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Prayer is Protective, Part 2

Matthew 26:36-41

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

I recently heard the story of a pastor who had a young man in his congregation who was a really good preacher, and so he would invite him to come preach now and then. And every time he met with him on Sunday morning before the service would begin, he could smell the smell of cigarettes coming off this young man for a number of weeks.

He didn't say anything to him about it. But then eventually he said, you know, every time we meet together—he wasn't being condemning or critical of the man—he said, I just notice every time we meet together you smell like cigarettes. Do you happen to be a smoker?

And the young man said, yes, I am. He said, that's my vice. I don't know, I got to smoking early on in my life, and it just took hold of me. And I just can't seem to get rid of this habit of smoking, he said. I'd like to get rid of it, but it just sort of has me.

And the pastor said to him, you know, I know sin can be powerful. It's just a sin against your body. But he said, I want you to think about something. Your potential as a preacher in advancing the Kingdom of God is huge, he said. Wouldn't it be sad if just some little white wrapped piece of tobacco caused you not to fill your full potential before God as a preacher?

And this man started to think differently about his sin.

When my mother was younger, her parents taught her to smoke with dignity, you know, before we knew it was really wrong. And I've heard her give her testimony after she became a Christian. And she knew inside of her that smoking wasn't right.

She started to have this dialogue with God, and she tried to convince the Lord that maybe, just maybe, she could be one of those smoking Christians. And so she asked the Lord about this, and eventually the Lord brought her out of that temptation.

Friends, the presence of sin is very real. It's in our hearts, and the temptation to sin is all around us.

Sure, we can talk about cigarettes, friends, but there is all kinds of sin. Sins of commission and sins of omission, where we get off track before the Lord. The temptations are great.

And so what Jesus has said is that we should proactively pray.

When Jesus was entering a hard time in His ministry—and sometimes when we're going through great challenges, the temptation to sin for relief goes up—Jesus was entering a very difficult time when He was going to be arrested and beaten and then crucified. He went to His disciples and took them out to pray.

And as He commissioned them to pray, and He withdrew to pray a little bit, He said this in Matthew chapter 26, verse 41.

He said, watch and pray. Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.

For the spirit is willing. Your spirit wants to do what's right. If you're born into the family of God, the Holy Spirit's motor is inside of you wanting to please God. The spirit is willing, but the flesh isn't very strong in this. It's weak.

And so pray proactively that you'll not fall into temptation or enter into temptation.

Jesus said when you look ahead in your life, identify those areas where you know you're weak and pray proactively. If you have a tendency toward depression or anxiety or some temptation for things to look at, or some kind of challenge in your physical life where you're tempted one way or another, and you know you're entering a vulnerable area, be on your knees in prayer that God would keep you from falling into that temptation.

Look ahead. Watch. Pray. Be pleading with God for strength to live above the sin in your life.

The Apostle Paul understood this as he prayed for the believers in Ephesus. He said this: for this reason I bow my knees before the Father, that according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with power through your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts.

The key to overcoming temptation is identifying our weaknesses and praying for God's strength to help us overcome them.

Prayer can fuel that inner man in the Spirit of God in us, so we can become stronger in our resistance to temptation. And what the flesh can't do by itself, when we feed the Spirit it can overrule, and we can become conquerors of sin in our lives.

Paul was wrestling with some sort of sin when he said, I do the things I don't want to do, and the very things I know I should do, I don't do. And then in prayer he cried out, who will save me from this wretched body that I'm in?

And then he said, praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's the work of feeding the engine of Christ within us, the Spirit of Christ within us, that helps us overcome sin.

When you pray, Jesus said, pray like this: Father, keep us from temptation, from falling into it. And then He said, and deliver us from evil.

Now we're talking about the presence of evil. Sin is, of course, itself evil, but in certain versions, in the original text it says, keep us protected from the evil one.

Ezekiel 28 says that the devil was a high-ranking angel created by God Himself, and he became proud himself and rebelled against God in Heaven. So he was kicked out of Heaven.

The prophet Isaiah said this of the devil: how you are fallen from Heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning. How you are cut down to the ground, you who weaken the nations.

Evil is present in our world, weakening the nations. The great dragon, the Book of Revelation tells us, was thrown down, that ancient serpent who is called the devil, Satan, the deceiver of the whole world. He was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

Jesus refers to him in Matthew's Gospel, and Paul does in First Thessalonians, as the tempter of humankind, the deceiver of humankind.

