

Lead Us Not Into Temptation
August 31st, 2014

Matthew 6:13a
Pentecost 12 A

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I have to wonder what it might be like to be taught the Lord's Prayer completely new, from the beginning, with each part explained in detail like we've been doing over the past weeks. I wonder because at this point, would a person maybe be asking, "what is there left to pray for?" Think back over what we've covered so far and just how much those few short petitions really encompass.

We begin with that all-important address, "**our Father.**" Jesus, who taught us to say this, paid the ultimate price so that we could start our prayers this way, that we might be sure of this, that God loves us, counts us as his own children, looks upon us with the same eyes with which he looks upon his only Son.

And then Jesus teaches us what matters. That the oxygen of my soul is not my job, the next weekend, the next game, the newest toy for my hobby that I saw on TV. The air I really breathe is not my nice home, my dream of a comfortable retirement, not even the family that I truly love. What matters, what makes or breaks all of these other things, is the name, the kingdom and the will of my Father. The moment I step outside this circle of my relationship with my Father, I cannot breathe, I cannot live – not really. Within this circle I can see that everything else – goods, fame, child and wife – are from hand of my Father, too. It's all about me and him. And here during my hard march toward my true home, I ask my Father to tell me again and again that he loves me. Because I need to hear it often. So I pray: "**Forgive us our trespasses...**" Others on the pilgrim path need to hear it from me: "**As we forgive those who trespass against us.**" We have the love of God, his forgiveness and his promises about our earthly and eternal life to guard and comfort us. So again, maybe at this point someone could ask, "what's left to pray for?"

But as we are reminded in the final petitions of this prayer, the road up ahead is dangerous. There is temptation. There is evil and the evil one. There are detours, potholes, unfriendly eyes peering at us from the bushes, seeking to draw us away from our Father's embrace. Out there, away from God in the wilderness, the casualties lie in warning – the abandoned baptismal grace, forgotten confirmation vows, Christian schooling that is only a distant memory, childlike trust in Christ long lost, Christ-like living a thing of the past, consciences that could care less about the clear commandments of God, and the altar of hearts where the flame of faith has died, leaving nothing but the cold, gray ashes of a life without Christ, without the Father. It is a life that is no life at all. And we've all seen it out there.

So the Savior teaches us forgiven children of the Father, even as we sit inside the circle, to pray: "**LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION.**" We might think: "What a strange way for Jesus to put it!" "**Lead us not into temptation.**" Why ask our Father not to do what our Father would never do in the first place? James says in his epistle: "**When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.**"

So why does Jesus put it this way? God would never lure us into a field loaded with the land mines of sin! Why ask God not to do what he has already promised not to do? But really, haven't we already done this throughout the prayer? God's name is already holy. You and I cannot make his name, his truth, his doctrines any more holy than they already are! But Christ teaches us to pray anyway: "**Hallowed be Thy name!**" God's kingdom and rule in human hearts through the gospel will come with us or without us, for so he has promised. But Christ bids us ask to be a part of it anyway: "**Thy kingdom come.**" God's will shall ultimately triumph whether we are with him or against him. Yet Christ tells us pray: "**Thy will be done.**"

Jesus said that God causes his rain to fall on the just and the unjust. But he wants us as his children to know from whose hand all this comes and to lift up grateful hearts and pray: "**Give us this day our daily bread.**" We stand under the shower of God's pardoning grace the moment we were brought to trust in the already finished work of Christ. But like the bride who wants to hear the words "I love you" again and again from the bridegroom, so we want to hear again and again from the Savior whom we have so often disappointed that he loves us: So we pray, "**Forgive us our trespasses.**"

So it's the same with "**Lead us not into temptation.**" Our Father has already promised that he will not lead us into temptation. Here we are simply asking our Father to be true to his own nature and to his own promises, to be to us the God and Father he has promised to be. In a way, much like the rest of these petitions, we are reminding ourselves of God's promises even as we pray it.

No one has said it better than Luther in the Small Catechism: "God surely tempts no one to sin, but we pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us, so that the devil the world, and our flesh may not deceive us or lead us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins; and though we are tempted by them, we pray that we may overcome and win the victory."

