

## INTO TEMPTATION

A few of you have been waiting a long time for this sermon, not so much because you need it as because you want to see if I get it right. “*Lead us not into temptation,*” or the more cryptic “*Do not bring us to the test,*” is one of the most puzzling comments in the New Testament.

It is often our first reaction that there must be some mistake. Jesus would not put a hidden, complex, mysterious, almost-beyond-comprehension phrase in the core and central prayer He was giving to His followers. It would be unkind to confuse generations of believers trying to pray this prayer on a daily basis. No Christian can really miss or duck this prayer, so eventually every Christian would run into the riddle. Jesus would not do such a thing! There must be some mistake, some mistranslation, or some simple explanation.

Because this prayer was so important to the Christian community – that is, because it was used so quickly and widely by so many – Matthew’s lengthier version, “*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,*” is understandable. But a mistranslation that changes the essential meaning is even less likely than with most passages. In other words, Jesus *would* do such a thing, and did!

When we stop to think about it, it is one of Jesus’ trademarks. A seemingly spiritual *non sequitur*, a Sphinx-like one-liner, a homey little parable that suddenly drops us into the lap of paradox – these go with Jesus like Z goes with Zorro. “*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.*” (Matthew 22:21) And boy, does that sound beautiful and seem right. And it got Jesus out of a jam. But nobody has been able to figure out what it means for two thousand years!

I do not mean to imply that Jesus does not make sense. But it is true that our minds struggle hard with His perspective and often fight it. And Jesus constantly hits us with teasers, friendly invitations to transcend our normal ways of awareness – of seeing and believing. Nobody can follow Jesus for very long or very far without giving Him quality time and undivided attention. So it is not surprising to find a strange petition in the Lord’s Prayer. If we did not, we would have to wonder if it really came from Jesus. We should know Him well enough

by now to know He would never leave us bored, or leave our minds untouched or our souls on the same level where He found us.

Study group people know that this is one passage I never try to help them with. I just tell them to keep pondering and praying it for themselves. That seems to be what Jesus intended. And you can imagine the abuse I take, for weeks, until they slowly forget about it. So why would I be willing to preach about it today? It's probably a mistake to do so. On the other hand, I am learning that when people are not ready for something, they either miss it entirely or forget it very quickly. Thus God safeguards wisdom, and its dangers, even from the gabbers.

There are probably some people here who have prayed this prayer all their lives without realizing that this last petition has endless strange dimensions. Do not feel ashamed. A high percentage of Christendom recites the prayer as a ritual of identity and loyalty, and the content is never really considered. It is simply recited as it was taught, without question. And there *is* value here other than the content. Furthermore, most of us learn this prayer when we are young and give it a content that is comforting and generalized. It may not occur to us to analyze it from then on. And so, for many, "*Lead us not into temptation*" means a general petition to "protect us from evil" – to "keep us safe." People leave it at that and find comfort in it. I doubt if Jesus would be very angry with this. It may be better, however, to take comfort from Jesus where He offers it, rather than take His most challenging precepts too restfully.

Eventually, most folk in our wing of Christendom *do* notice the paradox. Why are we begging a loving God not to lead us into temptation? Satan is supposed to be the tempter, not God! Why, in the petitions of our most important prayer, must we ask God to desist from doing us such damage? Surely Jesus was careless in the way He put this. Doubtless Jesus meant to say it another way. Only, Jesus apparently *did not* put it another way. Almost never careless, Jesus would certainly be even less likely to be careless in giving His followers this prayer.

We will not ever close down or close out the mystery of this prayer. But we can stop taking it for granted. *Lead us not into temptation*. The first reaction, not for all of us but for many of us, is: God would never do such a thing! Almighty God – God of grace and mercy and forgiveness and love – would never do such a thing!

