

ESSENTIAL PARTS TO A DISCIPLE'S PRAYER
A SERIES ON THE MEANING OF THE LORD'S PRAYER:
(4) RESISTANCE TO EVIL

Matthew 6:13

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PROLOGUE

Can you identify with this prayer?

Dear Lord,

So far today, I've done all right. I haven't gossiped, haven't lost my temper, haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or over indulgent. I'm very thankful for that.

But, in a few minutes, God, I'm going to have to get out of bed. And from then on, I'm going to need all the help I can get! Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. {13} No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. {14} But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; {15} then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death" (James 1:12-15 NRSV).

"Pray then in this way:...And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:9,13 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, many English speaking congregations have used some form of the following prayer: "from all the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil, spare us, good Lord." It is based on the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. We traditionally refer to this prayer of Jesus as the Lord's Prayer, but it would make more sense to call it the "Disciples' Prayer."

The Disciples' Prayer is a model for prayer. It teaches us that when we put God first then all the other concerns of life fall into line. The first three requests in the prayer have to do with the glory of God and the final three cover human need.

It is the last of the six requests in the prayer that seems to cause the most confusion. Usually

we say something like, “And lead us not into temptation.” But that sounds like we are saying to God, “Please, please, do not trick us into doing something wrong.” Yet this is NOT what the request means. God does not tempt anyone (James 1:13). The Disciples’ Prayer is not asking God to refrain from doing what he would never do in the first place. Rather, it is asking God to help us do no wrong.¹

The word translated as “temptation” (NRSV has “trial”) is a form of *peirazo* (pi-rad'-zo) which means “put to the test” in order to discover the kind of person someone is. It is a test that reveals who you really are.

Rodney Dangerfield used to say that he was so ugly when he was born that the doctor slapped his mother. He was so unlucky when he was a child, that his rocking horse died. He went to see his psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist said he wanted to check to see if Rodney had an inferiority complex. So they put him through a series of tests. Studying the test results, the doctor said, "I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is, you do not have a complex. The bad news is, you really are inferior!"

Fortunately, this is not the news God gives to us. Each of us is made in the image of God and we are precious in his sight. Paul writes:

“But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8 NRSV).

If we realize that God loves us then we view the circumstances of our lives in a different light. The trials of life are opportunities to show who we really are. We can affirm our love for God, prove the genuineness of our faith and grow to maturity in Christ. But before we can demonstrate what is good we must learn to resist what is bad. We need to pray, “Lord, when we are put to the test may we do no wrong.”

1. RESIST THE WORLD BY REFRAINING FROM COMPLICITY

When the world puts us to the test we need to resist the world by refraining from complicity in its misdeeds.

The Bible uses “world” in more than one sense. It can refer to the earth or even the human race. But it can also be used as a metaphor representing human rebellion against God. It refers to that aspect of society that lives as though God does not matter, as though God does not exist. The Bible warns us:

¹Parallels with ancient Jewish prayers, and possibly the Aramaic wording behind this verse, suggest that the first line means: “Let us not sin when we are tested.” See Keener, Craig S.; *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* Mt 6:13.

“Do not be conformed to the world” (Rom 12:1 NRSV).

The world invites us to be partners in rebellion. It wants us to be accomplices to its wrongdoing. To be conformed to the world is to share in its values and be molded by its perspective. The pressure to do this comes in many forms but none more seductive than what is represented by these three words: “Everybody does it.”

A 2005 Duke University study found that 90 percent of high school students admit to cheating (if you include copying another person's homework). When asked why, the most common answer was, “Everybody does it.”

Bill Lerach (pronounced LEER-ack) was once called one of the nation's most successful trial lawyers. But on the day before he was given a prison sentence for paying kickbacks (to plaintiffs he recruited to file class action lawsuits), he offered this insightful defense, “Everybody does it.”

Sandy and I were in the parking lot of a local store when a young woman shoved a shopping cart toward the front of our car. I called her on it. Did she apologize for the inconvenience? No. Did she express regret for any potential damage to our vehicle? No. She was visibly upset with me and then uttered those three magic words, “Everybody does it.”

- Everybody overcharges.
- Everybody takes home work supplies.
- Everybody cheats on their taxes.
- Everybody... Everybody... Everybody...

But a disciple of Jesus needs to recognize the deceit behind the claim. For what is popular is not always right. And what is right is not always popular.

2. RESIST THE FLESH BY REFRAINING FROM COMPROMISE

When the flesh puts us to the test we need to resist the flesh by refraining from compromise.

