

Lead Us not into Temptation

Last week we looked at the petition of the Lord's Prayer that is the most self-incriminating petition of this prayer. While on the surface we are asking God to forgive us the same way in which we forgive our neighbors, it brings to the forefront of how well we do or do not forgive our neighbors. We saw that this petition was about relationships and how our relationship with God is connected with our relationship with others and vice versa. Forgiveness is the way in which those relationships are restored and it is through Jesus that the debt of our lives is paid in full. This would naturally lead to questions about atonement and the various theories about atonement, which is beyond the scope of this study and best left where more time can be adequately spent on such theories. Forgiveness is also a wide subject which is also beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that forgiveness is the beginning of the restoration of broken relationships and the clearing of consciences.

This week, we turn our attention to the next petition: "And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil." When we dwell on this petition, it does not take us long to realize that our understanding of the very nature of God can be called into question. This petition almost seems to acknowledge that God does tempt us and we are asking God not to do so. This would go against the belief in a benevolent God who only wants the best for us. Perhaps the first Christians were perplexed by this which may have caused James to write in his letter "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" (James 1:13). James also goes on that "but one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it" (James 1:14). Here, James makes it clear that temptation does not come from God, but from our own sinful desires.

However, as with most issues that are addressed in the Bible, we can find references to where God does tempt, or test people. God tested Abraham's faith when God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac; God tested the people during the Exodus to see how they would respond to God's commands; and there are many other references where God has tested someone. This culminates to where God is likened to a gold refiner who puts the metal to fire to test its purity. There are some instances, in the Book of Job, for example, where God allows another entity to test a person.

So, how do we reconcile these different passages which present such a divergent view of God? If we just ignore those passages which do not fit in with our concept of God and focus solely on those that do, then we get a skewed picture of God, which sooner or later, would collapse. Therefore, we really do need to reconcile these different images of God. This not only addresses these seeming contradictions of God's character and nature, but will also give us a better understanding of God.

Perhaps we need to start by understanding what temptation, or testing is. When we are tested, or tempted, we come to a crossroads where our character is tested. How we respond to that test, that trial, that temptation reveals to ourselves, as well as others, what we are really like. It has been said, for example, that the game of golf exposes what a person is really like. Do they bend the rules when it is beneficial to them? Do they nudge the ball out of some rough grass when no one is looking? Do they not count all their strokes just so that they can have a better score than their golf partner? This is what testing is, it reveals our character in how we respond to pressure, regardless of the source of that pressure.

The next thing we need to determine is who is doing the testing, that is, the source of the tempting and why they are tempting us. If God is doing the testing,

say for example how God tested the Israelites during the Exodus, the purpose was to draw the people closer to God, to have them learn and strengthen their dependence upon God for what is needed, for their 'daily bread.' Using the imagery of God as the refiner, the purpose of the test, of putting the metal to the flame is also to burn off the impurities that cling to the metal.

On the other hand, when the devil tempts people, whether it was Adam and Eve, or Cain, or even Jesus Christ, it is for the purpose to drive them away from God. Satan tries to put a wedge between God and the people, destroying the relationship that God desires. As we heard in the Gospel reading, the devil tempts us with desires of the flesh, of power and of pretensions. The devil will begin the temptation by trying to create doubt as to who God is, what God is doing for us as well as what and whose we are. Temptations may start small, almost seemingly innocuous; it is easy to make it seem okay - 'well, it's not like I'm killing anyone;' or 'everybody does it.' But then, it begins to escalate, many times without our realizing it.

In remembering that this is a community prayer, what could be some of the ways in which the community is tempted? Temptations could take the face of feeling superior to another group for any number of reasons. They could take the face of feelings of entitlement that one group can take whatever they want from anyone else. Temptations could come in the guise of giving an unfair advantage to some business entities over a competitor. These are just a few general examples of how a community may be tempted.

This is where the second part of this petition comes in: "and deliver us from evil." Here we are asking God to have the temptation removed, to be brought away from this temptation. This is similar to the verse in the 23rd Psalm where we acknowledge that the Lord's rod and staff comfort us. While we know that the rod

and staff are used to poke and prod us to where we need to go, we have the assurance that the Lord will use those to protect us from dangers that we face. We should not wait until we are at our wits' end, having tried everything else on our own before we turn to God. We should turn to God in the first place, so that through the guidance of the Holy Spirit we may not face the temptation in the first place.

Throughout these past few weeks, we have taken a closer look at this prayer which Jesus' disciples asked Jesus to teach them. We had seen that prayer, in general, was being willing to have a conversation with God, telling God what is on our hearts and that prayer is a connection with the divine. By teaching His followers this prayer, Jesus is saying that everyone can have that connection with God without needing an intermediary. Through this prayer, we see the transcendence of God yet we can have an intimate relationship with God. It is a submissive prayer that teaches the community to have a dependence upon God for both our physical and spiritual lives. We need to always remember this community aspect of this intimate prayer, knowing that for God, this community will be the entire world some day.