He's also referred to as the father of lies, who fills the world with lies. He's one who came to steal, kill, and destroy from human beings.

The Book of Revelation says as time proceeds and the devil understands his time gets shorter and shorter, he will become more active and more filled with wrath, working harder and harder to deceive people, lead them away from God, lead them into sin, and fill the world with lies.

He and his cohorts are doing this now.

I don't know if you pay attention to our world, but it is filled with spiritual darkness, people being led astray, all kinds of behavior that's dishonoring and displeasing to God. The rage and wrath of humankind is bursting forth all around us.

And where is that wrath fed from, friends? It is fed from the depths of hell, from the demonic spirits that roam the earth.

Certainly there is a righteous anger, but we should be very slow to anger. The Bible says sometimes we make judgments without all the facts, and our anger is fueled by the evil one. And so Jesus has said, pray. Pray that you don't fall into temptation, and that if you have or you've been caught up by evil in some way, that you would be delivered out of it, brought out of it.

Our struggle in this world, friends, is not against one another. We might think it is. If we listen to the talking heads, we might think it has to do with other people, what we're battling in the world. But the Bible says that's not it. The battle we're in is spiritual at its core. We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, the powers, and the authorities of this dark world who've been cast here because of their rebellion against God.

And in the midst of this spiritual battle, we are to live differently. We're to live outside of the temptations, not be caught up in them. We're not to be held captive by evil. But if we are, there is a hope offered us in the Bible. We can pray for deliverance. And I will just tell you we need these prayers: deliver us from evil.

Certainly the devil is present and his cohorts are working in the systems of the world, and he understands our weaknesses and can come tempt each of us. But we need not fear him, the Bible says, because when we are born of God, we have already overcome them. Jesus has conquered death, sin, and Satan at the cross and the resurrection. He's an overcomer, and these things have been rendered powerless, even though they're still working in the world. But greater is he that is in us than he that is in the world.

May the inner Spirit of God be strengthened in his people to rise up and be delivered from evil, not caught up in it, so we can live as lights and salt in the world. We have so many things we justify in our world that are not pleasing to God, but we act like they are. Sexual sins. The devil lies to us, friends, and says our identity is based on our sexual orientation. No. Our identity is the fact that we're made in the image of God, free to choose as we want.

And God can transform us by His Spirit to live in a way that's honoring and pleasing to him, not ruled by anything in our sinful nature, not ruled by any of our earthly desires, but ruled by the power of His Spirit in us. And friends, all of us have challenges that we face inside of here, and God wants us to live free, strengthened in our inner being, conquerors over our own challenges.

But we need to pray. We need to pray for one another. We need to pray for our world.

As we end this series, I just want to call you, even though we're not going to be talking about prayer anymore, to keep praying. I was thinking this morning about the Apostle Paul, who just begged people to pray for him, that he would be courageous and bold in proclaiming what's true in the midst of all kinds of resistance in our world.

Would you pray that we as a church could be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power? Would you beseech the Lord for this?

The Psalmist said, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers them out of them all." What a great deliverer we serve! He delivered Daniel from the lion's den, Israelites from the Red Sea. He delivered David from Goliath, and he came and delivered Jesus from the tomb.

He can deliver you and I out of the clutches of sin and Satan, into the glorious life that he has for us. Let's keep praying. Keep seeking for him to do that not only for us, but for more and more people in our world.

When you pray, pray like this: lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for the opportunity to gather here and look into your Word. When you offer these prayers to us as ideas for us to pray, you're actually leading us down the pathway of life. We thank you that we can come to you anytime, anywhere, and we can be forgiven of our sins. And then we can pray to be victorious in life, those that don't get ensnared by sin.

I'm mindful that probably all of us are dealing with some sort of besetting sin. Some of us are maybe even enslaved with an addiction in some way. And we need your help, Father. And you have said that you came to set captives free and bind up broken hearts.

Father, would you please be our deliverer? Deliver us from enslavement to anything except for the freedom of following your Spirit. And deliver us as a people and as a nation, and in the world, farther from evil. May your kingdom come. Father, your kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Please have your way with us.

And Father, if there is someone here this morning who hasn't truly opened their heart to you and you're inviting them to, I pray that you would now draw them into your family through faith. Help them confess their sins before you, and then come to understand the saving work of Jesus and confess faith in him.

And then, Father, for all of us that are here, thank you for your mercy. Lead us in the everlasting way. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.