Like world, the Bible uses flesh in more than one sense. It can refer to the physical body. But it can also be a metaphor representing that aspect of an individual's life that is in rebellion against God. To live according to the flesh is to live for self as though God does not matter, as though God does not exist. Paul says:

“The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law” (Rom 8:7 NRSV).

We usually know right from wrong but we often look for excuses. One of the most beguiling excuses is the excuse of entitlement. If life treats us unfairly we feel entitled to

commit wrong in return. This is also the origin of the phrase “guilty pleasure.” Many times this has nothing to do with moral guilt - just an activity we enjoy that for some reason we would be embarrassed if others knew about it. But there are other times when we want engage in an activity we think will bring us pleasure and we also know it is wrong but we feel justified because of some past injury or offence. But, as the old saying goes, “two wrongs do not make a right.”

This is at the very crux of the request, “lead us not into temptation.” We are asking God to help us avoid turning difficult or unfair circumstances into an excuse to do wrong.

3. RESIST THE DEVIL BY REFRAINING FROM CONTRADICTION

When the Devil puts us to the test we need to resist the Devil by refraining from contradicting God’s truth.

The Devil is not explicitly named in the Disciples’ Prayer but is clearly implied. New Testament Greek has two different ways to express deliverance: rescue from an impersonal event such as a flood and rescue from a person such as a bandit. The Lord’s Prayer/Disciples’ Prayer uses the second form so the NRSV correctly translates it as “...and rescue us from the evil one.”

Ironically, one is *tempted* to dismiss the concept of "fallen angels" or "demons" as the product of primitive minds trying to account for disease, mental illness and strange occurrences. Yet Jesus Christ clearly affirms the reality of such spiritual beings who have fallen from grace and whose influence is felt on the world. More importantly he asserts his sovereignty over them.

He names the chief demon as "Satan" or "the Devil." He calls him the "father of lies" (John 8:44) and so reveals his *modus operandi*. If we look at the fall of humanity (Gen 3) in this light we must accept the reality of personal evil in the world whose destructive goal is to convince us that the Word of God is not true and to work contrary to God's purpose.

The Devil is not an opposite power to God. Whatever else the Devil may be he is a creature. As a creature he is finite and limited in time and space. He cannot be everywhere present, all-knowing or all-powerful. God alone has these attributes. One way or another all creatures serve God, though the Devil may serve unwittingly and certainly unwillingly. It would be a mistake to dismiss the concept of personal evil. It would also be a mistake to credit the Devil with powers he does not have or to look for demons under every rock. As disciples of Jesus we need to recognize that...

Satan's influence is behind every attempt to turn a testing into a temptation to evil, so Jesus teaches his disciples that they must rely on God not only for physical sustenance and forgiveness of sins, but also for moral triumph and spiritual victory in all of the spiritual battles of life.²

At the heart of every temptation are two lies. In order to *avoid* temptation we need to identify the first lie. Usually the first lie goes something like this, "Whatever God may have said about this matter is either not really true or it does not apply to me in this situation." Basically, we buy into the idea that there are no real consequences for our actions or somehow we have a personal exemption for this particular sin. Now once we believe the first lie we inevitably give in to the temptation. But after we have given in, we are told a second lie that goes something like this, "God will not forgive you." But this, too, is a lie. Listen to what John says:

"My children, I am writing this so that you won't sin. But if you do sin, Jesus Christ always does the right thing, and he will speak to the Father for us. Christ is the sacrifice that takes away our sins" (1 John 2:1,2a CEV).

Because the Lord always does the right thing we may think he would be more inclined to condemn us than forgive us. But because he always does the right thing he never breaks his Word and his Word is filled with promises of mercy for those who humbly and sorrowfully admit their sins to him. The past is forgiven. The future is made new. With God's help we can avoid the wrong and live for what is right.

CONCLUSION

Jesus taught his disciples how to talk to God using a model we have been referring to throughout this series as the Disciples' Prayer. The words of the prayer remind us that our purpose in life is to glorify God and then enjoy a grateful reliance upon God to meet our needs. The prayer brings all of life to God: our physical, spiritual and moral needs. But the prayer also brings all of God to our lives. It helps us realize that it is through the Father's providence that we receive our daily bread, through the Son's sacrificial death that we are forgiven and through the Spirit's power that we are delivered from the evil one. It is not surprising then that the Church would want to add an ascription of praise that credits "the kingdom and the power and the glory" to the One to whom alone it belongs.

²Wilkins, Michael J. "Praying (6:5 – 15)" In *NIV Application Commentary, New Testament: Matthew*. By Michael J. Wilkins, 280. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, © 2004.