

“Deliver Us”

July 31, 2022

The Prayer Jesus Teaches series

Sam Levenson says, “Lead us not into temptation. Just tell us where it is; we’ll find it.” Faith in Jesus doesn’t exempt us from trials and temptation. Faith in Jesus calls us to face temptation honestly - and seek to follow the way of Jesus in dealing with it. Temptation is a real thing, and it affects all of us. It’s not whether we’ll face it, but what how we’ll respond *when* we face it.

When we pray "Lead us not into temptation," we’re trusting God to help us and seeking to work against its power in our lives. We know how powerful it can be. We know the damage it can do to us and to others! We’re not strong enough on our own to deal with it. We need God's help - and we may need the help of others, too. We keep noticing as we take each phrase of this prayer is how this prayer’s foundational goal is to help us love God and love others well.

Most of the time, those who are faithful in prayer focus not on themselves and their struggles, but rather on their relationship with God and how they can pray for others. I wonder if that’s a part of the reason for Jesus to structure prayer this way.

When the focus is on others, then we’re not as concerned or preoccupied with ourselves. It makes sense, but it's difficult to do. It's not a call to be a martyr and not care about our own needs, but rather a call not to be self-centered to the point that we aren’t thinking of others. We always have to remember that Jesus offers this prayer in the context of a community: *Our Father...lead us...*

A 17th century rabbi explained (prayer) this way: If you watch a man out on a boat grab a rope and pull his boat to shore you might think, if you were confused about weight and motion, that he was really pulling the shore to his boat. People have much the same confusion about spiritual weight and motion: In prayer, some believe that you are pulling God closer to you. But in fact, the heartfelt prayer pulls you closer to God.

Last week, when we focused on “*And forgive us,*” we lifted up the word AND that falls between asking for daily bread and then moving into forgiveness. Well, there’s another important grammar point as we move into this last phrase; there’s another AND - *And lead us not into temptation...* It’s another reminder of the way that this prayer from Jesus builds in each successive phrase. Forgive us, and lead us, O God.

If we read this prayer a certain way, it may seem like God leads us into temptation in direct ways. But some scholars suggest that we add a pause (think of a comma) so we pray it this way: *And lead us, not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...* so the emphasis is on God leading us and not us leading ourselves because Sam Levenson is right - temptation isn’t difficult for us to find.

Reading from Luke’s Gospel, we’re told that Jesus was led into the wilderness. There he’s tempted by Satan (the devil), but doesn’t fall into temptation. And we may

gloss over it, but the temptations were difficult. Jesus has just experienced baptism by water and the Spirit's presence and the voice calling him Beloved.

I feel for Jesus – to go from the joy of baptism, filled with the Holy Spirit, and then be thrust in the wilderness - already hungry, thirsty, alone – and that's when temptation comes. When I think about Jesus and the devil (or Satan, sometimes called the Adversary, or whatever name you want to use), it makes me uneasy. It's a hard story. Yes, it's Jesus – Son of God, Savior of the world – but in all his humanity, this spiritual battle is a tough one. Jesus knew temptation well. He's clear about its power and calls us to pay attention to it in our prayers.

Jesus hits the big stuff in this prayer - forgiveness, temptation - those real struggles. There's some consolation that Jesus faces temptation. He shares the struggles of our humanity. He knows it - fully human and fully divine.

Maybe we have an image of what Jesus looks like in our minds, but what does the devil look like? Author Anne Rice offers the most compelling image for me. She's wrote a series of books on the life of Jesus. In her account of Jesus' temptation, Jesus faces a mirror image of himself, which makes the temptation even more powerful. Forget the devil as a red figure with horns and a pitchfork. Evil is usually more sinister, manipulative, and conniving than that.

Our picture of the devil may not matter so much, but we have to deal with the nature of temptation. Jesus isn't tempted with awful things. He's not up against sins of greed, lust, pride, anger, envy, sloth, or gluttony (remember our seven deadly sins?) in such stark terms. Really, the temptations Jesus faces point to the good, but it's not the good he's called to do.

