

Lead Us Not into Temptation
Matthew 6: 13
1 Corinthians 10: 13

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Mother had just finished putting the final touches on her chocolate cake for dinner. It was covered in delicious mounds of milk chocolate icing. Turning to her daughter who was coloring a picture with her crayons, she said, "Rachel, don't touch that cake, not even a finger's worth of icing. It's a special present for Daddy who will be coming home tonight after a long trip. Do you hear me?" "Yes Mommy, I hear you," the little girl said. But when Mom left to visit a neighbor with the cake sitting right in front of her on the kitchen counter, the thought of just one little dab of icing was awfully tempting. A short while later Mom returned. Much to her surprise, Rachel was not in the kitchen. Somewhat concerned, she cried out, "Rachel where are you?" "I'm in my bedroom," Rachel replied. Walking down to the bedroom, Mom poked her head in, saw her daughter busily coloring and asked, "Why did you leave the kitchen? It's a lot warmer there." "Oh Mommy, the little girl said, "I looked at that chocolate cake and it smelled so good and looked so inviting that I couldn't stand it. The temptation was just too great. I decided the bedroom was a safer place to color than in the kitchen."

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." That's what Jesus taught us to pray. The second part is easy enough to understand, especially in the times in which we live. But how about the first part, "lead us not into temptation?" How can we pray to a God who would lead us to a place or put us in a set of circumstances where we would be tempted to do something that we know is wrong? Remember the old "Flip Wilson Show?" Whenever Flip got caught doing something that he was not supposed to be doing, he'd say, "The devil made me do it." Does our good, loving, caring Creator have a demonic side to His personality, tempting us to do things that are wrong? Or is there something we're missing in this part of the Lord's Prayer. Let's find out.

For starters, the word "temptation" can have several different meanings. It can refer to those situations where we have to choose between doing something good, or doing something bad. Remember this Disney cartoon? Pluto, that loveable old pup, has been aggravated almost to the breaking point by a pesky little kitten. Now the little kitty has fallen into a deep well. Looking down into the well, Pluto is

confronted with a decision he must make. On one of Pluto's shoulders a little demon appears and says, "Let the kitten drown." On the other an angel cries out, "Save the little kitty." Well sometimes dealing with temptation comes down to making a choice between doing what is good and what is evil with definite consequences depending on which choice we make.

The word "temptation" can also have another meaning. It can refer to a time of testing when we must decide whether we're going to be true to our convictions and especially our relationship with Christ or whether we're going to cave in and abandon Him. Take for example, what happened to Peter. On the night that Jesus was arrested, He told Peter, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." If you will remember, Peter responded, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death" (Luke 22:22-23). Well, we all know what happened. Later on that very night in the courtyard of the high priest, Peter denied that he even knew Jesus on three different occasions. He had failed the test of loyalty and the Scriptures tell us that he went away and wept bitterly. Sometimes facing temptation means deciding whether we're going to stand up for convictions and our Savior, or whether we're going to turn scared and run away.

So, temptation is real, no matter what kind of temptation we're facing. But why should we ask our heavenly Father to refrain from leading us there? Why should we ask Him to NOT lead us into temptation? I've given this a great deal of thought. In fact, Sherry and I have talked about it and she's asked the very same question that you're probably asking yourself right now. Why would God want to lead us astray? Why should we have to ask Him, "Please don't take us to a place or a set of circumstances where we will be tempted, possibly beyond our ability to resist? We don't want to go there, so why do we have to ask You not to send us there?"

Here's the best answer that I have come up with and it goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Temptation is the unavoidable consequence that arises from our freedom of will. Let me explain. When God created Adam and Eve, He placed them in a beautiful garden and He said that they could eat any of the fruit in that garden except for the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In other words, they were given the right or privilege of making decisions, of making choices. God could have denied them this privilege by simply not planting the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden. But He didn't. Planting that tree

meant that He had to open the door to the possibility of temptation entering into the human experience. They would not only be able to make decisions related to morality, the knowledge of good and evil, but also the decision as to whether they would obey or disobey their Creator. Furthermore, God had to open a door to the one who would become the tempter, the serpent who slithered down out of the branches of that tree of knowledge. In other words temptation became the unavoidable consequence of the freedom that God granted to Adam and Eve and to be perfectly honest the same kind of freedom that He grants to you and me.

