

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION

MATTHEW 6:9-13; JAMES 1:12-18
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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We've arrived at the second last Sunday of our "Faith Questions" sermon series. This week's question is another good one. Well, perhaps "good" is the wrong word, given the subject matter:

Lead us not into temptation? Does God tempt us?

Last week, when the question was about forgiveness, I said that throughout this sermon series it's likely that various questions have resonated more with some than others but that this one affects us all. I think the same could be said of this one.

There isn't a single person in this room who has not been tempted. And, maybe, who has wondered about the source of that temptation.

At the heart of temptation is desire. And we human beings have many desires:

- **Things:** we think that the latest car or gadget or smartphone or flat screen TV or... The desire for material possessions is, in many ways, what drives our economy
- **Experiences:** if we could just go to the right places and have the right experiences... a beach in Jamaica or a river cruise in Europe... or a jaunt to southeast Asia... or a learning tour to Israel 😊... If we could just accumulate and

catalogue enough experiences, enough stamps on our passport, we would be complete

- **Security:** whether it's financial security or personal security or national security, this desire drives us to hoard and, at the broadest level, legitimates violence
- **Bodies:** catastrophic levels of infidelity that is destructive to families and communities... a pornography industry that is worth untold billions of dollars; a reduction of sex to what two consenting adults agree to and brings pleasure
- **Status:** reputation, renown; the YouTube generation is growing up believing that their value is measured by likes and clicks
- **Entertainment, distraction:** so many of us waste away idle hours on social media or Netflix—hours that could be spent on more worthy pursuits
- **Escape:** addictions of every kind—drugs, alcohol, food, social media... we self-medicate in countless ways to fuel our desire to escape
- **Connection:** social media that is the blessing and the curse of the digital age

Now, I don't think most of these desires are evil in and of themselves. Perhaps the desire for status and escape would be exceptions, but it's not bad to want to experience things or travel or enjoy sex in its proper context or to want to be secure or entertained or connected with our fellow human beings.

But the desire for these and other things can so easily turn toxic and corrosive.

We know this, right? I don't think I am describing a landscape that is unfamiliar to anyone in this room.

But the question was not, "What are the things that tempt us?" The question was: "Does *God* tempt us?"

What is the *source* of our temptation? Why would Jesus tell us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation?"

When it comes to the sources of the many things that tempt us, we have, broadly speaking three options.

Source #1: The Devil

I don't talk about the devil nearly enough for some.

In some church circles, one often hears prayers and conversations littered with all manner of wild spiritual warfare language that I confess makes me squirm with discomfort. What are we talking, like horns and pitchforks and fiery barbecues? It doesn't resonate with my experience in any way.

Alternatively, when I wander away from church circles, talk of the devil is often characterized by silly caricatures. The devil is kind of conceived of as the dirty, fun-loving uncle who lets you get away with all the stuff that a stiff and stodgy do-gooding God would prefer you avoid.

So, whether it's people who see a literal devil behind every temptation in life or more secular folks for whom the devil represents little more than a dalliance or two with the shadowy back alleys of life, neither seems particularly persuasive or compelling to me.

But Jesus certainly seemed to believe in the devil and a demonic realm. It's tough—really tough—to read the devil out of the gospels, hard as we might try. Jesus knew of the devil firsthand from his temptation in the wilderness. And it's probably not advisable to locate ourselves on the opposite side of Jesus when it comes to matters of theology.

Jesus has company. Pope Francis also seems to think of Satan pretty literally:

He is evil, he's not like mist. He's not a diffuse thing, he is a person. One must never converse with Satan—if you do that, you'll be lost," he told TV2000, a Catholic channel.

This is a proclamation that I suspect will not make him as popular as some of his other ones.

The devil as source of temptation makes sense of what we see. How else to account for the horrors that our world has witnessed? I don't really have to enumerate, do I? I suspect we all walk around with a kind of shorthand list of atrocities that we have heard or read about or seen or witnessed or experienced that makes us shudder down to our bones.

Or, perhaps we could get a bit more uncomfortably personal. It's natural enough to rummage around in our brains for the vilest evil we can imagine *out there* and then pin that on the devil.

But if the biblical account of human origins is in any sense to be believed, the devil's original temptation wasn't to lure the first humans straight into the grimmest depths of depravity.

It was a bit subtler than that. It was more like a whispered, Did God really say... ? You can be like God! The original sin was for human beings to assume for themselves the place that God alone should occupy.

And this has remained the devil's most basic and least challenging task since—to relentlessly drive us inward, to self, where God would direct us outward in love. Each of the desires I mentioned above, when turned toxic, are in some form or another about the self assuming the throne.

So, yes, the devil probably is the source of some temptation.

Source #2: God

Here we return to the last line of the Lord's Prayer.

Why *would* Jesus say, "Lead us not into temptation" if he wasn't somehow implying that this was something that God might do?

It's worth spending a little bit of time on translation issues here.

The Greek word translated by many translations is *pirasmos*, which can mean everything from a personal temptation to sin, to "trial" to "proving ground" to "adversity, affliction, or trouble" to "discipline or provocation."

Like many words, *pirasmos* has a range of meanings. And this is reflected in how various translations put verse 13 (and we must remember that every translation is, in some ways, an interpretation):

NIV: And lead us not into *temptation*, but deliver us from the evil one.

NRSV: Do not bring us to the *time of trial*, but rescue us from the evil one.

Two more colloquial translations or paraphrases:

New Living Translation: And don't let us *yield to temptation*, but rescue us from the evil one.

CEV: *Keep us from being tempted* and protect us from evil.

The Message: Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.

