

Teach Us to Pray sermon series
Deliver Us
April 3, 2022
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I used to have a tradition of writing my sermons on Thursday afternoons at Chocolate Holler, a hot chocolate and coffee shop here in town. I'd get my Honey Bear or Brownie Batter hot chocolate, fire up the computer, and pray the Holy Spirit would give me something to say. But the pandemic shut that down. In the meantime, I moved to a different part of the city and I'm now in walking distance of the new North Lime Coffee and Donuts. Now, every Friday morning while Amy is teaching, I walk to North Lime to do my sermon writing.

Each Friday is like a journey with Jesus into the wilderness, where he was tested by Satan. I know I should eat healthy and I try to be gluten-free, but those donuts stare at me with little red horns and a pitchfork and the Devil whispers in my ear, "Do you know how much better your sermon will be if you fuel it with a chocolate glaze?" I want to respond in solidarity with Jesus, "Man does not live on donuts alone," but then I think, "I actually COULD live on donuts alone, and it would probably be the most glorious three months of my life before I die because my arteries are clogged with crème filling." Every Friday morning I pray the prayer, "Lead me not into temptation but deliver me from eclairs." And when I finish praying, I get two gluten-rich donuts and write a sermon.

We conclude our sermon series today on the Lord's Prayer with what may be the most problematic line in the whole prayer. People often wonder, "Why would God lead us into temptation?" It's not like we need any help, right? Rita Mae Brown said, "Lead me not into temptation; I can find the way myself." We don't need any assistance from God in finding temptation, which makes the wording of this prayer seem peculiar.

So let's deal with that right off the bat. This prayer is not trying to say that it is God who leads us into temptation. There are two ways to fix this misunderstanding: punctuation or translation. Pastor Adam Hamilton makes the point that the meaning changes if we insert a comma in the right place. There's a big difference between "lead us not into temptation" and "lead us, not into temptation." In the second version, we are asking God to lead us but not accusing God of leading us down the wrong path.

The more salient issue here may be one of translation. If you're not convinced, please know that even the Pope agrees. He angered traditionalists when he recently approved a change to the wording of the Lord's Prayer. He said it should now say, "Do not let us fall into temptation." The Pope added, "It is not a good translation 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." The Message translation takes it even further from the traditional meaning when it says, "Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil."

Now, that opens up a whole can of worms about the source of our temptation. If we can't blame God for that, who is responsible for our temptations? Does that fall solely on our shoulders? Or is there indeed a deeper evil out there from which we need to be delivered, a Devil out there with red horns and a pitchfork, leading us to donut cases and coercing us to give in to the things that tempt us?

Let me add this disclaimer: It's not wrong to be tempted. We are human and it is impossible for us not to be tempted by the things of this world. When you consider the seven deadly sins – greed, sloth, gluttony, lust, pride, envy, and wrath – we can be tempted to all of

them. We are tempted to be greedy, to lust after others, to envy what others have. The sin is not in being tempted, but in giving into that temptation.

That susceptibility started at the very beginning with Adam and Eve, as Rick read for us. God tells them they can eat of any tree of the garden – the pear tree, the peach tree, the Reese’s Egg tree, the brisket tree – but they couldn’t eat of one particular tree. And then the serpent comes along to tempt them. I don’t hear the serpent proclaiming this temptation in a concession seller’s voice – “Forbidden fruit! Get your forbidden fruit right here!” I hear a quiet whisper, a snaky hiss, an insidiously quiet voice in Eve’s ear. “It’s OK. Go ahead and eat it.”

Isn’t that how temptation usually works? We all know the areas of our lives where we are most vulnerable, where we are most likely to fall, and this is usually where temptation strikes. It’s not usually an all-at-once kind of thing. The James passage spells this out with a great metaphor. James says God doesn’t do the tempting. Instead, we are tempted by our own desire. And that desire conceives a small seed of evil, just a little parasite that grows inside of us. We may not even notice. “It’s just a little thing. No one will find out. I’m not hurting anyone.” And yet, James says that will grow and give birth to sin, which leads to death.

