

“The Prayer: Lead us Not to the Time of Trial”

Matthew 6:5-9, 13-; Luke 11:1-4

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

I read a description of prayer the other day that I found really insightful. It said, trying to peach about prayer is kind of like falling into the ocean. We cannot touch the bottom; we are overwhelmed by the immensity of the sea around us. There’s no way to grasp the depth and the breadth of this mystery we call prayer. And yet, we continue to be buoyed by prayer—to be lifted up by it—even if we fail to fully understand it.¹

This sounds like a good analogy and description of my own practice of prayer. Maybe it fits yours as well. The more I come to understand about prayer, the more I understand that I don’t understand it. Prayer, the communication pathway were given us to speak to God, is a mystery. We must always approach it with deep humility over our limited ability to understand prayer—how it works, why it works, when it works, and, when it seems not to accomplish much. That’s probably one of the reasons the disciples of Jesus asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray...” They were saying in essence: “Lord, we don’t really know how to pray very well. Take the mystery out of it for us. Teach us how to pray.”

We are in week four of our sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer. In this series, I set out to explore the Lord’s Prayer, the prayer of prayers for Christians, in effort to shed some more light on it; to glean some additional insights on The Prayer that is so familiar to us. I still find that no matter how much water I tread in the ocean of prayer, mystery remains. To use another analogy: If I turn a light on the Lord’s Prayer, it’s like shining a flashlight on a football field—I can only see a tiny piece of ground; and there is much that remains shrouded in mystery, much for us to wonder about, much that we simply give over to God when we pray.

Lead us not into temptation/to the time of trial.

This week we come to what is probably the most difficult part of The Prayer to understand: “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” The way this reads, it sounds like we are asking God not to tempt us. Is this really what’s going on? Does God tempt us into sin? It certainly sounds that way.

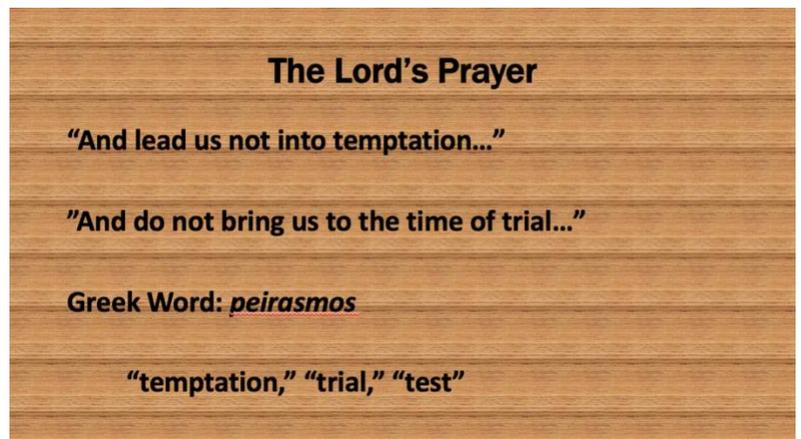
Well, the short answer is, no, God does not tempt us in an effort to cause us to sin. But the wording has caused problems at times for Christians.

Just two years ago, Pope Francis, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, approved changes to the wording of the Lord’s Prayer. The change is from “Lead us not into temptation,” to “Do not let us fall into temptation.” The Pope explained to an Italian TV station that the English translation is not accurate “because it speaks of a God who induces temptation.... I am the one who falls. It’s not him pushing me into temptation to then see how I have fallen. A father doesn’t do that; a father helps you to get up immediately. It’s Satan who leads us into temptation, that’s his department.”²

When I read the passage from Matthew earlier, I provided two different options for verse 13:

- And lead us not into temptation...
- And do not bring us to the time of trial.

Both translations are possible based on how Bible scholars translate a word from the original Greek text—that word is *peirasmos*.



¹ Paraphrase of comments by Lewis F. Galloway, “Luke 11:1-13, Homiletical Perspective, in Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, Eds., *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Volume 1, Chapters 1-11*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 309.

² Ryan W. Miller, “Our Father: Pope Francis approves changes to words of Lord’s Prayer, reports say,” *USA Today*, June 6, 2019, article online, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2019/06/06/our-father-pope-francis-approves-changes-words-lords-prayer/1366459001/>, accessed 3 February 2021.

This word can mean temptation, the way it is often translated. But it can also mean a trial or a test. We see this in several places in the New Testament:

- At the start of his ministry, “Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matthew 4:1). Note here that the Spirit of God led Jesus to the wilderness, but it was the devil, not God, who did the tempting.³
- Later, Jesus is put the test by the Religious authorities of Israel:
 - o The Sadducees and Pharisees tested him by asking for a sign from heaven—they got the sign of Jonah, who was three days in the belly of a great fish, a foreshadowing of Jesus’ death and Resurrection.
 - o The Pharisees tested him with a question about paying taxes to Caesar—Jesus told them to “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s.”
 - o And, a lawyer tested him with a question about what is the greatest commandment—love God with all your being, and your neighbor too.