So, if we compare and contrast multiple translations, the composite picture is a desire that God would *protect* us from temptation or deliver us through trial. It is a plea to God for safety, for rescue, for help amidst the storm.

We should remember that this is a *prayer*, not a theological treatise about the sources of sin or evil or temptation.

Prayer is the language in which we pour out our desire to God. We see this throughout the Psalms. And Jesus is teaching us to do this in the Lord's Prayer.

None of us *wish* to endure trials (even if we know that we must), so we pray to avoid them; none of us want to face the ugly parts of ourselves that give in to temptation, so we pray to be led away. This is simply the honest language of prayer.

Jesus modeled this in Gethsemane. He prayed *not* to be led to the cross—take this cup from me! He was also convinced that he would be delivered and preserved through this trial.

And of course in our other Scripture reading this morning, James answers the question of whether or not God is the source of our temptation in pretty explicit terms:

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.

There is no evil in God and he cannot tempt us toward it.

The line in the Lord's Prayer is most likely simply an expression of the desire for God to lead us, to protect us, to guide us down good paths.

Source #3: Ourselves

Let's go back to James, who is again very explicit:

[E]ach person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

This is a chronology of temptation that I suspect many of us are familiar with. I certainly am. It begins with desire, becomes sin when acted upon, and leads eventually to death—of relationships, of parts of ourselves, of goodness and truth and beauty, and ultimately, to eternal death.

And James is clear that the source of these desires that tempt us toward death is ourselves.

This is uncomfortable to hear, and goes directly against the grain of the narrative of our culture.

This afternoon, Naomi and I are heading up to Didsbury to see our kids and the RJC choir tonight. In thinking about the kids and about the origins and sources of temptation, I was reminded of a letter I wrote to them nearly two years ago on their fifteenth birthday, which I also posted on my bog.

Here's what part of it said:

In the media you consume, in the films you watch and the music you listen to, you are constantly told some version or other of what is becoming a very predictable (and inadequate) narrative about what it means to be human.

You are told that your heart is where you find the truest and best version of yourself—the self that you must be authentic to. Your highest aspiration, you are

often told, is to be true to the self you find within and to externalize this self to the outside world which is then obligated to affirm and validate this self.

I regret to inform you that this is a lie. It is very subtle lie and embedded within it are a number of partial truths. It is a very attractive lie and it captures the imagination of many people far older than you. But it is a lie nonetheless.

If we're honest—and it's hard to be honest, I know—when we look inside ourselves, we see that Jesus is telling the truth about us.

We find goodness of all kinds, certainly. But we also find small and selfish selves. We find reactionary judgments and grudges and violence (physical or relational) and harshness and impatience. We find lust and acquisitiveness. We find fear and a suspicion of peace. We find stinginess and a lack of self-control.

Not always, of course. But these things, along with more inspiring things, reside in the human heart. I know that you know this. I know that you know that **in the deepest parts of who we are, we find things that are not worth being true to.**

So, I hope you will increasingly come to realize that the goal of life, fundamentally, is not to be true to yourselves. I hope you will set your sights much higher than this because there are far deeper and truer and more beautiful things to be true to than this.

Our selves are wonderful, glorious, unique treasures. They are gifts from God and they are among the ways in which God's love is reflected out into a world in desperate need of it. But there are parts of our selves that, I am afraid to say, our only task is to die to so that better and more beautiful forms of life might be brought forth.

The goal of life is to be our best selves—to be summoned away from greedy attachments to ourselves and to follow God's call in pursuing the flourishing of our neighbour, our world, and ourselves within it.

So, be true to yourselves. But be truer to God. Because God is a much more reliable thing to be true to than a self.

I think they read this and thought their dad was kind of weird. But I think James would be on my side. James does not let us avoid this truth about who we are.

And I hasten to add that looking honestly at ourselves and the ways in which temptation is rooted in the human heart is not just about heroic resistance, rolling up our sleeves and resisting temptation (although there is much to be said for this).

As Christians, we have God's very spirit residing in us, convicting us, guiding us, forgiving us, rebuking us, and strengthening us to put to death those desires that are toxic and to nourish those parts of us that lead to love of God and neighbour.

And God will not lead us into places and situations where resistance is impossible. In 1 Corinthians 10:13 we read:

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

So, for this final source, we must also say, yes, the source of temptation is ourselves. We can't just say, "The devil made me do it." We need to own our own role in this.

When we say the Lord's Prayer, we often end with these lines:

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever, amen.

These lines are not in most of our English Bibles—and for good reason because neither Matthew nor Luke's account of the prayer have them in the original Greek. Some English translations that were based on later manuscripts (the KJV, for example), included these lines. Others, like the NASB, include them in brackets, acknowledging that they aren't in the original manuscripts.

But many of us cannot imagine the prayer without them. It feels strange to end the prayer with, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil."

I am not so much of a translation purist to complain about them. I think they express a vital conviction we have that ultimately, God's kingdom *will* come on earth as in heaven, and our hearts will beat in unison with our Creator.

We will no longer yield to the temptation to do that which we don't want to do because ultimately the kingdom is not ours but God's.

This is our ultimate hope. We trust in God's faithfulness to us not our faithfulness to God. We believe that God *will* have God's way, that God *will* triumph over the devil and over those parts of ourselves that lead us astray.

One desire that I failed to mention above was the desire for God. And I believe that this desire is hard-wired into each one of us.

This desire, like all desires, can be and regularly is misplaced. We fill the God-shaped hole in our hearts in all kinds of ways. But at its best, our desire for God expresses the hope we have that God's kingdom would come and override all the prevents its coming, and to align our lives with the source of this desire.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, Lord Jesus Christ.

Yours *is* the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Amen.

