

Teach Us to Pray: Testing, Temptation, and Deliverance

Matt.4:1-11

Hebrews 4:14-16

Final phrase of the Lord's Prayer: lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil (or, the evil one).

As we close this series, a reminder: just before Jesus gives the Lord's Prayer, in Matthew's gospel, he prefaces it with these words, "When you are praying praying, you don't have to go on using a lot of words, thinking God will hear you. Your heavenly father knows what you need *before you ask.*" That's a wonderful assurance, and we can rest in the assurance that God knows our needs, so our prayers can be simple, and sincere, without great formality and having to get it just right. Jesus is simply inviting us to pray. And do pray! After all, Jesus says "*when you pray...*" not "if;" so he assumes we *will* pray—and we're invited to pray in a way that isn't fearful, or worried about our needs. We're given a simple prayer, with simple petitions that focus on a bigger picture, a larger perspective of God's Kingdom, and God's heart for us and for the world.

I'm going to come at this last petition from the Lord's Prayer by looking at how Jesus himself was led into a place and time of testing/temptation, and was

delivered from evil (the evil one). Jesus was able to teach us this line, because he lived it; he experienced it.

Matthew 4:1-11:

4 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

⁴ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

“‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

⁷ Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹ “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

This is the word of the Lord!

Martin Luther is reputed to have said that every evening he *went to bed* praying the 5th petition of the Lord’s Prayer (forgive us our debts as we forgive our

debtors), and *woke up* in the morning praying the 6th (lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil). That makes sense, doesn't it? To go to bed reviewing the day—the good and positive, the times and places where I experienced God, and also praying “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” So we end the day with gratitude and a clean slate—no one owes me anything; or at least I'm working toward that. We can lie down and sleep in peace because we're keeping short accounts (or no accounts). Then we wake up in the morning previewing the day ahead and we pray for God's guidance and protection. Because then we can focus on the good and the positive things God wants us to do that day, protected from what might derail us.

That's a pretty good practice, thanks to Uncle Marty (what one of my Lutheran acquaintances called him).

When Jesus gives his disciples, and therefore his church, this line to pray, “*lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,*” I am certain that Jesus had his own wilderness testing time in mind, and was speaking from that experience.

Jesus is led into the wilderness. And he was led there to be tested—although almost all of our English translations say “to be *tempted.*” But the idea here is that God had a purpose for Jesus in this time of wilderness testing. He

needed to be strengthened, and his trust deepened, for the beginning of his public ministry, which was the new, next thing that was he was being prepared for. And that's what wilderness experiences do—they strengthen us for the next, new thing that God wants to do in our life. And when we read on in the gospels following this account, we are told that Jesus emerged from the wilderness filled with the *power* of the Holy Spirit. That's the goal; and, that's really cool! God means to strengthen us inwardly, when we are going through wilderness experiences.

But a question is often raised about this: all of this seems to be in contradiction to this line we are given to pray in the Lord's Prayer: lead us *not* into temptation. Isn't that exactly what God is doing with Jesus? Leading him into temptation? Well... no and yes.

We could get subtle and technical about words here. On the one hand the Spirit led him into the *wilderness*, not into temptation. But on the other hand, it says he was led there *in order to be tempted*. On the one hand we could say that the word "tempted" should be translated as "tested," but on the other hand what actually happened was that Jesus was tempted. And, on the other hand, Jesus

refutes the evil one by quoting Deuteronomy 6: “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.” So it looks like Jesus saw it as a test.

Now that may seem like technical, subtle distinctions, but the not-so-subtle distinction in the text is that it is **not** the Spirit who introduces the doubts, and the questions. God does not do the tempting here. God’s Spirit is leading Jesus to a place of strengthening, and of prayer. The mystery here, however, is that God does allow the tempting to come.

What isn’t a mystery, though, is that Scripture affirms that we will be *tested* from time to time in our life of faith, as God strengthens us and deepens our faith. And, that testing often happens in the wilderness times of life. And we all have experienced wilderness times in our lives: illness, unemployment, death of loved ones, or times in life when we are simply in-between things and we feel like we are wandering—which isn’t bad! JRR Tolkien: “Not all who wander are lost.” Times of wilderness and wandering can serve a good purpose.

In light of all this, Regent College professor Darrel Johnson rephrases the petition this way: “Father, as we go through times of *testing*, do not let the test become a *temptation*, but deliver us from evil.” That’s a good explanation of the prayer. (repeat)

So, the prayer is that while we are being *tested*, we would be shielded from the *temptations* that may come within a time of testing. I think that's a useful way to look at this petition. Again, the goal is to strengthen us and deepen our faith and trust in God.

