

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” <sup>2</sup> He said to them, “When you pray, say: “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. <sup>3</sup> Give us each day our daily bread. <sup>4</sup> Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.”

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

**FIRST READING:** James 1:12-18

<sup>12</sup> Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

<sup>13</sup> When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; <sup>14</sup> but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. <sup>15</sup> Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

<sup>16</sup> Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. <sup>17</sup> Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. <sup>18</sup> He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God

### ***“Lead Us Not into Temptation”***

One of those wise things that parents try to teach their children and teachers teach their students is that *“it is better to STAY out of trouble than to have to GET out of trouble.”* And boy, that’s the truth...temptations are all around us, all the time...big and little ones out there, luring us into trouble, and it’s hard to resist. *Like the little boy who scrambled up onto the kitchen counter in order to dive into the cookies even though he knew he wasn’t supposed to. When his mother walked in, unexpectedly, he had chocolate chips all over his face. She asked him, “What are you doing?” To which he replied, “I was just going up to smell them, Mom, and my tooth got caught.”*<sup>1</sup> The phrase, *“Lead us not into temptation”*, the second in our sermon series Troublesome Bible Passages is, in fact, Jesus’ way of reminding us of the same thing ... *“better to stay out of trouble than to have to get out of trouble”*, but Jesus additionally helps us know from whom we find the strength to resist. Let’s today consider this often-misunderstood passage from Luke 11:1-4, in the face of James 1:12-18.

I think what makes this passage so troublesome, is first not understanding what the word, *“temptation”*, means, and then also wondering why there is the implication that GOD, God might lead us into temptation! Seems wrong.

So, let’s talk about the meaning of temptation first. In fact, let’s compare *“temptation”* to *“trial”* since at least one of the more modern, Bible interpretations uses the words *“time of trial”* in that spot of the passage instead. The two words both certainly work, but they are not really interchangeable. In James 1:2-3, we learn a pretty clear definition of trial. It says, *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”* A trial is a testing of our faith, a moment used, used, used by God for our growth, to draw us closer to God. A trial usually comes in the form of an outside force beyond the our control: illness, fire, accidents, and job loss are easily recognizable bad moments, trials in life, over which God is sovereign, and through which we can grow by realizing our total helplessness and dependence on God. A temptation, by comparison, is

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<sup>1</sup>William Carl, *The Lord’s Prayer for Today* (Louisville: WJKP; 2006), 70.

something which works internally.<sup>2</sup> James, again, clarifies things: verse 14, “*But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.*” Yes, by our own desire....our OWN desire. While temptations themselves may not be evil, they trigger our desires to do evil, to sin. So Trials...imposed externally-opportunities for growth, temptations...work internally-opportunities for sin. We cannot be looking to another as the cause of our sinning, here. We cannot blame our teeth for getting stuck in the cookies, nor can we throw our hands up and say as Flip Wilson so famously said, “*The devil made me do it!*”

Speaking of the devil...It is worth mentioning here that many contemporary and ancient scholars have not “believed in the devil or the power of a devil”. St. Augustine, 4<sup>th</sup> c father of the Faith, for example, saw Satan as one of the highest of angels created by our purely good God, the God incapable of creating evil. He saw him as the one who fell from heaven because of his own corruption, his corruption made real by his use of another of God’s good creations, free will. Satan used this to make evil choices, just as later Adam did. In Satan’s case, the choice was his preference of himself to God, the exaltation of himself over the highest good. So, without speaking of serpents or temptations of any kind, Augustine thought about the devil as a kind of thought experiment in how evil can originate in a wholly good creation.<sup>3</sup>

Presbyterian minister and attorney, Rev. Steve Braden, after reminding us that the Jewish Faith has never recognized the devil as an independent being, provides an honest and scholarly scriptural study. He concludes that “*On the whole it is not entirely clear from the Bible, OT & NT, whether the devil is a being, outside of God’s control or not, and if outside of God’s control, from where its source of power comes.*”<sup>4</sup>

Finally, contemporary theologian, Brian McClearen, provides a good summary. Brian says this, “*Some people today believe Satan and demons to be literal, objective realities. Others believe they are outmoded superstitions. Still others (and I believe Brian is in this camp) interpret Satan and demons as powerful and insightful images by which our ancestors sought to*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/what-is-the-difference-between-trials-and-temptations.html>. (accessed 8-4-23).

<sup>3</sup> Phillip Cary. “*Augustine on Evil*”. <https://templeton.eastern.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/Augustine-on-Evil-by-Dr-Phil-Cary-Dialogue.pdf> (accessed 8-4-23).

<sup>4</sup> Steve Braden. “*Sermon: Deliver Us*” [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=1191569971625788](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=1191569971625788) (accessed 8-4-23).

