

A Journey Through The Lord's Prayer

“Lead Us Not Into Temptation...”

[Matthew 6:9-13](#)

With the sermon series, “A Journey through the Lord’s Prayer,” we have been studying the model prayer Jesus taught us to pray. By slowing down to carefully consider each phrase, we are seeking to better understand this prayer that we pray both individually as well as corporately and to grow in our prayer life. Today, we come to the phrase, “lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.”

First, “lead us not into temptation.” If you have ever thought this phrase sounded strange, you are not alone. For years, Christians have wrestled with the actual meaning behind this puzzling phrase. People have asked, “Why would we ask God not to lead us into temptation?” “Does it mean that God actually leads us into temptation?” “Why? Why would God do that to us? For what purpose?” “Doesn’t the Bible say that God will never tempt us?” Actually, the Bible says God does not tempt anyone. It’s found in the letter of James: “When tempted no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” (James 1:13)

One of the Christians who have raised such questions is Pope Francis. About the rather confusing phrase, he writes in his book, *Our Father - Reflections on the Lord's Prayer*:

This, “lead us not into temptation,” is not a good translation. In fact, if we open the Gospel in the latest edition of the Italian Episcopal conference, we read, “do not abandon us to temptation.” The French have also changed the text, with a translation that means “Do not let me fall into temptation.” I am the one who falls. It is not God who tosses me into temptation in order to see how I fall. A father does not do this. A father helps his child get up right away. The one who leads us into temptation is Satan. That is Satan’s craft. The meaning of our prayer is, “When Satan leads me into temptation, please God, give me a hand, give me your hand.” It is like that painting in which Jesus holds his hand out to Peter, who is imploring him, “Lord, save me, I am drowning, give me your hand!” (Matthew 14:30)

As you may have heard, over a month ago, Pope Francis officially approved a change to the translation of the Lord’s Prayer. With the public announcement of this official change, all Catholic churches are now supposed to say “do not let us fall into temptation,” instead of “lead us not into temptation.” Actually, many scholars say the new line is a better translation of the original text. (p.94)

In his book, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Kenneth E. Bailey introduces Joachim Jeremias’ linguistic approach to the text. He writes:

His [Jeremias’] argument is that the Greek word for “lead us” that appears in this petition is *eisphero*. The Aramaic equivalent to this Greek word is *nisyon*, which has two shades of meaning. One is causative and the other is permissive. The causative means “Do not cause us to go into temptation” (that is “do not lead us”). By endorsing the permissive, the text would mean “Do not permit us to go into temptations/trials.”

On our faith journey, the tendency is to turn aside into trials/temptations, and thus we are instructed to pray, as it were, "Oh, Lord, hold us back and do not let us take that path." (p. 129)

So, until our own denomination changes the wording on the Lord's Prayer, we will continue to pray "lead us not into temptation." But, let us remember that God does not lead us into temptation. With this phrase, we are asking God to help us not to fall into the temptations and trials that we might turn towards during our faith journey.

Now, let's take a closer look at the word, "temptation." According to one dictionary definition, temptation is a desire to engage in immediate, short-term urges or impulse for enjoyment, that disrupts an individual's ability to wait for the long-term goals.

There was a man who decided that he had some excess pounds to lose. He was very diligent and stuck to his diet very strictly. He even changed his route to work, so that he could avoid driving by his favorite bakery in the morning. However, one day, he came into work with a big coffee cake. As his coworkers started to scorn him, he said, "Wait, I can explain why I bought this coffee cake. I accidentally drove past my favorite bakery today and I saw all these delicious coffee cakes out on the display case. So I prayed. I prayed to God, 'Dear Lord, if you really think I should have this delicious coffee cake, show me an open parking spot right in front of the bakery.' And, guess what? God answered my prayer! There was one on my 8th time around!"

We all know that temptation is real. It is what we wrestle with everyday. And it is everywhere. There are innumerable temptations in the world, around us, and within us. We are tempted all the time. Though the temptations may vary depending on our individual circumstances, we all share in the struggle with them, don't we? And, when we give into temptation, our natural tendency is either to rationalize our actions or to blame someone or something else for what we have done. We avoid taking responsibility.

We see it play out in the first biblical story of temptation in the Book of Genesis. The garden of Eden was a place of God's abundance. There were plenty of fruits for Adam and Eve to enjoy. God told them they could eat from any tree in the garden except one -- the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God warned them that they would die if they ate from the forbidden tree. Then, a snake, a tempter came and said to the woman, "You will not surely die!" So, she ate the forbidden fruit and gave it to Adam. And when confronted by God, neither of them is willing to take responsibility for their actions. Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the snake.

Adam and Eve's temptation and fall in the garden of Eden is not just their story. It is also our story, the story of our own temptation and fall. The apostle James says, "one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire conceived, it gives birth to sin. When sin grows up, it gives birth to death."

I believe that is why Jesus included this phrase in his model prayer. Having also been tempted, he knew the struggles his disciples would face as they were trying to live as his followers, as citizens of God's kingdom. So, he inserted this phrase into the Lord's Prayer: "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." Knowing that they would pray it three times a day.

Martin Luther is said to have prayed two of the petitions of the Lord's prayer, one at night, and one in the morning. When he went to bed, he prayed, "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors." And,

when he woke up in the morning, he prayed, “lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” Praying for God’s forgiveness at the end of the day and then praying that God would lead him in the right path and deliver him from evil before he began the day. This was the daily rhythm of the great reformer’s life.

Finally, let’s turn to the second half of the phrase, “but deliver us from evil.” When we hear the word, evil, images that come to our minds are terrible and horrible things, such as murder, rape, torture, abuse, genocide, war, and violence. But, evil is more than that. Evil is anything that separates us from our true identity as God’s children. Because when we forget our identity as God’s children, we cannot see others as a beloved child of God also. All the horrible things we witness in the world are a result of this separation. Evil’s fingerprints and handiwork has been around from the beginning of human history, ever since the temptation and fall in the garden of Eden. We saw it in the slave trade, in the Holocaust, in the apartheid, in the genocide and ethnic cleansing, in the terrorist attacks. We see it now in the ongoing instances of racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Today, we struggle with the temptation of evil when we look away. When we look away at the suffering all around us. When we look away from the growing number of people who sleep in tents and cars and on the streets and benches right here in Campbell; when we look away from the plight of desperate migrants at our borders and detention centers; when we look away from abused women and children in homes of domestic violence; when we look away from those who suffer from mental illnesses; when we look away from the destruction and devastation we have caused in Mother Nature.

In our struggles with the choice between good and evil, right and wrong, in our temptation to look away, Jesus calls us to pray his prayer, “lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” Because we need God’s help. We cannot do it alone. We need God to lead us. We need God to remind us because too often we forget who we are.

Would you continue to commit to praying the Lord’s prayer this week, meditating on how the phrase “lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil” helps you to re-engage the world around you? Because by the power of the Holy Spirit, we will live out the words we pray. Thanks be to God!
Amen.