I remember, as a troubled young pastor in New England, taking this question to the mentors/saints whom I had fortunately run into by that time. (There were three of them, none of whom knew each other – Frank Weiskel, Lee Whiston, and Winn Hall.) One said, “Have you never been on the stormy, north-side of God?” I said I had been in dark places but assumed it was my fault or encounters with Satan. He said, “I’m sure that’s true also, but God is even tougher than Satan. God is not always tame or safe or nice, like you have been taught or like we all want to believe. There is more at stake here than we want to think. Stop being so self-centered. It is not all your fault. Sometimes God hands us some of Creation’s trouble. It may even be a compliment.”

I struggled with what he told me and got only a little bit of it. Some time later, when I had a chance to see the second saint, I posed the same question, saying I could not believe that God would ever lead us into temptation. This man had a smiling face with piercing, dark eyes, so you were always getting sort of healed and wounded at the same time. He looked at me with that gentle, rapier smile and said, “You were born, weren’t you?” It was three weeks before I began to realize what a wondrous and helpful response that was.

The third man told me, without insult, that I was not “old enough” to understand yet. He also told me to read the third and fourth chapters of Luke and, when I was old enough, that was where I would find the answer.

The first big problem we have with this last petition of the Lord’s Prayer is that we do not think God would lead us into temptation. But God would, and God does! It finally comes clear, in fact, that if God loves us – and *because* God loves us – God has no choice. Satan tempts us with counterfeit goodies. Satan tries to mess up or counteract the good with seemingly appealing shortcuts and with corruptions and aberrations of the truth. But God leads us into the places of temptation. We have an earth saying: “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” This is always true, unless God is in charge. Yet it is God who keeps giving us power, hoping we will stay humble and leave God in charge. But we *are* given power – we *are* led into temptation. There is no possibility of power, growth, or purpose apart from temptation. Light casts shadows. God’s only other choice is to leave us undeveloped – to leave us asleep, or dead.

What could be more beautiful than parenthood – participation in creation? And yet, to be given such absolute power over infant human beings is indeed being led into temptation. Every ability we discover,

every gift we are given, every opportunity that comes our way is backside with the temptation to abuse the power; to gain control for ourselves; to use things, events, and people for our own ends instead of for God. The most dangerous place of all is after God has called us, commissioned us, sent us, and now we are on the job (the mission), doing what we believe or know God has called us to – and then we take over and start running it ourselves, but in the name of God. Sure, God is on our side because it was all God's idea in the first place, but we have taken over. That is the most dangerous place of all. God leads us all into that kind of temptation, if we will go with God at all in the first place. What is God's alternative? Never to deal with us at all.

What happens immediately after Jesus is baptized and receives the Holy Spirit? He is led by the Spirit for forty days into the wilderness. There in the wilderness, Jesus also encounters Satan. There is no help for that! The mission has to be planned, strategized, understood. God knows the wilderness experience will be fraught with the toughest temptations Satan can devise. There is no help for it. Jesus has to go there. God sends Jesus into that wilderness of temptation. And it is Jesus who gives us this prayer.

So we would like to believe that God would never do such a thing as lead us into temptation. But God would and God does. There is no choice, except to abandon us or leave us as we are.

Now the second problem arises. Seeing the necessity – realizing God *must* lead us into temptation – why would we pray not to be so led? Well, we can imagine ourselves praying for escape, but why would Jesus instruct us to pray against what God is trying to do with us?

This is a prayer of great faith – the most personal, dynamic faith the world has ever known: *Abba – Daddy of the hallowed name*. It ends with a humility to match. This last petition does not ask for the highest Christian virtue directly; rather, it embodies the *attitude* of humility. It is not logically or theologically correct to ask God *not* to lead us into the hard places – into the temptations and testings – knowing that God must do that for our development. But the reality is that this is still our proper and rightful attitude, and any other attitude will cost us dearly.

