

Lead Us Not Into Temptation

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Matthew 6:7-13

Sermon Series:
Pray Daily: Igniting
Our Passion for God

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I begin today with a confession. This confession came to me in the middle of the night last night. Or was it the middle of the morning?

Prayer has not always been my strong suit. I am not, by nature, a very contemplative person. Some people take to prayer naturally. I don't!

This confession may come as something as a surprise to you. Some people think preachers must be incubated in monasteries or something.

In the early part of my ministry I wanted to do something for God. I wanted to preach for God, influence people for God, build buildings for God. But be with God? The campus ministry of which Chris and I used to be a part spoke of prayer as having a quiet time. I hated the phrase "quiet time." It seemed, well, so quiet! Forget the quiet, I wanted action.

At a relatively young age, I became senior pastor of this church. I was busy raising kids and growing a church. Before long, who knows, people will want me to be chaplain of the Senate or chaplain of the Redskins or chaplain of the whole free world!

Then, something happened. I cannot pinpoint it exactly. In the early '90s, as we were talking about building this sanctuary, it hit me. God and I were just acquaintances. I felt like a fraud. I

talked more about God than to God.

I was approaching the middle of my life. I didn't want to waste my life. So I began, as if for the first time, to pray. There were no dramatic answers to prayer in this transformation. No huge revelations! The biggest difference has been the reorientation of my spiritual center of gravity. Prayer has brought about a qualitative difference in my relationship with God. I have become more centered and less anxious. I have more energy and feel less frenzied.

That's why I want 2007 to be a year of renewal, because God is renewing me. That's why I want this summer to be 90 days of prayer, because God is igniting my passion for Him through prayer. And, naturally, I want for you what I have experienced!

Now that I have put my cards on the table, let's explore the meaning of prayer from Matthew's gospel. Our morning lesson. This summer, we're preaching our way through The Lord's Prayer. One of the remarkable features of The Lord's Prayer is its brevity, a mere 56 words in all. If you pray this prayer at a moderate pace, it takes about 30 seconds to recite it. But it is taking me a lifetime to plumb the depths of this prayer.

We come today, to the 6th petition of The Lord's Prayer. You will notice, if you have your Bibles

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open to Matthew 6, that the prayer ends with the words, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” The ending Protestants recite at the end of this prayer, “For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen,” is conspicuously missing. It’s not likely part of the original prayer. It was added later by the early church to adapt this prayer for liturgical use in worship and is likely taken from a verse in 1st Chronicles (29:11). It was customary in those days to conclude a prayer with a doxology. Jesus might have concluded his model prayer this way, although there is no way to know for sure.

This 6th petition is set up as a parallelism, in which two balanced ideas are joined by a conjunction. Not only that, but this 6th petition is called an antithetic parallelism. That means what is stated negatively in the first part of the sentence is contrasted positively in the second half of the sentence.

The words “lead us not into temptation” seem initially like a non-sequitur. Why would God lead us into temptation? These words seem like a non-sequitur. This petition sounds like a logical fallacy.

Most modern Bible translations interpret this verse “Do not bring us to the time of trial.” The words “temptation” and “trial” both originate from the same Greek word. It is unlikely Jesus would have prayed, “Lead us not into tempta-

tion,” since we are told expressly in James that God tempts no one (1:13).

God doesn’t tempt, but God tests people. The Bible affirms from beginning to end that God tests people. God tests Adam and Eve by giving them every tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17). God puts Abraham to the ultimate test in calling for the sacrifice of his only son, Isaac (Genesis 22:1). God tests Israel’s strength and loyalty for service (Deuteronomy 8:2; 13:3). God tests Job (Job 23:10). God tests Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1).

I observe three things about God’s tests in Scripture.

First, God’s tests make us grow. God doesn’t administer tests to fail us. The tempter tries to make us fail, but the tester helps us pass the test. The devil wants to bring us down; God wants to raise us up.

Don’t be caught off guard when trouble comes our way; expect it. “In this world, you will have trouble,” Jesus said (Matthew 6:33).

God’s tests are designed to make us stronger. Friedrich Nietzsche may have been wrong about plenty of things, but he was right about one thing, “What does not kill us makes us stronger.”

