

The Lord and His Prayer

Temptation and Evil

Genesis 22: 1-14 Matthew 4: 1-11 Matthew 6: 13 (Luke 11: 4b)

This is the last sermon in the series on the Lord's Prayer. Today we consider the hardest element of the prayer, the final petition concerning temptation and evil. We need to remember that the petitioner in prayer connects the sacred with the worldly, seeing the tension between the eternal and the worldly as the temptation to evil presents itself.

The opening words of the petition pose the sharpest difficulty we may encounter, *Lead us not....* To put it differently, 'O God, may we not be led into temptation ...' The Epistle of James states: *When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does God tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.* (James 1: 13-14)

Temptation is commonly understood in basic terms. Temptation is the dessert menu. Temptation is sexual and lustful. Temptation is dropping a lie to serve your own purposes. Temptation is cheating the IRS a few dollars. Temptation is gossiping to undermine someone you don't care for. Temptation is gaining revenge, a tie in with last week's petition on forgiveness. Temptation is surrendering to the lesser, weaker value rather than sustaining the higher, greater value, like the temptation to retribution instead of forgiveness.

In all of these instances, our common trap is to look only at the surface issue, the physical reality present in each instance. Whether it's chocolate cake or pornography, a victory obtained fraudulently, or an ill-gotten financial gain, or chatting a few words against a foe, or seizing an opportunity for sweet revenge, we often fail to examine the spiritual bases that lead us into temptation. These tempting things in and of themselves can be neutrally valued. Just as we know some people can walk away from chocolate cake, we know others can't pass a slot machine without emptying every last dollar into it. When otherwise neutral factors meet a receptive, welcoming spirit, then they become tempting. It is the nature of the spirit that defines the temptation.

So then, what is temptation? It is to spiritually surrender to a particular weakness – whatever it may be – that entices us to depart from what we know is good, true and righteous. Everyone has weaknesses, and it's the responsibility of the faithful to be **aware** of their weaknesses so that there's a ready spirit for righteousness when the time of temptation comes. The weakness that we all must face as Christians concerns the strength of the spiritual foundation that keeps us faithful to God, or not.

Let's also remember not to trivialize, domesticate, or individualize these matters in the Lord's Prayer so that they fit into our limited or preferred range of imagination. We have to recall that the opening petitions of the Lord's Prayer focused on really big things: God, God's will, and God's Kingdom. It petitioned for the restoration of Paradise, to heal the breach caused by human sinfulness in Eden, the sin of wanting to be like

God. We pray that it will be ‘as in heaven, so on earth.’ This is the big stuff and we have to scale up our imaginations in order to grasp the impact of what the prayer conveys.

Having pledged one’s allegiance to the Kingdom, and having expressed the petition, *Thy Kingdom come*, woe to us if we’re found enmeshed in the web of the world and its false gods. The only other place in the gospels where we find the word “temptation” is in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus is with his disciples just prior to his arrest. From Matthew 26: 40-41: *Then [Jesus] returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”*

The admonition to “watch,” to be awake, to be alert, is repeated many times in the teachings of Jesus. Those who fail to watch, stay awake, remain alert, fail to be prepared for the Kingdom. They are likened to the blind who cannot see what God is doing, to the deaf who cannot hear the word of life. So it was with the disciples who did not understand what was coming, who did not recognize the betrayal, who never really comprehended what Jesus was all about, even there in Jerusalem, even at the Last Supper, even in Gethsemane. And in their failure to watch, stay awake, and remain alert, they abandoned Jesus to his fate, scattering in fear after his arrest.

Temptation is the failure to be mindful of the expectations of God, to make easy compromises in our faithfulness to God as we fall prey to the many, many false gods who vie for our attention, who promise us blessings and power and security, who proclaim their salvation and their truth, and who have no sincere interest in the God who is petitioned in the Lord’s Prayer. Temptation is when we make believe that we are God, selecting our truths, our blessings, and our salvation from a menu provided by the worldly Powers-That-Be. We do it every day and ally ourselves with evil, that evil being the worldly Powers-That-Be that supplant God and Kingdom and Savior in our lives with their fraudulence and corruption.

Today’s scriptures present two instances of individuals facing temptation. Revealed in each story is a remarkable spiritual resolve of obedience to the will of God.

Starting with Abraham and Isaac, we must first appreciate the figure of Isaac. As his only, long-awaited son, and the primary heir on whom the whole promise of God seems to rest for Abraham, Isaac represents the total sum of life’s blessing for old Abraham. Isaac is the most important thing in the whole world to Abraham.

As God tells Abraham, the father, to sacrifice the son in offering to God, the words of the Lord’s Prayer push us into the shoes of Abraham, ‘Lead me not into temptation....’ In this *extreme* example, the challenge of obedience to God, who asks the unthinkable of his faithful, devoted servant, seems overwhelming and ghastly. That is the exact intent. As we step into Abraham’s life at this moment, we hear the question – the spiritual question that challenges our faith and devotion, our spirit of obedience to God. “Will you literally sacrifice what is most precious and dear in your life to remain faithful to your God?”

