

October 13, 2019 – First Presbyterian Church of Redlands, Pastor Cheryl Raine

First Reading is from 1 Samuel 12:19-24

¹⁹ All the people said to Samuel, “Pray to the LORD your God for your servants, so that we may not die; for we have added to all our sins the evil of demanding a king for ourselves.” ²⁰ And Samuel said to the people, “Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart; ²¹ and do not turn aside after useless things that cannot profit or save, for they are useless. ²² For the LORD will not cast away his people, for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you a people for himself. ²³ Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way. ²⁴ Only fear the LORD, and serve him faithfully with all your heart; for consider what great things he has done for you.

Introduction to the Second Reading

Today we will explore a phrase in the Lord’s Prayer that has bothered the church since its early days. “Lead us not into temptation...” Some have asked, “Does God lead Jesus’ disciples, you and me, into temptation?”

Our reading from 1st Samuel suggests that God’s people get themselves into enough trouble all by themselves. We heard them beseech Samuel to not stop praying for them; otherwise they might die, for they had added to their own sin. I am sure we might feel the same way. We manage to sin well enough on our own. We certainly don’t need God to lead us into temptation.

So, let’s turn to the text and listen once more to the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray from the Gospel of Matthew.

The Second Reading is from Matthew 6:9-13

⁹ “Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

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

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

As we know the Lord’s Prayer is found in the Gospel of Matthew as well as in the Gospel of Luke. As we reach the concluding phrase in the biblical text of this prayer I offer both versions:

In Luke we read: “And do not bring us to the time of trial,” and

In Matthew we read: “And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.” You’ll note that Matthew has an additional phrase.

So, a reasonable question would be: Then why do we pray each and every Sunday, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil instead of the shorter version from Luke?” The easiest answer is because our ancestors in faith translated the prayer into English this way. Our English wording reflects the Matthew version mandated for use by Henry VIII, which was based on the English version of the Bible produced by Tyndale in 1525. And the reformers of the 1500’s continued to use this particular version of the prayer and we continue to pray this version today. Yet, this history probably doesn’t answer the question most of have about this phrase.

What we say weekly seems to imply that we have to ask God **not** to lead us into temptation. By praying this it sounds as if we believe that God **will** unless we can convince God otherwise! And that of course is troubling. I don’t know about you, but I don’t need any help in the temptation department. The principalities and powers of this world are strong enough lures without God hastening the way.

So, what exactly are we praying when we ask, “Lead us not into temptation?” First we need to look at the Greek. The Greek word translated in our prayer as temptation – peirasmos (peer-AS-mose) – is more accurately translated as, “trial,” or “test,” writes Frank Thomas. So when we say “temptation” we should understand it as a “time of trial” or “time of testing” as the NRSV translation suggests.

Yet, this doesn’t necessarily help, because heaven knows none of us want trials or tests in our lives either. We don’t want to be tempted, but we certainly don’t want trials or tests either. We prefer life to be smooth sailing. We prefer to believe that joining God’s team and working for God’s kingdom goals will bless us and those we love, keeping us secure from all storms and struggles. Deciding to be a Christian is supposed to be a good thing for our lives.

Yet, our lives tell a different story. Being a Christian doesn’t exempt us from the realities of life. And as was shared this past Thursday, untested values are just nice concepts. We all want to be kind, but in the face of rejection or ridicule can we retain the ability to be kind? The experience of adversity is often the crucible that determines whether or not we stay true to our values.

Now I am almost certain that most of us have gone through a time of trial and some of us are in the midst of them even now...a job loss, a debilitating illness, a financial crisis. All of us have been tempted by things we thought we wanted or desired, even though we knew they were not right or good for us, and some of us even now are struggling with temptations such as these...greed, alcohol, success, gluttony, pleasure. The stories of our lives suggest to us that we cannot overcome temptations or make it through difficulties - trials or tests - without help and that is why this phrase is so troubling, especially if we are to understand that it is God who is leading us into them. So, how are we to understand this line of the prayer?

First, the phrase is not a mantra for personal protection. We are reminded that we pray “us” and not “me.” When we pray this prayer we are not seeking to save ourselves as individuals per se. We are praying to save us, to deliver us, collectively. Jesus said pray like this, always keeping in mind the gathered community. And so when we pray “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” we are praying for us, for all believers, for all of God’s children to be delivered from those things that do not help us usher in the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Next, when we pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” we acknowledge that there are forces in this world other than God and that being believers in Christ puts us at odds with these forces. The principalities and powers of this world wreak havoc and their values are often at odds with God’s values. Violence, not peace, reigns. Greed, not equality, reigns. Indifference and apathy, not love, reigns. Prejudice, not inclusive welcome, reigns. The evil one is alive and well working against the fabric of God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. It is any wonder that we need to pray for God’s help?

