far,
becomes your greatest weakness?

There have been many examples throughout history.

Napoleon wrote an essay on the dangers of ambition,
but it was his own ambition that wrecked his life and career.

Moses was known for his obedience to God, but in an impetuous moment,
when he didn't trust God,
he turned and struck the rock with his staff,
and because of that he was not able to enter the Promised Land.

Peter was known for his impulsive courage,
but at the very moment when he had the greatest opportunity to confess his
faith in his Lord,
he denied even knowing Christ three times.

God often tests us at the point of our greatest strength, and there are times when
we want to say,
“God, I’ve had enough...
I’ve had all the testing I can handle...
No more testing, God...
I can’t take anymore.”

And so when we pray, “Lead us not into temptation,” we are asking God to not
give us more testing than we can handle.

What we are saying is,

“Lord, lead us in the paths of truth and peace and harmony and joy.

*“Lead us in the direction you want us to go with our lives so that we are not
anxious, we are not afraid, we are not upset about the smallest things that
happen to us.*

Bring us to you truth, O Lord, and show us the way.”

So this final petition of the Lord's prayers brings to us the honest recognition that God uses times of trial and testing in our lives...

to reveal what is in our hearts,
to allow us to clarify our priorities,
to fortify our will and our resolve,
to enable us to be examples in overcoming testing and trial,
so that we can be witnesses of God's love and grace to others.

As Martin Luther once said,

"My temptations have been my masters in divinity."

In all these ways we can see the purposes of God in leading us into the time of trial,

into what St. John of the Cross called "the dark night of the soul,"
for God's redemptive purposes.

VI

So when we pray this sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer, this is what we are saying:

*I know that trial and testing and temptation must come to me,
for there can be no life without them.
But when they do come, as they must,
do not, Lord, abandon me to them,
do not deliver me helpless into their power,
do not allow me to be overcome by evil.
Stand by me, God, as you stood by your Son
in his hour of need.*

"Do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one." (NRSV)

For if we did now know the power of evil,
then how could we know the power of God to deliver us from evil?

So we do not request to be excused from testing,
to be exempt from temptation.

Instead we pray not to be abandoned,

helpless and unarmed,
to its assaults and power.

A little girl was asked if she was a Christian. She said "Yes" without any hesitation.

Then she was asked, "But you're so small and the devil is so big. What do you do when he knocks at your door and asks to come in?"

"That's easy," the girl replied. "I say to Jesus who lives in my heart, 'Would you please see who's at the door?' And when Jesus answers the door, the devil says, 'Oops! Wrong number!' and runs off down the street."

Temptation and testing are real.

And so is God, our heavenly Father,
who stands with us,
and is ever ready to protect us from it.

As John Newton wrote:

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

In asking God to deliver us from evil,
we acknowledge that God is greater than any foe.

The power of evil must be taken seriously,
but not too seriously.

Perhaps that is why, though this final petition of the Lord's Prayer honestly focuses on trial, temptation, and evil,
it never mentions Satan by name.

Evil is a threatening power, yet a defeated one.

Though the battle rages,

we know who has won the war.

In his greatest hymn, Martin Luther said it best:

*And though this world with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed,
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure,
For lo! His doom is sure.
One little word shall fell him.*

VII

So do you see, Sisters and Brothers, that by giving us this prayer,
Jesus invites us to walk forward into the darkness
and discover that it, too, belongs to God?

But, once you have entered that dark night of the soul, the fact that you have done
so with the Lord's Prayer on your lips means that,
when the darkness breaks,
it will be glory itself that wakes.—

Waking like the human cry of a small baby,
blinking up at its mother in the sudden light,
and seeing in her face,
and reading in her heart,
the hope and promise
that good will triumph over fear,
God will deliver us from evil,
and God will at last bring us to the kingdom.

Amen.

Sources:

William J. Carl III, The Lord's Prayer for Today (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 70, 73-74.

William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, Lord, Teach Us, The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life (Abingdon, 1996) 87, 94.

N.T. Wright, The Lord and His Prayer (Eerdmans, 1996), 76.

Paul Thigpen, "Lead Us Not Into Temptation," article in *Discipleship Journal*, no. 62, 1991

Sermons by Gockel, Julian, Tooze.

Books on The Lord's Prayer by Buttrick, Barclay.