We know we shouldn’t give into temptation, but sometimes it’s hard to isolate the voice of temptation in order to resist it. That reminds me of the game show “The Price is Right.” Johnny Olson would say to a new contestant, “Come on down!” and they would join the other players and Bob Barker down front. Then Barker would reveal the next prize – a dinette set or a case of Rice-A-Roni – and contestants would bid on it. The crowd would start whooping and hollering and shouting out amounts and the contestants would try to listen to figure out what they should bid, but it became this chaotic symphony of voices that were indistinguishable for each other.

That’s what avoiding temptation and following God feels like to me. I want to listen to God’s voice, to hear what God is trying to say to me, but all these other voices are shouting, too. “Stay busy!” “You have to be perfect!” “Spend all your money on yourself!” “We have donuts!” And before you know it, you’ve given into your own desires. Resisting temptation was not easy for Adam and Eve, and it is still incredibly hard for us today.

So, we pray for God to lead us, not into temptation, but as Psalm 23 says, down paths of righteousness. One of a shepherd’s jobs is to protect his flock, to keep it safe from danger, to make sure it stays on the path. That’s what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. God knows we have brains and know right from wrong, but God also knows we are not strong enough to resist. And so, through Jesus, God has not only shown us how to resist temptation but has offered us forgiveness when we go ahead and order those donuts and give into our desires.

That’s what we pray for when we ask God to deliver us. Deliver us from the evil that exists in the world, deliver us from all the attempts to distract us, deliver us from ourselves. And, because we know this is a communal prayer, asking God to deliver us instead of deliver me, we have to be mindful of the ways we are seduced by and contribute to societal representations of evil. Things like Jim Crow laws, segregation, legislation limiting the rights of people because of their sexual orientation, loving a country so much you hate people not from that country...all of these are examples of the evil from which God we ask God to deliver us.

We can take heart that, as we will be reminded in a few weeks, Jesus has already given us the victory over evil when he walked out of the tomb. We are no longer captives to temptation, to what Paul calls the sinful nature within us. When faced with temptation, our ability to say “No” is backed up by the power of Jesus Christ in our lives. That doesn’t mean we won’t still give in,

but Christ reminds us that's no longer who we are. You are a child of God, forgiven, loved, and free, and God wants to lead you down paths of righteousness.

The end of the prayer, what we call the "Doxology," was probably not the original end of the prayer, although some translations have added it. We know it was being used by the early second century, although some churches still don't use it. I used to worship on Friday afternoons at a Catholic church. The first time I went to mass, there were only about 10 of us, so I did my best to mimic the behavior of the others so I didn't stand out too much. When it came to the Lord's Prayer, I forgot that Catholics don't say the Doxology, so after "deliver us from evil," I said, "For thine is the pow..." A little old man in front of me turned around, winked, and said, "Who's the new guy?"

This last line is not just an add-on. One book called it "a pledge of allegiance to a king and his kingdom that throws all other allegiances into crisis." If we claim that God owns the kingdom, the power, and the glory, then we are saying that nothing else has a claim on those things, not Wall Street or Madison Avenue or the Pentagon. We are claiming that we serve God's kingdom, not any other nation or principality. We are claiming that the power we have – purchasing power, voting power, activist power, the power of privilege – is to be used in service to God and God's kingdom. We are claiming that we don't care who gets the credit for the work we do because it all belongs to God's glory. We are pledging our allegiance to God.

That means we are once again paying attention to pronouns. When we talked about "thy kingdom come," we drew a distinction between "me, my, mine" and "thee, thy, thine." And here, at the end of the prayer, we emphatically restate that distinction. "For thine is the kingdom. For thine is the power. For thine is the glory." It all belongs to you, God. Despite the temptation to claim things for ourselves, to try and make a name for ourselves, to prioritize our own agendas, we know it all belongs to you.

We need to pray this prayer every day because every day we need to be reminded of the importance of giving God the glory, of committing to God's kingdom, of nourishing ourselves and making sure others are fed, of offering the forgiveness we have received, and of resisting temptation and following God's lead. Every day, we need to make the choice between listening to the voice of the Spirit or the whisper of the serpent. Every day, we must make the choice – mine or thine? What do you choose today? Will you join me one more time in praying this prayer together?