First, turn the stones into bread. Jesus is hungry, but he could feed all who are hungry! He does that in his ministry, but it's not his sole calling. Go ahead – satisfy yourself with food and use your power to get what you want. It's a temptation of possession. But bread alone isn't the answer, Jesus says. Jesus is the Bread of Life.

Second, worship the devil and have power - endless political power - even power to do good and make peace. Go ahead - take power over the world and get your way. A temptation of power. How many of us like power and control?

Jesus brings peace, but not necessarily through worldly structures, though he certainly challenges the politics of his day. But his worship is for God alone. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says that his peace is different than what the world gives. It's peace that permeates and changes the heart from living with fear to living with faith.

So, Jesus is tempted - possession and power. Lastly, jump from the top of the Temple so everyone knows you're the Son of God. Surely that will gain Jesus some followers. Go ahead – show the world you're special and get everyone's attention. A temptation of protection. But testing God isn't what Jesus will do, and miracles won't be the only way that people come to believe, though they are important in his ministry.

Jesus uses this moment to define his life and ministry. He will not be the One who goes for the quick answer to immediate needs. Bread for the hungry isn't the end of his mission. He will feed people and meet needs, but he offers new life and hope that outlasts a simple meal.

He will not be the One who worships anyone else except God. Power over others isn't the end of his mission. He will not be the One who does wonders just so others believe. Certainty isn't the end of his mission; faith and trust and relationship with God are the goal. Miracles point to something more.

One thing that's clear is that Jesus doesn't simply jump into these offers to do good. Perhaps it's a reminder to us to be more discerning and more prayerful. When faced with temptation, we can and should pause. Take some time to pray and consider the whole picture.

The offers Jesus encountered are hard for us to ignore. We like pleasure, power, and prestige. We like getting what we want when we want it, getting our own way, and being revered by others. We get sucked into over-indulgence. We have the option of putting God last and filling up our schedules with other things. Temptation is real and all around us, and we can't fight it on our own strength. We need God's help to live with it and overcome it.

The prayer we pray is for God to *lead us* - that part comes first. *And lead us, not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...* And that's where the prayer ends in Matthew. The part that's been added probably comes from I Chronicles 29. Jesus ends with this part - lead us - so that we're following God and no one else.

Perhaps even by praying it, we pay closer attention to avoiding temptation. It isn't up to God alone to help us avoid temptation. We have work to do. Someone wrote, "Faith is faith because it does not demand God perform on cue, because it believes in God's promises, because it accepts that God's presence is always at hand, no matter what our circumstances or challenges."

We pray for God to lead us, but prayer involves work on our work. We pray and work. If I don't want to be tempted by chocolate, I shouldn't have it in my house! If I struggle with lust, I shouldn't put myself in a situation that challenges me or tempts me - whether in person or online. If I get out of control with alcohol, I shouldn't drink or I should ask someone to hold me accountable. If I can't stop at the slot machine or the game table, I shouldn't be at the casino. If I tend to respond quickly in anger, I have to be intentional about taking time before I react. *And lead us, not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...*

And yet, we know the struggle is real. It's not simple, easy, or quick - sounds like forgiveness, right? But that request for God to deliver us really means for God to rush to us and rescue us from evil that is so very real. We need God to lead us - and protect us. But we also have to be aware of our vulnerability to temptation. And it's not just from our personal struggles, but from the communal struggles, too. It's too easy to fall into the

temptation to love less than we should. If this prayer is supposed to form us and transform us, then anything that doesn't help us love God and love others is a temptation. We see hatred, violence, greed, and apathy permeate the world. Temptation is real.

Henri Nouwen says, "When we are connected with God and God alone then we discover that the God of our prayer is the God of our neighbor. Therefore: The closer we come to God, the closer we come to each other." That's what this prayer that Jesus teaches can do for us - form us and transform us. *Lead us...deliver us...*

The closer we come to God, the closer we come to each other. I pray that's what happens for us as we continue to pray the prayer Jesus teaches - not simply saying right words - because Jesus warns against that, too - but praying it and meaning it - and allowing it to shape our lives.

As we pray together, when we come to the Lord's Prayer together, we'll pray slowly...phrase by phrase. Let us pray...