A couple of modern translations also give us hints to help us better understand what we are praying. Eugene Peterson translates this troubling phrase this way, “Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.” And I certainly agree. We need help! We need help keeping safe from ourselves at times in our lives. Especially, when we acknowledge what Apostle Paul confessed: “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” The Phillip’s translation from 1963 translates it this way, “Keep us clear of temptation, and save us from evil.”

These various translations - lead us not into a time of trial, keep us safe from ourselves, keep us clear from temptations that work against the coming of your kingdom, O God. As believers we seek God to guide us, to lead us, and when we pray this particular phrase of the Lord’s Prayer we are beseeching God to keep us from such things and to save us from the wiles of the evil one who wants to reclaim what God has saved – namely, us!”

Now, I do have to make note of a possible apocalyptic (end times) understanding of this phrase. Just before the final victory of God and the full coming of the kingdom, Jesus indicates that the power of evil will be intensified. Therefore, Jesus might be instructing his disciples to pray that God would not bring them into this time of trial, when the pressure might be so great as to overcome faith itself. “Thus ‘evil one’ in this sense is a better translation of the final word of the prayer, not evil in the abstract.” Our human tendency is to deny the potential of evil’s power over us when we only talk about evil in the abstract.

C. S. Lewis wrote about this tendency in his book entitled *The Screwtape Letters*. Uncle Screwtape writes to his nephew Wormwood, “Our policy, by the High Command, is to conceal ourselves... and if any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise in his mind, suggest to him a picture of something in red tights, and persuade him that since he cannot believe in that he therefore cannot believe in you.”

Making evil abstract, often allows us to deny its power in our lives and especially in our institutions. We have to remember that the kingdom of God has come, yet it is not fully among us until Christ comes again in all glory and honor.

So when we pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” we are acknowledging our tendency to fall prey to the evil one infecting the principalities and powers of this world that work against the fabric of God’s kingdom. Powers that are both obviously heinous and powers that are far subtler and sometimes can even seem acceptable.

Let me put this into perspective for us. The American church culture has defined the successful church as the one with the biggest attendance and budget. Outreach Magazine even produces a list once a year that highlights the largest 100 churches in America. North Point Ministries in Alpharetta, Georgia with 40,455 members’ ranked number one in 2019, Saddleback in Lake Forest with 24,195 ranked number 5 and The Rock Church in San Diego with 12,710 ranked number 17. We obviously didn’t make the list.

Yet, American churches, regardless of size, have sometimes made acquiring attendees and larger budgets a higher priority than caring for the needs of starving people in their neighborhoods. American churches in pursuit of numbers often lose sight of the gospel mandates – feed the hungry, clothe the poor, visit the imprisoned. Yet, Jesus didn't emphasize numbers or material wealth, he emphasized the transformative power of the Spirit at work within us. Jesus said, "What good will it be for someone if they gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? [Matt 16:26] Jesus is interested in our individual souls as well as the soul of our churches. When we pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," we are praying that God will give us the strength to say "no" to soul damaging values.

Let me see if I can bring this to bear on our own story of faith as church? What soul damaging values are we tempted by as a church? Are we tempted to make decisions that would keep us all comfortable with the way we like it instead of continually stretching ourselves to embrace our diversity? Are we tempted to stockpile our financial reserves instead of risking them to respond to a ministry need in our community today? Are we tempted to think we are not enough because we only number about 200? Are we tempted to allow our fears of the future to paralyze us and focus us only on survival?

Praying this whole prayer challenges us, over and over again, to keep our lives centered on the reign of God, of making earth as it is in heaven. When we pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," we are asking God to give us the strength to deny temptations that lure us away from kingdom values. We are asking God to sustain us through life's difficulties, so that we hold fast to kingdom values, bringing glory to God through our actions.

Mulholland states, "The saints are not those who are no longer tempted. The saints are those who have seen enough of the kingdom of God to be able to resist the principalities and powers of this world." Jesus had seen enough of the kingdom of God to resist the principalities and powers of the world when the evil one tempted him in desert. I wonder, have we seen enough of the kingdom of God to resist the principalities and powers of this world?

Our daily walk together is bombarded with the Wormwoods of the world who are trying to reclaim us for the Evil One. According to C.S. Lewis, every believer is a battleground for the evil one who hopes that we succumb to the principalities of the world. Who hopes that we live focused only on whatever works to secure what me, myself or I need.

That is why we pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Yes, lead us in your ways, O God. Give us the strength to be delivered from anything that attempts to decenter us from your will and your ways. Deliver us, because we know that left alone we might compromise our kingdom values. Yes, deliver us, for we admit we have no power to navigate and overcome the trials of our lives alone. Yes, deliver us, we pray. Amen.