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A Series on the Lord's Prayer 4. Temptation

Matthew 6:13

(King James version) "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil"

(Common English version) "Keep us from being tempted and protect us from evil."

(Eugene Peterson's The Message translation) "Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil."

(New International Reader's version) "Keep us from falling into sin when we are tempted. Save us from the evil one."

(James 1:13) 13 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.

I sometimes get amused at the warning labels on products, with cautions about things that would have simply never occurred to me but apparently occurred to **someone**. This then resulted in the manufacturer's lawyers requiring the company to warn us about particular temptations that would have never occurred to you or me. Not long ago, I came across a listing of such opportunities for temptation from various product labels. One product label, found on a bottle of shampoo for dogs, said this: "Caution: The contents of this bottle should not be fed to fish." Another label, printed on the back of a birthday card for a one year old said this: "Not suitable for children aged three years or less." But if you've ever attended a birthday party for a one-year-old, you might need the following warning label that was found on a package of Silly Putty: "Do not use as ear plugs." A sign on one city's subway platforms warns about a temptation whose unfortunate effects could follow you even after death: "Beware! To touch these wires is instant death. Anyone found doing so will be prosecuted." And perhaps my favorite warning label about a temptation that had never before occurred to

me was found on a he box containing a shipment of hammers: "May be harmful if swallowed." I'm sort of thinking that whatever occasioned **that** warning sign probably had something to do with a few too many beers.

Now, Jesus too had a warning to offer about temptation. But before we look at that warning, let's remind ourselves where we've been these last three weeks as we've studied the Lord's Prayer. We saw in the first sermon that in its opening lines, the Lord's Prayer tells us that God is both close and far, both utterly near and marvelously transcendent, as near as our heartbeats and as far away as the galaxies – and that if we **over**-emphasize either one we will get our relationship with God messed up. In the second sermon, we saw that the phrase "Thy Kingdom come" is a **challenge** to us to act in ways that would be more nearly Kingdom-like, if you will, and which never say that God does things that we would say were evil if they were done by a human being. And then last's weeks sermon, focusing on "as we forgive our debtors," reminded us that perhaps the truest mark of mature Christian faith is an overwhelming gratitude to God for God's grace, and, in turn, our responding by offering grace to others. This morning's focus are Jesus' words about temptation, and the most common translation says "Lead us not into temptation."

This is the verse that is the most trouble one in the whole prayer, isn't it? It's troubling on three counts. First, the very fact that Jesus seems to be suggesting that we ask God not to put us in situations where we could hurt our own or others' lives obviously seems to presume that God would sometimes do so! And that just seems so at odds with everything else we know about God. And, secondly, the idea that if we say the right things to God then God won't lead us into evil ends up back at that terrible idea that God is some sort of cosmic tyrant who only does things on a whim or if He is pleased by the words offered. But, again, that just seems so different from the God of utter graciousness whose grace, like it or not, as the Psalmist says, indeed falls on the

just and the unjust. And third, the words here are just flat-out different from what it says elsewhere in the New Testament. Did you hear the Apostle James' 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."* So which is it? Does God tempt us or not?

Let me begin with the third question. The apparent contradiction here is the sort of thing that critics of Christianity point to and say "You can always find quotes in the Bible to support or criticize anything." And you know what? They have a point – IF you or I insist on reading the Bible as if it were simply some sort of divine phone book where we have bits of data and every piece of data is just as important – or not – as any other. But such a way of reading so diminishes and even disrespects the Bible and its reflection of four thousand years of Jewish and Christian relationships to God. The Bible isn't just "data": no, it tells us **both** about God and about its writers, and sometimes those writers grasp oh-so-beautifully and marvelously the nature of God and sometimes they really are showing their own foibles and failings rather than accurately describing God. As I've mentioned before, when the Psalmist, in a fit of anger writes in the 146th Psalm that God will bless those who kill the babies of his enemy he is telling us more about himself than about God. When the gospel of John has some terrible lines about how "the Jews" are the spawn of the devil, that is telling us much more about the sad family fight going on at the turn of the first century when Judaism and Christianity were starting to become separate than it does about a God of grace unbounded. These are examples of why you have to have what I call an *interpretive lens* through which to look at the Bible. And I believe that the best lens through which we ought to view scripture, the lens that will indeed magnify a God worthy of our worship is to ask this question: *does this or that verse, this or that story, this or that description of God, match up with the unconditional love of God and the unconditional expectation of God for justice to every creature?* Now, anyone who claims that the Bible

can be read “without interpretation” is fooling themselves and others.