Samuel Rutherford (17th century Scottish Presbyterian minister—those were serious people, those old Scottish Presbyterians!) went so far as to say this: *“I find it most true, that the great temptation out of hell is to live without temptations. If my waters should stand, they would rot. Faith is the better of the free air, and of the sharp winter storm in its face. Grace withers without adversity. The devil is but God’s master fencer, to teach us to handle our weapons.”*

He's going all William Wallace here. He's saying “Bring it on!” I'm going to strap on my sword, tighten my belt, pick up my shield, like the apostle Paul says to do in Ephesians 6 (put on the full armor of God). Rutherford is saying, “God is at work, strengthening me, growing my faith! So, bring it on!”

I'm not quite as eager as Samuel Rutherford, but what he is saying holds true. God aims to strengthen us, *because* our Father is pleased with us. God's goal for our lives is a growing faith, and strength for our journey to do his will—to

participate in his kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven. And we are sometimes strengthened through adversity.

I want to make a note on the nature of the temptations that Jesus faced, and how he was delivered from them. Because *Jesus' temptations are our temptations*. What Jesus faced is what we face, as it says in our confession from Hebrews 4.

Before getting into that, a brief mention here of the ways that the Bible speaks about "the evil one," or the devil. There are three main words used in Scripture to 'speak of the devil': Satan, which is an ancient near east term that literally means "the accuser." Or, "the one who brings the accusation." It was a term used in their legal system, in a court of law, for the one who brought an accusation against another. In the new testament there is a word used for the devil that means "the twisted one," or "the evil one" or "the liar." The idea here is that the devil takes what is good and true and manipulates it, perverts it, or twists it, to cause confusion, doubt, or despair. The last word used is "diabalos" which means "the divider." It was a word used to describe the splitting of wood. That gives us a nice image of what "the divider does": splits relationships (between people, and people with God), splits churches, etc.

Btw, all three words, and all three aspects are employed here in this narrative of Jesus in the wilderness! We'll see as we go along.

What the devil assaults here with Jesus, and it's always the same assault on you and me and everyone, is the assault on Jesus' *identity*, and his *trust* in the Father and the Father's goodness. Identity and trust. It's a double-barreled assault; they always go together.

All of the temptations challenge Jesus' *identity* as God's beloved child. "*If you really are the beloved, in whom God is well-pleased... prove it! Show it! Do something that proves it, or do something that will make **God** prove it to you.*" The temptation is to get him to question his identity, and his belovedness (which had just been declared over him at his baptism, btw).

The temptations are attempts to get Jesus to DO something to *prove* his worth and identity, and therefore not trust in, and rest in, his *identity* as beloved child, and believe what his Father had just said about him at his baptism.

One of the biggest temptations we face from the one evil/evil is to question our identity; especially our identity as children of God. "*If God really loves you and is pleased with you... then why is your life such a mess?*" (which may actually not be true, but that's the nature of the lie). "*If you really belong to God... then*

why do you struggle? God must not care about you. Prove that God loves you! Because God doesn't seem to be showing you anything that looks like love or approval right now; so, prove that you are his beloved daughter, his beloved son."

Whenever we find ourselves hearing these types of questions, questions about our identity as God's beloved children with whom he is well pleased, it's not from God. That's "the twisted one," the accuser. And we need to be aware of that. God never questions our belovedness; God always *declares* our belovedness.

The main temptation of evil/the evil one, is to assault our identity as God's beloved children. What this assault on our identity aims to do, then, is erode our **trust** in our heavenly Father, and the Father's goodness. The temptations Jesus faced were temptations to erode trust in his Father's goodness, and then to find strength and sufficiency *in himself, apart from God* (that's the divider at work). Because if I'm not sure of my identity in the God's love, then I'm not sure I can trust God completely. And I'm tempted to take matters into my own hands, and trust myself rather than God and God's goodness.

This is the nature of the devil's questions with Jesus: *"Is God really good? It doesn't seem like God is coming through for you right now. You're hungry, you're*

tired, you're depressed. Turn these stones into bread!" In other words, "Fix your problems. God isn't doing it—in fact he seems to have abandoned you." You get the picture. The devil aims to make spiritual orphans out of us. Who feel abandoned and left alone; and therefore (when we believe we are left alone and no one is there to help us or care for us) we must become self-sufficient because we can't trust anyone. *That's the nature of temptation.*

Temptation to sin is not necessarily temptation to do bad things. On the surface, that's what we usually think of when we think about, or confess, our sin. I said a bad word; I lost my temper; I lied; I talked about politics when I promised I wouldn't. Note carefully: Jesus' temptations *are not temptations to misbehave*: the devil doesn't tempt him to lie, steal, cheat or lose his temper and say a bad word. The temptations he faced, and that we face, are always—at core—an assault on our identity, and our trust—our trust in God and God's goodness.