The greatest test for Jesus was the Cross. In the Garden at Gethsemane, Jesus came face to face with the power of Evil. He prayed that the moment might pass, that the cup might be taken from him, “yet not what I want but what you want” (Matthew 26:39)—an echo of the Lord’s Prayer, “thy will be done.”

When he returned to find his disciples sleeping, he woke them and said, “Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial” (Matthew 26:41).⁴

In all these cases, Jesus is led to a time of testing, or temptation, but it is not God who tempts him. God does not tempt us. The Apostle James confirmed this is the case with these words:

“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. But one is tempted by one’s own desire...” (James 1:13-14).

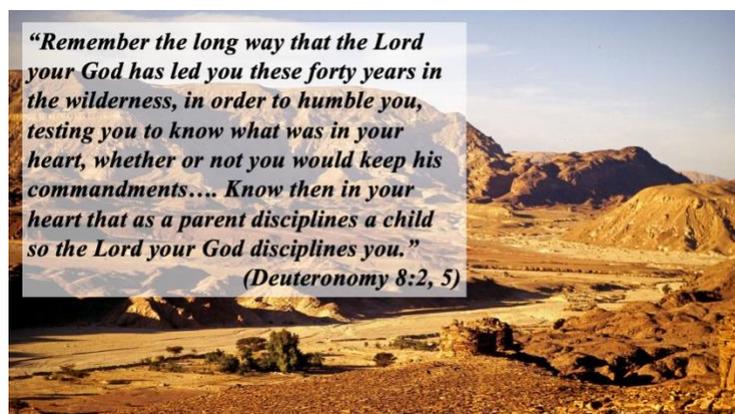
God does not tempt us.

But God can, and does, test us.

We see this in the Bible too:

- Job’s faith in God was tested when God allowed Satan—acting here like a prosecuting attorney—to take away all Job’s wealth, and the people and things he loved. Job remained steadfast in his faith and was ultimately rewarded with new material goods and family; although, take note, there are troubling questions that remain about the suffering of Job (the reason for it is never given) and the seeming inconsequence of his family (all but his wife died), which make this a difficult story to study.
- Another test is that of Abraham, whom God asks to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Abraham’s faithful obedience brings him to the point of killing his son, but a last-minute reprieve from God allows him to sacrifice a ram instead.

We are not likely to face tests of such magnitude as Job or Abraham. But God does allow our testing, much as a parent allows their child to struggle through certain things, in order to help them grow.



In the Book of Deuteronomy, for example, we read about God’s testing the people of Israel in the wilderness:

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.... Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you (Deuteronomy 8:2, 5).

³ Wesley Hill, *The Lord’s Prayer, A Guide to Praying to Our Father*, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 74.

⁴ Examples of testing from Amy-Jill Levine, *Sermon on the Mount, A Beginner’s Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020), 85-87.

God allows us to be tested, so that our faith and obedience can be strengthened to meet the challenges of this fallen world we live in.

Because of Jesus, we can even rejoice in our trials, according to the Apostle Peter, because Christ has already overcome temptation for us:

Even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold, that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Peter 1:6-7).

In fact, God remains faithful to help us in our times of trial that may lead to temptation:

No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

It is God's desire that we turn to Him in times of temptation, not so God will condemn us for our weakness, but so that God can rescue us.

But deliver us from evil.

Evil has a life of its own, one that can show up in human beings. We have seen evil in our lifetimes.

- 9/11 was one occasion when a small group of people, radicalized with an ideology of hatred rooted in distorted religious beliefs, carried out terror attacks on the United States.
- Less memorable, though on a far greater scale, was the evil unleashed in the African nation of Rwanda, where in just 100 days, around 800,000 people of the Tutsi tribe were murdered by extremists from the Hutu tribe. A Canadian general who headed up a UN mission to the country and saw the results of this genocide first-hand, wrote: "In Rwanda I shook hands with the devil. I have seen him, I have smelled him and I have touched him."⁵

The Bible affirms the presence of evil in the world. It is personified in the form of the devil or Satan, who opposes God's will every step of the way.

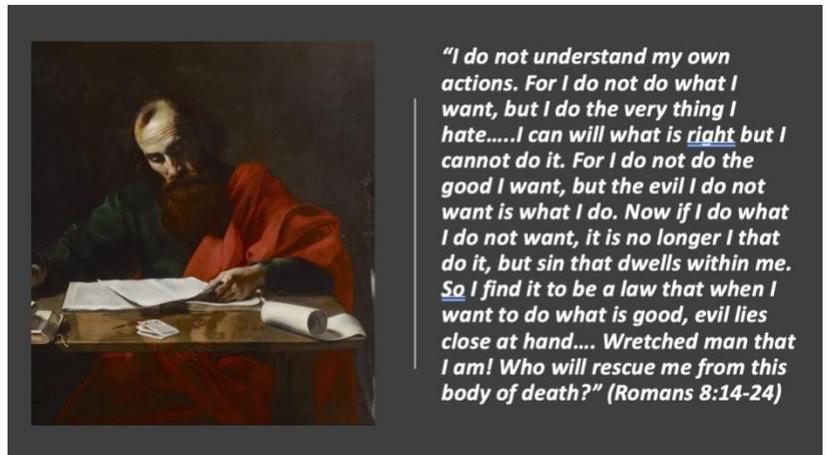
- When we pray "deliver us from evil," we are asking God to liberate us from that which binds us in servitude to something other than God.
- When we pray to God to "deliver us from evil," we are not talking about the run of the mill, got your hand caught in the cookie jar, kinds of disobedience.