"**Lead us not into temptation.**" The sense of the phrase is that our Father would help us to resist even the

beginnings, to avoid the first step down the path. **“Lead us not into temptation,”** that is, don’t even let me get close to the fire. He does not teach us to pray: “Lead us out of temptation,” though we want that too. We prefer to not even get close. Because oftentimes once we are close...it’s already too late. Like our mother Eve, once we are near the tree, our pulse begins to stir, curiosity is piqued, greed and passions and pride are aroused, and the battle is already lost. Our ability to do the God-pleasing thing is paralyzed.

This is why our relationship to our Father cannot be the emergency rescue kit but must be a way of life. This is why it is so important not to wait to pray this petition until after the temptation is already on our doorstep, when rebellion is already running its mad, downhill course. Then we may not be able to pray at all. We need to ask for God to help before we’re in dire straits, to help before it even happens! So much depends on our praying this petition while we are still sober and prudent, each morning, before we are even caught up in the passions and pressures of a given day, asking God to be the Father of our thinking and doing at the outset.

There’s an old German prayer that used to be taught to children to say before they left the house each day: *“Jesus in Herzen, Jesus in Sinn, In Gottes Namen, gehen wir him.”* “With Jesus in my thinking, Jesus in my heart, in the name of our God, let us depart.” They understood that we naturally tend to play along the borderlands of sin, and so we need to begin well in order to end well.

And so we ignore this petition and indeed our entire faith-life to our peril. We arrogantly assume we are stronger than we really are. We forget the devil is leering at us from the sidelines as we stupidly say things such as: “I won’t be influenced! I won’t fall into the same trap as my friends! I know what I’m doing!”

That’s what our mother Eve thought too when she imagined she could out-debate Satan’s twisted theology. That’s what Lot thought when he moved his family into the questionable neighborhood of Sodom. That’s what Samson thought when he hankered after the godless Delilah instead of seeking out a godly wife. That’s what David thought when the noise of battle quieted down and he had too much time on his hands, time to stand on his balcony and fasten his eyes on another man’s wife. That’s what Peter thought when he bragged to Jesus: **“Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you!”** And who knows what Judas was thinking? His soul, his Savior, for thirty pieces of silver? That’s it? But people have sold Christ and their own souls for less.

“Lead us not into temptation.” It’s a dangerous world for the children of the Father. There is the devil himself who paints a bulls-eye on us from the moment we crawl out of bed each morning. It is his unrelenting ambition to lead us further away from faith in Christ, even if by mere inches each day. There is the Christ-less world around us calling to us with a siren-song from the television, the internet, the social media, our peers and from classrooms. There is our own sinful flesh, a traitor in our own bodies which wants to be in the driver’s seat when it ought to be tied from the back bumper and dragged down the road behind us.

And it’s not just the vile and disgusting things that can get their hooks into our hearts – the porn, the promiscuity, the passions. What if everything is going well? Then success becomes a fatal narcotic laced with pride. What if everything we touch turns to gold? Then greed can grab us by the throat. What if we are healthy? Then who needs God? What if the house of my life collapses? Then Satan prods me to ask: “Where is God?” or “Is there a God at all?” What if one storm after the other demolishes my dreams? Then despair and doubt move into my heart and evict faith.

So while you are still close to your Father, pray unceasingly: **“Lead us not into temptation.”** Father, keep me from going back to the way things were, from listening to the voice of strangers, from succumbing to the enemies of faith.

It was about him who taught us this prayer that the writer to the Hebrews said in our epistle lesson: **“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have One who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.”** Yes, as Satan assailed Christ after his baptism in the wilderness temptation, so he assails us too from the moment we are baptized. While we struggle with temptation, we can never say to Jesus, “You don’t know what it’s like!” God the Son became our Brother. He not only died for us, he lived for us the life we have failed to live, kept for us the commandments we have failed to keep, and resisted the temptations to which Adam, and you and I, have given into time and time again. And yet even though he did it, all this he credits to our account before the Father as though we had done it.

Now he invites us simply to believe this, that as the first Adam was by a tree overcome, Christ, the second Adam, by the tree of his cross overcame. There in the wilderness with the devil he showed us how. Three times he wielded the sword – “It is written...” – the sword of the Spirit – the word of God – no more and no less. Why would we think any sword of our own making could be sharper? Our private devotions and our public gathering around the Word, the water and the blood each week may not seem like much, but it is Christ’s own way of keeping us close to our Father, so that nothing and no one can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Not now, not ever.

Amen.