

The Lord's Prayer: Lead Us Not into Temptation
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James 1:2-4, 12-16

² My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; ⁴ and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

¹² Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. ¹³ No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; ¹⁵ then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. ¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved.

Matthew 6:9-13 Serendipity Bible

⁹ This then is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

I love these words from James: "No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one." Another translation of the Greek word for "tempt" is "test" so they are interchangeable when we read them. Which means we can say, "God tests no one." I know, and respect, that there is a common thought that God doesn't tempt, nor test, us more than we can handle. That thought is hard for me - as a fellow follower of Christ, not as someone who stands up here each week but as someone who is traveling a faith journey alongside your faith journeys - that thought is hard for me to subscribe to for three reasons.

- 1) James says it isn't so – God does not test us,
- 2) I cannot understand how testing someone is loving them (and God is love above all else), and
- 3) I've known people who **have** been broken, marriages which have not survived a variety of sorrows, sobriety which has ended, homelessness and incarceration which become permanent, people who have taken their lives.

It troubles me to disagree with people whom I respect, with people who have toughed it out through many troubles because this thought, that God doesn't test us more than we can handle, has given them strength to hang in there. So I come before you today and say, "I don't know."

Just as our author James says “faith without works is dead”¹ and the apostle Paul says that faith supersedes works,² so James says that God does not tempt us and Paul says that he was **given** a thorn in his flesh, “a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.”³ What do we do with these seemingly conflicting accounts of the good news? We, like believers before us, ask the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom and, together, we seek to understand these readings in the context of the whole Bible, for they are not meant to be read alone or pitted against one another but to be seen each as necessary threads in the whole fabric of the Bible.

For this morning, we’ll do that by looking at the Lord’s Prayer and, specifically “Lead us not into temptation.” We know what tests us – I need not make a list for you. As for what tempts us, it can be summed up in three words: our own way. In all of the temptations laid before Christ in the wilderness, turning stones into bread, calling upon the angels to save him, having power over all the earth,⁴ Satan asked him to do things for himself which would give him fame and glory. But Jesus resisted, for he came that he might give **God** glory; he came to do things God’s way so **we** might know what it looks like, we might have an example to follow. Whether we lay the blame on Satan or our culture or ourselves, the temptations to do things our own way, for our own gratification and even for our own glory, present themselves everywhere we turn. William J. Carl III rephrases the prayer this way: “Lead us, O Lord, not into the temptation of thinking our possessions define who we are. Whatever separates us from God, lead us away from that, O Lord.”⁵

I would add a few words: Lead us, O Lord, not into the temptation of thinking our possessions or our accolades or our friends define who we are. Lead us, O Lord, not into the temptation of allowing our roles and our responsibilities to define us, and to hold us back from our relationship with you. Lead us, O Lord, not into the temptation of thinking our mistakes - those actions we are tempted to dwell on, the past we are tempted to regret, those things which convince us that we do not deserve the forgiveness we’ve just prayed for – let those not define us. Lead us away from that, O Lord. Lead us away from things and thoughts that mire us in ourselves instead of releasing us into you.

We must pray that prayer because, by nature of our humanity, it is inevitable that we will be tempted, and many times **not** against our wills. In Mark Twain’s *Following the Equator*, he opens chapter eighteen with what he calls a Pudd’nhead Maxim which he writes are “wisdoms...for the luring of youth toward high moral altitudes.”⁶ His maxim on trouble is: “It’s easier to stay out than get out.”⁷

¹ James 2

² Romans 4

³ 2 Corinthians 12:7

⁴ Matthew 4:1-11

⁵ William J. Carl, III. *The Lord’s Prayer for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press; 2006) p. 72.

⁶ Mark Twain. *Following the Equator* (iTunes free version) p. 4.

We do, indeed, know that from experience. And our author James sees this fact with hope, saying, “whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.” Anne Lamott describes our situation in a coarser way, which I appreciate. She says, “Sometimes the first time we pray, we cry out in the deepest desperation, ‘God help me.’ This is a great prayer, as we are then at our absolutely most degraded and isolated, which means we are nice and juicy with the consequences of our best thinking and are thus possibly teachable.”⁸ Either way you hear it, temptation is a chance to learn, a chance to get closer to God.

It’s easy to hear in “Lead us not into temptation” an emphasis on “temptation.” I suspect if we had the chance to ask Christ, he would suggest the emphasis is on “Lead.” The Chinese symbol for the word “crisis” is composed of two parts, one the symbol for “danger” and the other the symbol for “opportunity.” In our own crises what do we choose? Carl leans the way I believe Christ would and says, “So often, when we look at it we look at it sort of negatively: keep us away from the bad things. But in reality there’s a positive side to this. What we are saying is ‘Lord, lead us in the paths of truth and peace and joy and harmony. Lead us in the direction you want us to go with our lives so that we are not anxious, we are not worrying, we are not so upset about the littlest thing, the smallest thing that happens to us. Bring us into your pathway, O Lord. Show me the way, O Lord.’ So there is a positive side to ‘Lead us not into temptation.’”⁹

So what do we make of the idea that “God doesn’t test us more than we can handle” in light of all of this? I still don’t have a definitive answer - and wise persons will say that if I think I fully understand the gospel then I definitely do not – but I can say this with assurance: in anything we face, we never face it alone. If we pray “Lead us not into temptation” then surely God is with us since God is whom we are following.

And maybe my human conception of what it looks like when people break under the weight of difficulty, well, maybe that’s not how God sees it at all. For in all brokenness is an opportunity for God to redeem, for God to bring forth good from what we understand as bad. That **is** the overarching theme of the Word. The fabric of the Bible is a tapestry which depicts redemption and James and Paul, danger and opportunity, temptation and endurance – these are all threads which make up that image. Thanks be to God for that.

Let us pray: Lord, lead us in the paths of truth and peace and joy and harmony. Lead us in the direction you want us to go with our lives so that we are not anxious, we are not worrying, we are not so upset

⁷ Mark Twain. p. 226.

⁸ Anne Lamott. *Help, Thanks, Wow* (New York: Riverhead Books; 2012) pp. 3-4.

⁹ William J. Carl, III. *The Lord’s Prayer for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press; 2006) pp. 74-75.

about the littlest thing, the smallest thing that happens to us. Bring us into your pathway, O Lord. Show us the way, O Lord. Amen.