Second, God’s tests never exceed our strength. God never tests us beyond what we can endure. God never administers a test we cannot pass. Paul writes,

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“God is faithful and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Third, God’s tests produce endurance. We read in James, “Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:2-4).

God cares more about our spiritual maturity than our happiness. Don’t get me wrong, God wants us to be happy, but not at the expense of our spiritual maturity. Those of you who are parents want to raise your children to become mature adults. Sure you want your children to be happy, but not at the expense of their maturity. There is nothing more pathetic than to witness adults who act like children.

God doesn’t tempt; God tests! Essentially, we are praying in this petition, Lord don’t let us succumb to a time of trial.

We now turn to the second half of this parallelism, “Deliver us from evil.” This verse reminds me of a story about a mother who was teaching her three-year-old daughter Caitlin the words of The Lord’s Prayer. At bedtime, her mother would line out the words of the prayer and invite Caitlin to repeat exactly what she said. Finally, Caitlin was ready to go solo. Her mother listened with pride as Caitlin carefully enunciated each word right up to the end of the prayer. “Lead us not into temptation,” she said, “but deliver us

some evil.”

Most modern translations interpret this petition, “Deliver us from the evil one,” since, in the Greek, the appearance of the definite article before the word evil makes the sentence read, “Deliver us from the evil [one].”

The Bible says three things about evil. You’ll notice I’m thinking in threes today. That’s hardly surprising, according to Michael Eck. He writes in *The Book of Threes* that people tend to break concepts into three parts to understand whatever it is we are thinking about.

First, evil is personal. Evil is not merely abstract, it is intensely real. In this enlightened age, people balk at the thought of a personal devil. In C. S. Lewis’s imaginary tale *The Screwtape Letters*, Uncle Screwtape advises his junior devil Wormwood, “The fact that devils are predominately comic figures in the modern imagination will help you. If any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise in his mind, suggest to him a picture of something in red tights, and persuade him that since he cannot believe in that he therefore cannot believe in you.”

Second, evil is seductive. In Paul’s words, Satan masquerades as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). If evil appeared as monstrous and twisted as it really is, who would be attracted to it? So the devil disguises evil as something attractive and alluring. Evil pretends to be enjoyable. And so it is, for a time. But once evil has you in its grip, it enslaves you.

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- C.S. Lewis

Jim Collins wrote about evil in the aftermath of the Enron scandal, “These were people who... got drawn into it, one step after another. If you told them ten years ahead of time, ‘Hey, let’s cook the books and all get rich,’ they would never go along with it. But that’s rarely how most people get drawn into activities they later regret. When you are at step A, it feels inconceivable to jump all the way to step Z, if step Z involves something that is a total breach of your values. But if you go from step A to step B, then step B to step C, then step C to step D, someday you wake up and discover that you are at step Y and the move to step Z comes about much easier.”

How did Hitler dupe Germany into embracing the evil of Nazism? He did it a little at a time. A farmer never notices his corn growing minute-by-minute. But, if he stands in the field long enough, he discovers one day he’s in over his head. On the surface, a body of water may look calm and placid, but underneath there may be strong, deadly currents that can trap us under water.

Third, evil is powerful. C. S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, “Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of an army by fighting it, not giving in. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in.

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The Lord’s Prayer begins with God’s name to be hallowed, God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done and ends with our need for daily bread, forgiveness and deliverance from evil. What begins as a crescendo of God’s glory ends on a somber note of human frailty! We need God’s deliverance!

In a scene from an old M*A*S*H TV show, the Catholic priest, Father Mulcahy, offers prayer with a group of soldiers. Many of these soldiers are obviously not very religious and unaccustomed to prayer. But the good father offers The Lord’s Prayer and concludes with “Amen.” There is a moment of awkward silence, which is finally broken when someone asks, “Is that it?” Another soldier replies, “Of course. Nothing comes after Amen.”

If we pray The Lord’s Prayer with conviction, there is plenty that accompanies the “Amen.” Praying for God’s deliverance is one of them!

Where do you need God’s deliverance today? It may be a smoldering anger or seething hostility against someone. It may be bitterness or jealousy toward someone. It may be an addiction or obsession of some kind. You may not think you need God’s deliverance all that much. God’s deliverance is for those who need it the most and those who think they need it the least.

