

## 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 praying, you don't have to go on using a lot of words, thinking God will hear you then, because your 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 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. <sup>2</sup> After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."*

*<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

*<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. <sup>6</sup> "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.'"*

*<sup>7</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

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

*<sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"*

*<sup>11</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> petition of the Lord's Prayer (forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors), and *woke up* in the morning praying the 6<sup>th</sup> (lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil). That makes sense, doesn't it? To go to bed reviewing the day, praying "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Clean slate. No one owes me anything—or 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 the distractions that might derail us.

That's a pretty good practice, thanks to Uncle Marty (what one of my Lutheran acquaintances calls 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. We can't teach what we don't know, right? (I suppose we can, but it doesn't have the same wisdom and authority).

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. Kind of like our covid wilderness, which was an opportunity to reflect and emerge with a new sense of what God wants to do. 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.

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

We could get subtle and technical about words here. On the one hand the Spirit is leading 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 perhaps 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 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. Like living with covid quarantine for a year!

In light of that, Regent College professor Darrel Johnson rephrases the petition this way: “Father, as you lead us into times of *testing*, do not let the test become a *temptation*, but deliver us from the evil one.” 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 of this is to strengthen us and deepen our faith and trust in God.

Samuel Rutherford (17<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Presbyterian minister—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. 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 is true. God aims to strengthen us, because our Father is pleased with us. God’s goal for our lives is not ease and comfort, but 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 often strengthened through adversity.

I want to make a note on the nature of the temptations, and how Jesus 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.

What the devil assaults here, 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 evil one 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?*" "*If you really belong to*

*God... then why do you struggle with negative thoughts and emotions? 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. And we need to be aware of that. God never *questions* our belovedness; God always *declares* our belovedness.

Here's another gem from Uncle Marty: when faced with temptation—this temptation to question his identity and belovedness, Martin Luther responded to it by repeating: "I am baptized, I am baptized, I am baptized." In other words: I claim the promise and the truth that I am beloved; I belong to God and God's people; I am protected by his presence and his promises.

So, remember your baptism! And if you aren't baptized, don't worry—you are beloved. Baptism is not a magic ritual that *produces* God's love. It *affirms* the love that God already has for you; God's covenant love. If you aren't baptized, I highly recommend it. It's an experience where you and claim those promises; it's

a cool experience, especially as an adult. And have the community affirm you, speaking on God's behalf that you are beloved.

The main temptation of the devil is to assault our identity as God's beloved children. What this assault on our identity aims to do, then, is erode our **trust** (2) in our heavenly Father, and the Father's goodness. The temptations Jesus faced were temptations to erode trust his Father's goodness, and then to find strength and sufficiency *in himself, apart from God*. 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 your 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 think of when we think of, 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 temptations of the devil are either temptation to pride, or 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: by remembering God's goodness from our *experience*, and 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 (and we’re going to sing about that at the end of the service).

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 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. The first three verses of Psalm 18 are a good example; we recited these in our call to worship this morning: “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 forgiveness.

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). Or use one of those great metaphors, of God as your rock, fortress, shield, stronghold, etc.