

“THE LORD’S PRAYER – PRAYING WHEN IT IS DIFFICULT”

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Matthew 6:9-13, Romans 8:31b-39

(10-17-21)

This morning we come to the last part of our sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer. We end with the final petition of the prayer which reads, “And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.” You might think, wait, isn’t there more to the Lord’s Prayer? What about the line, “For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever, Amen?” But you will note that as we have read the prayer as recorded in the gospel according to Matthew over the past few weeks, we have always ended with the verse, “and do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.” That’s where Jesus stops and so that’s where we’re going to stop in terms of preaching on the prayer as well.

That last sentence, “for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever,” is found in later manuscripts of the Greek New Testament but is understood by scholars to be a later add on. That’s not to say that the words aren’t significant, they were, and they are, significant enough that the Christian church for over a thousand years has incorporated the last sentence into the Lord’s Prayer as a doxology and has prayed those words, as we have, as the ending to the prayer. But for this series, we will end our exploration of the Lord’s Prayer where Jesus ended it.

Do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. You might think, hmm, that doesn’t sound quite right. It’s not the way I have prayed the Lord’s Prayer. You might be thinking of a version that goes like this, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” That’s the version I was taught and I grew up with. It’s also still prayed in most of the presbyterian congregations I know of. But you may have noticed that we don’t use the version that says lead us not into temptation. Our version reads, “save us from the time of trial.” So what’s up with all that?

Well, let me ask you, does God ever lead us into temptation? I think we would answer, no. At least not in the sense that God would deliberately put us in places where we would be tempted beyond what we could bear, so that we would deliberately sin. So then why would we pray for God to not lead us into temptation? The better understanding of the phrase based on the Greek would be, ‘do not let us be overpowered by temptation’ or ‘do not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear, beyond our ability.’ That makes more sense, so then why not use words that convey that meaning more clearly? That’s what our version of the prayer tries to do using the phrase, save us from the time of trial. Sometimes it helps to update language to allow the meaning to be better understood, but all the versions are saying essentially the same thing.

Speaking of temptation, Karl Barth, one of the most important and leading theologians of the 20th century, writes that there are minor temptations, sins that do not lead to death... which God sends us daily and which vary according to our age and God visits them upon us because they are necessary to us. They are temptations that we can resist and we must not ask to be spared at any cost from those temptations.¹ While Barth doesn't spell out what these minor temptations might be, I think that we know what they might be, and they vary for each of us, as Barth says. What tempts me wouldn't necessarily tempt you and what tempts a young person won't tempt an older person in the same way. What we do know is that these temptations can be resisted, even if they cause some difficulty for us in the resisting.

The Apostle Paul seems to understand this when he writes in Romans 5, *that we can boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.* There are things that all of us are called to resist, that we can resist, even if it causes us to suffer, for in that suffering we grow, we learn, we mature as followers of Jesus, we learn to trust God even more.

But there is another kind of temptation, says Barth, this one not minor and this one which we are powerless to resist in our own strength. This great temptation is the work of the Evil One, the infinite menace of the nothingness that is opposed to God himself... which for the creature, carries with it not only a passing danger, a destruction of secondary importance, a momentary corruption, but total fall, ultimately extinction... this absolute evil imposes itself upon creation in the form that we all recognize, namely, sin and death.²

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, when we pray the words of our final petition, when we ask God to not bring us to the time of trial, to save us from the time of trial, and to deliver us from evil, to rescue us from the evil one, we are saying that there is such a thing as evil in our world, an evil which leads to sin and death.

Now that's a big word, evil, and it's not necessarily a popular word in our day and age. How do you understand that word, evil? Is evil just the absence of good, or the absence of God? Is evil only defined by what it isn't? I do think that we live in a world, in a culture, which often struggles to speak about evil in the way scripture speaks of evil. We do acknowledge evil in our world, but we tend to be more isolated about it. We've been horrified to learn of the killing of the British MP, Sir David Amess, as he met with his constituents in a local church. The police are calling his murder an act of terrorism. Surely that was an act of evil. And there's many more examples we can cite from just a cursory reading of the news.

But I think that if we limit evil to acts of violence and hatred, we are missing the big picture.

¹ Karl Barth, *Prayer*, p.59

² Ibid, p.60

There is a power at work in the world that is aligned against the will of God, against the intention of God for creation, for us. This power isn't just about random acts of violence and mayhem, this power is purposeful, focused and intentional, consciously working to subvert the desire and will of God for God's creation, a creation that includes us. In a world and culture which may not be comfortable speaking of such things, we need to acknowledge evil for what it truly is. We can't delude ourselves into caricaturing evil as a guy in red tights with horns and pitchfork. And we shouldn't fool ourselves into believing that evil can only look like a malevolent dark force. The truth is that evil is much more nuanced than that because evil, the Evil One, Satan, knows full well that we won't be tempted by the obvious stuff, it's too easy to resist, even for us, so evil disguises itself as good stuff, stuff we like, things we admire and desire, and tempts us to want those things more than we want God, to make those things our idols.

What I'm getting at here is that this last petition of the Lord's Prayer makes clear that just as our prayer begins with the words, Our Father, in heaven, thus confessing that God is not merely something we have thought up in our minds and hearts, residing under our control and imagination, but is a God who exists because God is a cosmic God, not under our control, never limited by our capacity or comprehension, so also true evil is a cosmic force, beyond our imagination, utterly beyond our ability to tame or control or resist by our own devices. Our prayer acknowledges that there is a cosmic struggle going on between good and evil, between God and the principalities and powers of the world, powers that are large, cosmic, organized, subtle, pervasive, and real.³

We pray this petition because we seek to be saved, to be delivered from this evil. We pray this prayer because we know that we can't do it by our own power or ability or capacity. We pray this prayer, addressed to Our Father, in heaven, because we know that only God can save us, only God can deliver us from true evil, from the Evil One. We know what life can be like when it gets truly difficult, when we are no longer besieged by minor temptations that are resistible, but when true evil threatens our hope, blots out our light, crushes our compassion and tempts us to give up on love. So Barth writes that the Lord's Prayer must end as it does, with those who pray it, with us, as sinners, praying from the depths, having to trust in the mercies of God.⁴ Because if God doesn't save us, if God doesn't deliver us, then we are doomed.

But of course, God does! We pray this prayer because in Jesus Christ we believe that God has delivered us, that God has saved us, that God has done what we have prayed for. By praying to God in this way, in the words Jesus teaches us to pray, we are confessing that no matter how attractive the Evil One renders his temptations, though we ourselves are powerless to overcome them, we trust in the one we call Lord and Saviour and our hope is in our God.

³ William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us – The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life*, p.89

⁴ Barth, p.62

And in Jesus Christ, by the cross, through the resurrection, God has acted, God has moved to save us, to deliver us.

Though for now the battle still rages, we know who has won the war, God has. So we can join with the Apostle Paul in saying, *If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Nothing, says Paul. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Sometimes when life is difficult, when it's difficult to pray, it feels like it would have been better if we had never met Jesus. Why not just give in to the temptations of the Evil One? So many others do, and they don't always seem the worse for it. But we forget that the principalities and powers of this world don't really concern themselves with those who have bought into what they're selling. It's the ones who have chosen another way, God's way, that get the attention of the Evil One. And when it gets difficult the temptation rises to take the easy way out. Stop caring so much, stop struggling with things like forgiveness, stop being concerned with the need to share our daily bread with others.

We could give in, but we know better. God has claimed us. Our bending has shaped us. We've seen and experienced too much to turn back. It's like we've been walking a path and all we've seen is what's straight ahead of us. But sometimes we get a glimpse of something different, something off to the side. At first we only get a glimpse and it disappears, but we keep walking and we keep looking and we see it again, more and more, until we finally turn the corner completely and we walk our journeys with a different vision, the vision of God's kingdom come, of God's will being done.

We don't know what the future hold, but we do know who holds the future. Evil is a threatening power, though a defeated one. Though the battle rages, we know who has won the war.⁵ So we are to continue our journeys with hope and courage, assured that the outcome is not in doubt but that we have been enjoined by God to work together with God to do what we can right now, here and now, to keep bending, to keep loving, to keep serving, to keep sacrificing, persevering, enduring, building character and hope, until God bring to completion what God has started.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are God's, now and forever!
Amen.

⁵ Willimon, p.94