So how shall we interpret this line that is traditionally translated “Lead us not into temptation?” As you see from the four readings of this verse printed in your bulletin, this issue has clearly troubled other translators as well, and every translation really falls into one of two categories: the ones that say, in some fashion, “lead us not” and the ones, best represented by the Common English Version, that says “Keep us from being tempted.” Let me cut to the chase: I believe that, theologically, the Common English Version has it right, and best reflects what we know about God through the overall testimony of the scripture and through the witness of the life and teachings of Jesus. That is to say, God is not evil or capricious and takes no delight when we fail or falter. God doesn’t do things to “test us” that, if they were done by a human being to his or her human child, we would label evil or hurtful. God seeks the highest and best good for us in every moment, offering the best that is possible and holding out to us hope, inviting us, luring us to follow the best that is in us, to become bigger than our smallnesses. And so it is very, very, very fitting to pray “keep us from being tempted,” for that’s a way of saying “God, may I be more attuned to what you want, to the best that you call me to rather than the worst that I am capable of.” That indeed is a fitting prayer – and it’s a needed prayer. I know that I need that help. For indeed I am tempted – and I’ll be you are too – by things that would make your life and the lives of those around you less than they could be, that hurt you or others. And so this is a warning we need far more than ones about not putting Silly Putty in our ears or even warning us against attempting to swallow hammers. So let me close with a couple of notes about temptation and how that prayer “Help me God to keep from being tempted” is indeed oh-so-needed in my life and, I dare say, in yours too.

The first thing I want to notice about temptation – something that my wife Barbara actually wisely pointed out to me – is that unlike the way the word often gets

used, it is actually not our weaknesses that make for the most terrible temptations, but our **strengths**. Let me explain. I am not seriously tempted to become a ballet dancer – and oh my, what a disturbing mental image that is! – because there are sacks of flour that have more bodily grace and coordination than I do. But, on the other hand, there **are** things that are my strengths and my most terrible temptation is to misuse those strengths: to use my ability with words to hurt, for example, rather than to build up. There is a reason that a professional boxer can be charged with assault with a deadly weapon if he hit someone – because it is precisely because of the **strength** in his hands that allows such damage to be done when he gives into the temptation to settle an argument with his fists. It's not his weakness that does the most damage, but his strength. God has given each and every one of us strengths that are marvelous; no two of us have the same set of gifts or strengths. That is what can make us so powerful together when we combine those strengths to move forward in sharing the love of God and reaching out to those who are hurting. But the most hurtful temptation is when we use those strengths to do less than God might want. For example, as we stand on the verge of a new school and program year, we know that one of our strengths together is the wonderful legacy of the past in this place. But if that strength is ever used to stop us from moving forward in new ways to express the gospel and new ways to minister and new ways to invite new people in, then we will have fallen to the temptation to use one of the strongest things about us for something less than we could have had. What about you? Are there strengths that you have, gifts that God has given you, that you sometimes find yourself mightily tempted to use for less than the best? If so, pay attention to Jesus' words, "keep us from being tempted," or in Peterson's marvelous and oh-so-apt translation, "keep us safe from ourselves" and pray them every day.

The story is told of a family that moved to a new house that was near a canal. The son in the family was an adventurous sort, and so the father said to him, "Son,

don't swim in that canal." "OK, Dad," he answered. But he came home carrying a wet bathing suit that evening. "Where have you been?" demanded the father. "Swimming in the canal," answered the boy. "Didn't I tell you not to swim there?" asked the father. "Yes, Sir," answered the boy. "Why did you?" he asked. "Well, Dad," he explained, "I had my bathing suit with me and I couldn't resist the temptation." "Why did you take your bathing suit with you?" he questioned. "So I'd be prepared to swim, in case I was tempted," he replied.¹

Whether it's a bathing suit to test out prohibited canals, or the strengths that we have that we can get tempted to misuse, or our temptation to get frustrated when God doesn't see things our way, the best response, the response most fitting in the face of a God whom we know deep down is grace and love unbounded and who never does evil is indeed this: "Lord, keep us from being tempted"; "Lord, keep us safe from ourselves."

May it be so. Amen.

¹Adapted from <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/t/temptation.htm>