Here we are talking about the power of evil that ensnares and enslaves, that oppresses and degrades, that exploits other people, aiming to destroy us in mind, soul, and body. Here is where we find great evils: drug addiction, human trafficking, prostitution, genocide, slavery (yes it still exists), and more. Evil enslaves and tries to keep us from doing God's will.

The Apostle Paul testified to this in his letter to the Roman Church, when he wrote:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate....I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.... Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Romans 8:14-24).

Evil is a reality and a powerful force in our lives. But it is also a defeated power because of Jesus Christ.



⁵ "Rwanda genocide: 100 days of slaughter," BBC News, 4 April 2019, article on internet, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-26875506>, accessed 4 Feb 2021. Romeo Dallaire, Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda, (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004), xviii. Quoted in Hill, The Lord's Prayer, 81.

How to resist evil must begin with confession: we confess that we, like Paul, cannot free ourselves from its power. The second step is to seek liberation from the power of evil by calling on Jesus Christ to help us. When we confess our inability to save ourselves, we turn to the one who has the power to heal us and free us from the power of sin—Jesus Christ.⁶ For it is Jesus who has overcome sin; Jesus who has overcome death; Jesus who has overcome the world.

Christ died for us, so that we can live into the freedom that is promised us by God. That is true now, and on a daily basis, and it is true in eternity; for there will come a time when Christ returns, when heaven and earth become one, when evil is finally and fully destroyed, and Christ will be all in all. Until then, we pray daily for God to not lead us to the time of trial, and to deliver us from the evils we see around us, so that we can become healing, hoping, praying agents of God’s redemption in the world.

One of my all-time favorite hymns captures both the plea for deliverance, and the result in the last verse of “God of Grace and God of Glory”:

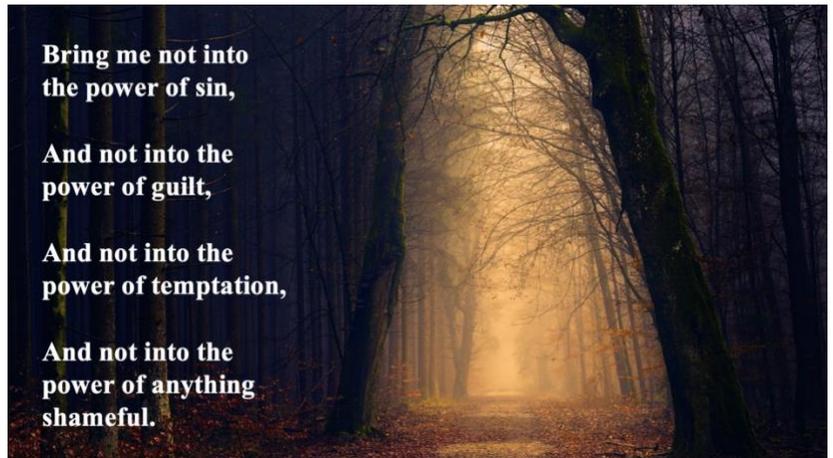
Save us from weak resignation,
To the evils we deplore;
Let the search for thy salvation
Be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
Serving thee whom we adore.
Serving thee whom we adore.⁷

Closing prayer.

I want to close this morning with another prayer that is very close in sentiment to the Lord’s Prayer. It comes from the Jewish faith; it is a daily form of prayer that petitions God to lead us away from the possibilities of sin. Let us pray this prayer together:

Bring me not into the power of sin,
And not into the power of guilt,
And not into the power of temptation,
And not into the power of anything
shameful.⁸

The reason this prayer, and the Lord’s Prayer, make for good daily prayers is that Jesus teaches us to rely on God for everything, and that includes daily victories in the moral and spiritual realms. May we keep on praying for God to deliver us, to rely on God alone, and to strengthen us by the power of God’s Holy Spirit, day by day, night by night, and prayer by prayer. Amen.



If you want to know more:

C. Clifton Black, *The Lord’s Prayer, Interpretation Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

Justo Gonzalez, Teach Us to Pray, *The Lord’s Prayer in the Early Church and Today*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020).

Wesley Hill, *The Lord’s Prayer, A Guide to Praying to Our Father*, (Christian Essentials), (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

⁶ Justo Gonzalez, *Teach Us to Pray, The Lord’s Prayer in the Early Church and Today*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020, 143-149.

⁷ Harry Emerson Fosdick, (God of Grace and God of Glory,” *United Methodist Hymnal*, #577, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989).

⁸ Clinton E. Arnold, General Editor, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, Volume 1, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 46.