Could He have done otherwise? I don't think so. Within my lifetime, computers, especially personal computers have come into existence. At first they were little more than repositories of information that we could access. They were useful tools to improve our lives. But then something happened. Some of the information we could download was not so valuable. It was downright harmful to ourselves and others. The choices we could make were not limited to what is good, just, or moral. In fact, just the opposite. An entire culture of evil serpents slithered out of our computers and with all kinds of tempting propositions. Did it have to be that way? Could safeguards have been installed? Maybe, but would those computers have been expressions of genuine and wholehearted freedom? Probably not. Real freedom, in whatever form and shape it takes, requires the opportunity to make decisions, to choose between at least two different alternatives, one which is good and one which is maybe not so good.

That's precisely what Jesus confronted after He was baptized by John the Baptist. The Scriptures tell us, "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil" (Matthew 4:1). In other words, the time had come for Jesus to make some important decisions about His life and ministry and that required being led by God to a place where He would be tempted. Would He be true to what God wanted Him to do? Or would He respond favorably to what the devil offered? That same serpent who led Adam and Eve astray proposed some intriguing opportunities, "Turn these stones into bread and feed not only Himself, but the multitudes. Become a super hero and amaze everyone by jumping off the temple in Jerusalem and floating down to the pavement below. Finally become a world ruler of all the kingdoms of this world. All Jesus had to do was to say "yes" and all these things would come to pass, at least he said they would. Of course, as you will remember there was also that little thing about paying homage to this adversary of God's sovereignty. How did Jesus respond? He reminded the devil of what the Lord had to say in the pages of the Old Testament—"Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. Do not put

the Lord your God to the test. Worship only the Lord your God and serve Him only." When Satan heard these words, he realized his mission had failed. Jesus had been tempted just like each and every one of us, but He had resisted and risen above those temptations.

But you say, what about me, I'm not Jesus? Don't put these kind of temptations in front of me! That's why Paul told the Christians in Corinth, a pagan city that was chock full of temptations, "And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up against it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). How does God do that? Just like Jesus, it may be a remembered passage of Scripture, or perhaps a word of warning from a trusted friend, or maybe that inner voice of the Holy Spirit who says, "Get out of there before you get into real trouble." Whatever it is, God wants to lead us to a place in our lives where we can stand up to and overcome our temptations. So when we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," what are really saying? We're saying, "Heavenly Father, I live in a world where there are lots of temptations. Sometimes you even lead me to a place where I must confront them. When that happens, grab a hold of me and give me strength to resist them. But if I'm beginning to waver, lead me away from them just as quickly as you can."

And there's one other thing, one more phrase in this part of the Lord's Prayer that we need to consider—"Deliver us from evil." Another way to say it is—"Deliver us from the evil one." Who was hiding in the Garden of Eden? Who was tempting Jesus in the wilderness? Who desires above all else to pull you away from God and get you to enter into a destructive way of life? The devil is pretty good at what he does. He's a master of devious deception and I've seen him destroy more than one life during my years of pastoral ministry. So take seriously what Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians about the devil and the spiritual warfare which we and indeed all of God's people must confront, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

In closing let me share a story I heard about an old farmer. Quite frequently he would pray at church, "Lord, prop us up on our leaning side." Intrigued by this oft repeated prayer, his pastor asked the old farmer why he used these words over and over again in his prayers. "Well," the farmer said, "one day I was working out in my fields and I realized that my barn was leaning to one side and if I didn't do

something, it was going to fall down. So I cut some boards and propped it up on the side where it was leaning. The barn will never be straight again, but it won't fall down. Those boards will keep it from toppling over. Then I realized that I was like that old barn. Over the years I'd begun leaning, old habits and old temptations pushing me over and pulling me down. So I decided that I needed to ask the Lord to prop me up on my leaning side. And come to think of it," the old farmer said, "we all need a little propping up every now and then."

I suspect that old farmer had it about right. Maybe we ought to pray the part of the Lord's Prayer we've been talking about today in a slightly different way—"Heavenly Father, when the devil's trying to push us over with all kinds of temptations and we're just about to fall down, prop us up on the leaning side."