As always, the fastest clarity comes in the analogy Jesus gives us: the relationship between a loving, wise parent and a trusting, exuberant child. It is the first day of school. The parent has tried to explain it all and the child has tried to get used to the idea, but the

day finally arrives. The parent takes the child to school and says, “This is your wonderful new teacher, and this is your exciting new classroom. Have a wonderful day.” And the child says. “I don’t want to do this. I want to go home with you.” And the parent says, “You cannot come home with me. School is important. You are going to love it. It means you are growing up. You will be safe. It will be all right. Trust me.” And the child says, in one way or another, “I don’t want to do this. I want to come home with you.” Do not lead me into temptation. Do not bring me to this test. I’m afraid. I don’t think I can handle this. “Come on, *Abba* – if you love me, you will not do this to me.”

Whether it’s walking into a classroom at age five, a new job at age forty-five, or the last hospital room at age eighty-five, the dynamics are much the same. Theologically, it is not correct to fight God’s plans for us. But honesty is more important to the relationship than acting correct. No matter how much you believe and trust God’s love – and no matter how much you love God back – if you are not afraid in God’s presence, you are not in God’s presence! God always has an agenda that is scary for us. We are afraid we will fail, or disappoint, or make fools of ourselves, or die. No matter how many times God says “Don’t worry, I will catch you,” we still wonder: Will God catch us? Can God catch us? What if something distracts God at the crucial moment? What if we are slippery? What if ... What if ...

There is another side to this same attitude. We are never to be wiseacres in the face of evil or temptation. Putting it more clearly: In God’s Kingdom, never volunteer! Never buck for promotion. Be grateful for everything, and be content with whatever level you find yourself on. But never volunteer.

This does not mean shirking or lack of enthusiasm. In human organizations, we sometimes have to do extra to get noticed, and we have to get noticed to get any real opportunities. In God’s Kingdom, we are always noticed. The right opportunities will always be offered to us. Each new test will come just as soon as we are ready for it – and from our perspective, always a little sooner. If we get cocky, get ambitious, try to speed things up, or think we can take on greater temptation than we are ready for, we only end up defeated, resentful, and rebellious children. It is right for us to hold back – to be alarmed at the power of temptation and evil.

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From Noah to Abraham to Moses and down to now, every saint's first reaction to God's leading has been: Do not send me! I'm not good enough. I will blow it! I cannot do this for You. Send somebody else. Send my brother, Aaron. Surely there are others with better qualifications. "*Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*" (Peter, in Luke 5:8.)

So in our right minds, we would really rather not have the money, the power, the position, the prestige – knowing what comes with it, and how many others have been defeated so badly by such things. We would rather enjoy our friends and loved ones and the fellowship of the church, and sit around talking, praying, learning, and growing for as long as possible. And please, God, leave it this way. Do not give us any new assignments. We are not at all sure we could handle them.

And do you see how this prayer ends without an ending? It does not expect to have the last word. It ends with unfinished thoughts hanging in the silence ... waiting for Another to speak.

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One cannot pray this prayer consciously for very long without realizing that Jesus was giving to His followers the principles of prayer that He Himself used. Knowing that He was headed for a cross, Jesus must have been closing His own prayers for months (at least) with this plea that He would not have to go there. *Do not bring us to the test.* It is the Gethsemane clause. Jesus both did not want to face the ordeal of this death, and did not want to fail the test by deserting God in that Garden.

The Gethsemane clause is never left out of the Christian contract. The covenant each obedient servant has with God includes the testing and the temptation. Will you make it through your life here without having the clause activated? Will I? We do not want to be interrupted – again. "Please let us go on living here in hopefully ever-greater security. And hopefully some of what we do here also serves You. But please do not bring us to the test." Can you pray such a thing with a little heartfelt sentiment?

Nevertheless, we know it can come: a new challenge, a new test, a new temptation, a new assignment. Any day at all, it can come. We do not want to fail or betray or let down our Lord. But against

real temptation, we feel weak and uncertain and undependable. God has big business, and we would certainly rather die serving God than die some of the other ways we know about. But if God brings us to the test, will we respond as true believers should?

*Lead us not into temptation.* We pray it humbly every day – knowing that some days, despite our requests, God will. Is it very clear in your mind which times in your life God was leading you into temptation? In my case, they are directly connected to all of my most dramatic spiritual breakthroughs. I would not be surprised if it is the same with you.