The issue will always be: in whom, or what, is our trust and dependence? Even *if* temptation manifests itself as temptation to misbehavior. That's just one step, one piece, of the temptation package. The devil's goal is to get you to give in to misbehaviors more and more, so that over time you believe something untrue about your *identity*: "Look what you did—and what you did *again!* You're a lost cause, you're weak, and you're alone in your struggles."

The opposite can happen too, by the way: we can be tempted to pride: “Look what you did in saving yourself! You’re a self-made man, a self-made woman; you don’t need God, and you don’t need anyone else—in fact, you’re better than everyone else. Who needs God?” (and so forth)

CS Lewis once said that all of the temptations of the devil are either a temptation to pride, or a temptation to despair. And both leave us spiritual orphans.

And if we begin to believe those lies, then our trust in God, and God’s goodness, is eroded. And we are tempted to take matters into our own hands because there is no one else on earth or in heaven to trust. That’s the basic nature of temptation.

And when temptation comes, deliverance from evil will come in a couple ways, at least: (1) by remembering God’s goodness from our *experience*, and (2) remembering God’s goodness from *Scripture*. *Experience* and *Scripture* are our deliverance, by the Holy Spirit’s prompting and guidance, as we pray this second half of the petition, “Deliver us from evil.”

We have all *experienced* those times when God was very near, very real, very good and loving. Remember those; write them down; keep them close in our heart and mind. So, we know and remember from *experience* that God is

good. That's what David does in the Psalms. He remembers; he writes them down. During temptation, trial, depression, and times of waiting for God to answer, he remembers. See how many times in the psalms, when David is lamenting or expressing how down he is, or waiting for answered prayer, he says, "I will recount the deeds of the Lord..." This is Jeremiah in Lamentations, after Jerusalem has been ransacked and he is tempted to despair, he says: "This I will call to mind, and therefore I have hope; the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases... Great is thy faithfulness." He remembers from his *experience* that God is good.

I'm convinced that Jesus withstood these temptations because he remembered his experiences of his Father's goodness, including from his baptism where he heard words of affirmation and approval—you are my beloved, with you I am well pleased. We know from *experience* that God is good.

And we know from *Scripture* that God is good, and that God protects us. Here is a call again to treasure the Scriptures; have them close at hand. They are food and drink and nourishment and life. Every time this narrative of Jesus in the wilderness is studied and taught, it is observed—and it's worth observing again—that Jesus responded to temptations with Scripture. And even when the devil quoted Scripture to him, in a twisted/manipulative way, Jesus knew the greater

and larger truths of Scripture and was able to call upon those. He used Scripture to interpret Scripture when it came to larger and more essential truth.

All Scripture is useful, but in particular we can claim specific verses that speak of God as our deliverer, and protector. Psalm 46 from our call to worship is a good example: God is our refuge and strength; very present to us in times of trouble. The first three verses of Psalm 18 are a good example: *“The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, so I shall be saved from my enemies.”* There are lots more where that came from!

Remember God’s goodness—from your *experience*, and from *Scripture*. And in doing that, remember what God has said about you, who you are and where you stand in relation to God. You are God’s beloved daughter, God’s beloved son, with whom he is well pleased. There is an old Jewish proverb that says: “Before every person there marches an angel proclaiming, ‘Behold, the image of God.’” Let that image sink in and give you a boost as you go forth! It helps us see others differently too!

And remember that assurance in Hebrews: we can approach the throne of grace with confidence. Jesus was tempted just as we are. He sympathizes with us in our weakness. So, we don't face temptation alone! Brother Jesus is waiting...

There is more good news: he is not only waiting to help us during times of *testing and temptation*, but ready to forgive *when we fail* during testing or temptation.

Jesus was without sin, Hebrews tells us. We, however, are not. I hope that isn't a news flash to anyone. The good news is that Jesus sympathizes with us in our weakness and helps us in our time of need, and sometimes what we need is mercy and forgiveness. And that is what we receive at this table this morning.

Our prayer for this week: lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Perhaps you want to pray it every morning as you prepare for your day. Or paraphrase it ("don't let the test become a temptation"). Or have another short verse of Scripture to recite: God is my deliverer (or something like that). Use one of those great metaphors, of God as your rock, fortress, shield, stronghold, etc.

Here at the table is a good place to remember our identity, our belovedness...

All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly