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Lord, Teach Us to Pray – Lead Us Not Into Temptation

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TEXT: Luke 11:1-4 (NRSV)

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

Several years ago, I read a story which took place in a New England textile mill. In that factory, there was a huge sign posted for all the workers on the main floor or the big machines were producing cloth. It instructed: "If your threads get tangled, send for the foreman." Well, one day a new employee got his threads tangled. The more he attempted to untangle them, the bigger the mess and the more helpless he became. So we finally called for help. The foreman came immediately and asked him why he hadn't sent for him earlier. "I did my best," the worker said. Defensively, the foreman smiled and said, "Remember, doing your best is to send for me." Doing your best is to send for me: that was a truth that Jesus lived by in his ministry. He was constantly turning to his heavenly father, sending for him. And the prayer Jesus gave his disciples also reflects that truth as well. As a whole, the Lord's Prayer testifies to a need for our total reliance on God and his care in all matters of life and faith. This prayer covers everything and reminds us that God's presence and help is an absolute necessity for the Christian as he or she navigates life.

Jesus has already taught us so much about praying in this series on the Lord's Prayer. How to approach God: when we turn to God, we call him father. We approach him like a child, approaches a heavily, a loving father. And we then first talk to him about his person: hallowed be thy name. May your name be holy, not only in my life, but in all people's lives, Lord. And then we talk to him about his program: thy kingdom come. May your rule come. This is to be our deepest longing and desire as God's children – that he be worshipped and obeyed not only in our own lives, but in the whole world. That's how God intended things to be. It was perfect and the best thing for us. Next, Jesus teaches us to dependently turn to God for our daily needs: provision. Give us this day our daily bread. Pardon: forgive us our sins.

After having prayed to God for provision and pardon, we end our prayer requests for ourselves by asking for God's protection. Jesus taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” A woman in a shopping mall wore a t shirt which read, “Lead me not into temptation, I can find it myself.” It was meant to cause a chuckle, but that one-liner raises a question for us. What exactly are we praying for when we asked “Lead us not into temptation”? We're well aware that life is filled with all kinds of temptations, aren't we? We joke about tempting sweets calling us to devour them, and we watch television advertisements tempting us with the promise of happiness with the purchase of a product. Then there are those temptations to do things my way instead of God's way, or to even walk away from trusting God because of personal tragedy or the pressuring of others. There are so many things in this world that can come along and mess us up in our relationship with God, our father. So this prayer is basically asking for spiritual protection from them.

The wording might make it seem that we're supposed to ask God to kindly refrain from tripping us up with temptations to sin. But you know, we know that God never tempts anyone. The New Testament letter of James tells us that: “Let no one say when he is being tempted, I am being tempted by God, for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.” So what are we saying then when we say lead us, not into temptation as Jesus taught us? I like what pastor Haddon Robinson, one of my favorite preachers, writes about this, he says:

I take it as what grammarians call *Le Tote*, stating something negatively in order to say something positive. A couple of months ago, I was having lunch in one of those New York delicatessens, and right next to me were two women, evidently

Jewish. One was describing to the other the young man her daughter was going to marry. He had completed medical school and had a good practice. He came from a very good family and she would marry into prestige and wealth. The other woman listened to all of this and said, "He's not objectionable, is he?" No, he wasn't stating negatively. This woman was saying positively, "Boy, she's got a great catch."

Jesus is encouraging us to express an attitude here that we need God's help and protection in times of temptation so that we not be seduced by temptation and succumb to it, lead us away. This request reflects a recognition about ourselves – we're weak on our own. If we are to be protected from falling into temptation, we must lean on God to protect us. This supplication has the force of "cause us not to succumb to temptation." It recognizes that without God's leading, we would be leading ourselves straight into sin. It's like a sheep nibbles himself lost. It reflects a depth of spiritual sensitivity that understands just how prone to sin we are without God's help. As a hymn puts it: "Prone to wander Lord, I feel it prone to lead the God I love." I have found Martin Luther small catechism very helpful and understanding this prayer request Jesus taught us. He gives us this explanation:

God tempts no one to sin, but we ask in this prayer that God would watch over us and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful self may not deceive us and draw us into false belief, despair and other great and shameful sins. And we pray that even though we are so tempted, we may still win the final victory. This, then, is leading us not into temptation when God watches over us and keeps us, and he gives us power and strength to resist, even though the temptation and tribulation is not removed or ended.

No one can escape temptations and "lurements" away from God as long as we're living in this world. Even Jesus himself was continually being tempted. So can we, as his followers, expect anything less? But to feel temptation is quite a different thing from consenting and yielding to it. Or, as William Shakespeare wrote, "It's one thing to be tempted, another thing to fall." We must be armed and prepared for them as Jesus was, for we will suffer trials and temptations. But we pray in this petition that our Heavenly Father will help us not to be overwhelmed by them and fall prey to them, but instead be victorious over them. We need God for protection.