*describe shadowy realities that are still at work today. In today's terminology, we might call these realities social, political, structural, ideological, and psychological forces. They become forces that take control of individuals, groups, and even whole civilizations, driving them toward destruction.*" Brian goes on, *"Imagine (I don't think it will be hard for you to do) a spirit of racism, revenge, religious supremacy, nationalism, political partisanship, greed, or fear getting a foothold in a community. Previously decent people become possessed, controlled, and driven by these forces, mind-sets, or ideologies. Soon, individuals aren't thinking or feeling for themselves anymore. They gradually allow the spirit of the group to possess them. If nobody can break out of this frenzy, it's easy to imagine tragic outcomes: vandalism, riots, beatings, lynchings, gang rapes, house demolitions, plundered land, exploited, or enslaved workers, terrorism, dictatorship, genocide. Bullets can fly, bombs explode, and death tolls soar—among people who seemed so decent, normal, and peace loving just minutes or months before."*<sup>5</sup>

Right. You don't need to believe in literal demons and devils, although evil is so terribly real and dark in this world that you might as well call it that!<sup>6</sup> You may have seen the Calvin & Hobbs cartoon where Calvin says to Hobbs, his stuffed pet tiger, *"Hobbs, do you believe in the devil, the supreme evil being, dedicated to the temptation, corruption and destruction of humanity?"* Hobbs says, *"I'm not sure humanity needs the help!"*<sup>7</sup> No, you don't need to believe in literal demons and devils to agree with Jesus that evil forces are also in us. They begin in our minds and our thoughts, maybe initially seeming outlandish and wrong. Our moral compass says, *"That's dangerous, be careful."* But then, the more we are exposed to it, the less outlandish it seems. Eventually, we find ourselves rationalizing, accepting it, getting so comfortable with it, whatever it is, that we give into it. *In C.S. Lewis' Screwtape Letters, the teacher devil, Screwtape, writes to his student, Wormword, "Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one--the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones,*

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<sup>5</sup> Brian McClaren. <https://brianmclaren.net/q-r-satan/> (accessed 8-4-23).

<sup>6</sup> Cindy Rigby. Communication. APTS. Systematic Theology. Fall, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Steve Braden

*without signposts.*”<sup>8</sup> Rev Alistair Begg warns that from our thought then come actions. He says, “*sow a thought reap an action sow an action reap a habit, sow a habit reap a character, sow a character reap a destiny.*”<sup>9</sup>

Yes, brothers and sisters, the temptations are always around us and evil forces are in us as they are in the world. So ultimately, the prayer that Jesus teaches us to say, “*Lead us not into temptation*” might best be understood as “*Do not let us fall into temptation*”<sup>10</sup> or “*Do not let us succumb to our weaknesses.*”<sup>11</sup> Or maybe just, *God, don’t let us mess up!* It has never been that we are begging for God to not tempt us. God does not tempt. God is light and with him, there is no darkness. No, but it has been that we are acknowledging in these words that God can do what we ask and more. We acknowledge that God can protect us, strengthen us, deliver us and we pray to boldly acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Almighty Lord, simultaneously putting in their place all those other lesser powers which are aligned against us and within us. “*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.*” (Rm 8:38-39)

Yes, we boldly pray the prayer, holding onto Jesus’ protecting, strengthening, helping hand. But you know, in petition we are also asking, “O Lord, show us the way.” It is the positive flip side of the same coin. The corollary to “*Lead us not into Temptation*” is “*Lead us in the paths of truth and peace and joy and harmony.*” In his book of sermons on the Lord’s prayer, Rev. Helmut Thielicke describes a young man who daily battled his temptations with every fiber of his being. The man’s preoccupation with them unfortunately only increased his involvement with them and assured his repetitive surrender to them. Thielicke suggests that with Jesus there is a sense in which we should simply should not focus on our temptations, but just keep our eyes on HIM.” *It may be somewhat like the counterfeit expert who was asked how he identified*

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<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis. The Screwtape Letters Quotes. <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/2920952-the-screwtape-letters> (accessed 7-7-16).

<sup>9</sup> Alistair Begg. “*Lead us not into Temptation*” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4bWr79K-uY> (accessed 8-4-23)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/06/led-not-into-temptation-pope-approves-change-t-lordsprayer#:~:text=Instead%20of%20saying%20%E2%80%9Clead%20us,Conference%20of%20Italy%20last%20month> (accessed 8-4-23).

<sup>11</sup> Alistair Begg.

*the false coins and bills. He said, "I don't spend a lot of time looking at counterfeits. I spend a lot of time looking at the real thing." <sup>12</sup>*

Siblings in Christ, as we soon go to God in prayer, using the words Jesus taught us to say, let's consider those evil choices that in our weaknesses we are prone to make because we need know where the slippery slope begins. But more than this, let us consider the One who is at our side, giving us his hand to protect, strengthen, and deliver us from these evils....in fact, to show us the way to paths of truth, peace, joy and harmony. Yes, let us be focused on Jesus, the real thing, for his is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Our Heavenly Father: Sermons on the Lord's Prayer*, trans. John W Doberstein (Evanston, IL: Harper and Brothers, 1960), pg119-20. Published in Germany under the title *Das Gebet das die Welt umspannt* (Stuttgart:Quell-Verlag, 1953).