With Abraham, we shudder and quake, “No, Lord God, not this, anything but this.” The power of temptation, the impulse to reject God is fully exposed here. No matter how reasonable it seems to reject God, no matter how **un**reasonable the demand from God should seem, the person of faith is pulled across the bounds of worldly, practical, rational reasoning, and compelled to leap into the mysterious expanse of faith in the most extreme and excruciating trust for a God who now suddenly seems so alien, remote, and incomprehensible. What spiritual level must be grown and sustained to bridge this incredible divide? What level of faith can plunge us into this fearsome mystery of sacred trust? It is truly exceptional.

Abraham’s willingness to obey God’s command is the whole story. He wholeheartedly pursues the murderous task that would result in an excruciating loss. Obviously, Abraham’s faithfulness to God was given full witness.

The spiritual challenge facing Jesus occurs in a particular context. Unlike Abraham who seems to enjoy a garden-variety day until God instructs him to sacrifice Isaac, Jesus has been on a long, isolated spiritual sojourn. A spiritual encounter in this desolate setting is to be expected. In fact, the scripture states that his **purpose** in sojourning in the desert was to be tempted by Satan – an invitation, if you will. Jesus goes into the desert wilderness to prepare for the challenge that awaits with prayer and fasting.

Jesus is hungry. The first temptation sets Jesus’ physical needs against his spiritual commitment. But let’s think bigger, because the stakes are bigger than a mere individual decision. Jesus can feed the whole world if he turns stone into bread. Jesus can bring material salvation to the poor and suffering. And isn’t that what God wants for the people of God’s greatest concern, the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable? However, Jesus is centered in his spirit from this wilderness sojourn, from his spiritual discipline. His mission is not to feed the world, not to bring bread to every open mouth and hungry stomach. His mission is to advance the Kingdom of God, to bring down the Powers-That-Be and their oppressive ways, their love of violence, their greedy exploitation, and their salvation that saves themselves at the expense of the little people who are kept poor, desperate, and feeling justified in doing so. We can even quote scripture just as the Powers-That-Be will do, and we can even use Jesus’ own words: *The poor you will have with you always*. We even heard it last week in the reading from Deuteronomy 15. But removed from context, the righteous Bible-quoting religious expose their true allegiance to evil, to the worldly Powers-That-Be, not to God or their professed Lord. No, Jesus knows his true mission. He casts the temptation aside.

The second temptation targets Jesus’ spirituality. Surely one who has spiritual strength would give it a clear demonstration. The Tempter quotes Jesus some scripture to show how righteous this request is. Tempting him to take a literal “leap of faith” and trust in the salvation of his God gets seen for what it is, an appeal to trust in his own power to coerce God’s obedience to him. This temptation speaks to us who might seek to test God and God’s faithfulness to us, rather than admitting we’re the ones whose faithfulness should be tested by God. Jesus will not turn the tables on God, but stays

focused on his mission as principal servant of God's Kingdom, not making God into his servant. He denies the validity of this proof of faith, offering instead a true trust in God by remaining steadfast. He quotes Deuteronomy 6: 16 to the Tempter, *You shall not tempt the Lord your God, or, Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*

The third temptation would give Jesus all of the wealth, power, and authority in the world in exchange for loyalty to the tempter. Even the most righteous may be tempted to take it all. With righteous intent, we may believe that *we* could bring the fulfillment of God's justice and peace, fulfilling the promise of God through our faithful and righteous exercise of authority over the wealth and power of the world. But the temptation to trust in oneself and empower oneself always comes at the expense of faithfulness to God. God must be professed as Sovereign of all creation and its destiny. It is *God's Kingdom* that must come. Jesus' mission is not to join the other worldly Powers-That-Be, but to put them all out of business. So, Jesus will not take this offer, neither imagining himself on a par with or greater than God, nor willing to sell out his spiritual commitment to the Tempter, regardless of the worldly prize.

The Lord's Prayer admits that we can be led into temptation, but it also asks for the spiritual strength to overcome and persevere. 'Lead us not into temptation *that delivers us into the web of evil purposes as collaborator and supporter of worldly Powers-That-Be*, but deliver us from evil *and preserve us unto yourself as faithful servants of the Kingdom.*'

Yet the prayer also reminds the believer of their responsibility to develop a spiritual vitality and depth to actively confront any temptation to turn aside from God and what is sacred, true and right. In an Olympic fraction of a second, the spirit will be confronted, tested, tempted to depart from the way of faithfulness and enter the profane, futile, and vain. God tests us in order to refine us, to awaken us to threatening weaknesses, and return us stronger to the path of faithful discipleship to our Lord.

As we are tested, may we reach for the glory of God rather than the gain of folly, embracing the beguiling siren song of the worldly Powers-That-Be, instead following obediently and faithfully the way of Christ toward his Kingdom of new life for all.