We have three kinds of temptations we're dealing with as human beings. There's our flesh, the world, and the devil himself. First, our own flesh, our sinful selves. Noted theologian of the past John Calvin lists two categories of temptation: the right and the

left. From the right comes riches, power and honors, which tempt us into the sin of thinking we don't need God. And from the left comes poverty, disgrace, contempt and afflictions, which tempt us to despair, to lose all hope and to become angrily estranged from God. Calvin writes both prosperity and adversity, then, are sore tests, and each one brings its own set of enticements away from trusting God and toward centering your life on yourself and on inordinate desires for other things. Then there is the temptation to come via the world, which is filled with values and priorities that are opposed to God's ways. It can be overwhelming for us, and we sometimes find ourselves buying in. And the world can also be hostile and reject the gospel and God's kingdom people as we seek to live as kingdom people. And this reality can cause us to set our faith in God aside and our obedience to God. It's deadly. And of course, behind the temptations is the tempter, seeking to ruin us and our faith in God, incessantly attacking us, using all the above tools to harm us, and we cannot stand against him on our own. That's a fact.

This lesson from Jesus on asking for spiritual protection, then, it reminds me of a story from the Apostle Peter's life. As you're probably aware, today is Palm Sunday, also called the Sunday of the Passion. The passion story is the story of all the events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. And it begins with Palm Sunday, when Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem and was hailed as king by the people who waved palm branches to honor him. King, what a temptation that would be for Jesus to consider. I can't help but wonder if he was repeatedly praying this petition under his breath: "lead me not into temptation," as he rode in on the donkey. Well, later on that week, after giving the disciples the Lord's Supper in the upper room, Jesus led them to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray and prepare for what lay ahead the cross. Jesus went off and prayed by himself while his closest disciples kept watching nearby. But when he came back to Peter, James, and John to check on them, and maybe gained some human encouragement from them, he found them sleeping instead of praying and listen to what he said to Peter. "Watch and pray, Peter, that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Hmm. "Enter into temptation." To enter into temptation is to entertain and consider the prospect of giving in to sinning, like prayer-less Peter eventually did when he deserted and denied Jesus when the pressure was on at the arrest and trial of Jesus. He didn't have the ability to stand firm. You see, he wasn't prepared. So Peter, "the Rock," as Jesus called him, crumbled. Martin Luther wrote this truth in his large catechism. (If you like a small catechism, I guarantee you'll love the large catechism.) Luther writes this:

We must know that all our safety and protection consists in prayer alone. We are far too weak to cope with the devil in his might, and his forces are arrayed against us trying to trample us underfoot. Therefore, we must carefully select the weapon with which Christians ought to arm themselves in order to stand against the devil: prayer. And this is such an important prayer request for us to make daily as we follow Jesus Christ as his disciples lead us, not into temptation.

Father, protect us.

I greatly appreciate the way Christian author Max Lucado sheds light on this particular petition of the Lord's Prayer in his book *The Great House of God*. He writes,

This is a prayer for the childlike heart. This is a prayer for those who look upon God as their father. This is a prayer for those who have already talked to their father about provision for today and pardoned for yesterday, and now this child needs assurance and protection for tomorrow. The phrase "lead us not into temptation" is best understood with a simple illustration. Imagine a father and son walking down the icy street. The father cautions the boy to be careful, but the boy is too excited to slow down. He hits the first patch of ice, up go the feet and down plops the bottom. Dad comes along and helps him back to his feet. The boy apologizes for disregarding the warning and then tightly holding his father's big hand. He asks, "Keep me from the slippery spots, dad, don't let me fall again." Such is the heart of this petition from Jesus. It's a tender request of a child to a father. The last few slips have taught us the walk is too treacherous to make alone. And so we place our small hand in his large one and say, "Please father, keep me from evil. Lead me not into temptation. Protect me." Thanks be to God for the availability of that large hand that he's offering us. And we're invited to grab it daily, believing that God is present for us and faithful to his children. And if you're wondering if God really loves you, notice that the hand that he offers you to hold. It's a nail pierced hand.

I've already made a couple of references to Martin Luther in today's message. Here's one more: I'm going to use Luther's elaboration on this petition, "Lead us not into temptation" as we close in prayer today. Let's pray. Oh, dear Lord, father and God, keep us fit and alert, eager and diligent in your word and service so that we do not become complacent, lazy, and slothful as though we had already achieved everything. In that the fearful devil cannot fall upon us, surprise us and deprive us of your precious word or stir up strife and factions among us and lead us into other sin and disgrace,

both spiritually and physically. Rather, grant us wisdom and strength to your holy spirit that we may valiantly resist the devil and gain the victory. Amen.