

Sunday 27th May. 2018
'Lead us not into temptation.'

We now come to look at the last petition of the Lord's Prayer. I have said many times, that even though there is nothing wrong in saying the words alone, this prayer taught to the disciples by Jesus, is a guide to prioritise our praying. The petition has two connected elements about temptation and evil. Both are very significant topics, so this week I will look at 'Lead us not into temptation.' Next week we will consider deliverance from evil, and if time permits, join them back together as the one petition they are.

Firstly, what this petition does not mean.

As with the previous petition, many people misunderstand what Jesus is saying here. They forget that we interpret Scripture with Scripture, and in passages which have potential for misunderstanding, we interpret them with the help of passages which are clear.

Some people think that this phrase indicates that God tempts us. This is not what it means. James chapter 1 verse 13 tells us that God does not tempt any to sin, but rather that He abhors sin in any shape or form. This being so, how can we think that God is responsible for tempting us to sin. Mark chapter 14 and verse 38 is in the narrative about Jesus praying in the garden before His arrest. He takes His three closest disciples with Him as He prays, but they fall asleep. When Jesus finds them asleep, He tells them to watch and pray that they may not fall into temptation. Why would Jesus say this to them if God were the agent of temptation? Why would Jesus give this petition if God was the one who tempted mankind? Why would He say pray to your Father not to lead you into temptation if God were the tempter? Finally, James Chapter 1 and the verses following 13 tells us the chemistry of sin. Sin arises when our fleshly passions are aroused and mulled over in our minds. So, this petition is not suggesting that temptation arises from God.

At this point it might be useful to say something about what temptation is and its nature.

A basic description or definition of temptation is that it is an inclination and desire to think of and do something which is contrary to God's glory and His revealed will. This arises from our own natures, and does so because it is convenient or offers us pleasure. These can be legitimate desires taken too far, or something which is not only a transgression of God's Law, but also falls into the sphere of criminal law.

A slight digression here. We tend to think of big sins and little sins, white lies and bare face untruth. In our present society, things that were once regarded as sinful are now accepted as our right or prerogative. The sanction of society neither makes a thing right nor wrong in God's sight, so we must be careful. The view of the Church over the ages is that the Scriptures are the final authority in all matters. This means that if society says something is acceptable, and the Scripture says otherwise, then it is sinful to go with Society's view against the Bible. I should also add that the Church is not the final authority. It must adhere to Scripture and is in error when it diverts from it.

The Bible does not distinguish between big sins and little sins. It does not matter if we miss a bus by a few minutes or a month, the bus has gone without us. It does not matter if our sin is little or big, we have transgressed against God's Law, and all of it is broken! If one link of the chain is broken, the ship drifts because, in effect, all of the chain is broken. This is the Biblical view of sin and we would do well to ponder it.

Temptation begins when our fleshly, natural instincts are aroused, as I said, even legitimate ones. When does a dedicated worker become a workaholic? When does concern for someone become being a busybody? We can be tempted by good things or unwholesome things. These usually begin in our minds either in thought or by dwelling on something our other senses have stirred. We begin to imagine what this or that would be like, how we could do it or do it and get away with it. This grows from a notion to something which is becoming a much more pressing or enjoyable thought, and as this works in us, we plan how we will do this, or we go straight to the doing of some act, and we sin.

Temptation is seductive, deceitful and deadly.

Temptation seduces us into sin. Seduction is like the flower of the Pitcher Plant or the Venus Fly Trap. Both plants are carnivorous, and they work in such a way to lure flies to them and they are designed in such a way that a point of no return is reached, and the insects fall into the trap and are digested. The words of Jesus as recorded by Mark tells us the way to avoid going so close to the trap of temptation that we are caught and fall into sin. We are to watch and pray. If we are not watchful, temptation will seduce us to the point of no return, and we will fall into sin. Don't walk too close to the cliff edge if you want to be sure not to fall. Don't play with fire if you don't want to be burned.

Think of the history of King David. One day he went up for a walk on his roof, often a place where a garden had been built, if you were wealthy! He was relaxed, it was a nice day. The army was off fighting, so matters of state were quite, he had time on his hands. As he walked, he saw a beautiful woman bathing on a nearby building, and his eyes lingered. She was beautiful, naked and he was a man, wasn't he! A king, a fine specimen of a man! Temptation was seducing him. He did not have to stay there, he did not have to look, he did not have to imagine, but he did.

David sent her a message inviting her over for afternoon tea. Nothing wrong with that, foolish, but not wrong in itself, and after all, he was king and could do what he wanted! That bit I made up, but can you see how seductive sin and temptation are. I suppose when David stepped out onto his roof that day, he did so not thinking that today would be a fine day to commit adultery and plan an assassination, but that is how the day and the following days ended!

Temptation and sin is seductive, but it is also deceptive. Temptation unchecked will lead to sin, and one sin will lead to more and worse sin. David thought that there would be no consequences from his adultery. After all, what nobody knows can't hurt them, right?

Wrong. He thought that he was in the clear, but Bathsheba was pregnant with David's child. Firstly he tries to manipulate events so that the husband could be thought of as the father, and when that didn't work, he arranges an assassination to cover his own tracks.

What started off as a careless response to looking at what he should have turned away from led to adultery, assassination, lying and soul sickness! A small temptation yielded to opens the way to greater temptations and this leads to sin after sin, each one getting greater! Someone might ask, why did David not catch himself on and stop before it got too far? Well, this is another aspect of temptation. As we yield to it and to sin, it not only emboldens us to sin under the pretext that no-one will know, or everyone does it and all those sorts of thought, but it raises our passions higher and hardens our hearts as to the fire we are playing with. Temptation is seductive and deceitful, ask David.

Temptation and sin is also destructive. Read Psalm 51. This is the Psalm David wrote after the Bathsheba affair as told in 2 Samuel chapter 11. He was confronted by Nathan, and it seems as if he wakes out of a sin induces stupor. This is the hardening of heart by the deceitfulness of sin. Hebrews 3.13. We don't know how long after the event this confrontation was, but it was not the next day. This means that David had been living with unconfessed sin for a while. As you read Psalm 51, take notice of the metaphors David uses to describe the damage his sin had done to his soul. The greatest matter was the offence he had given to God, but his soul had been affected also.

He feels unclean, as if he is suffering the pain of broken bones, he has lost joy and gladness, and there is a strong hint that he recognizes that he has lost the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and fears he may not get it back! However you read it, David is describing a soul very much out of sorts with itself and God, and in a very different condition to the times where he sang God's praises! This is sin sickness. The tragedy is, that if left unchecked, like a leprosy, it would make him more and more unfeeling towards God. This is sometimes described as back sliding, and this gives birth to apostasy. That is a slippery slope which none of us should toy with.

It is because of the seductiveness, deceitfulness and destructiveness of temptation and sin that we need to watch and pray. We are to pray that we do not fall into temptation and that we are not led by our lusts and passions, and desires into temptation.

There is a Hymn in the Wesley Hymnal by Miss Elliot that speaks of such things, based on Mark 13 verse 33.

Christian! seek not yet repose,
Cast thy dreams of ease away;
Thou art in the midst of foes;
Watch and pray.

Principalities and powers,
Mustering their unseen array,
Watch for thy unguarded hours,
Watch and pray.

Gird your heavenly armour on,
Wear it ever night and day;
Ambush lies the evil one;
Watch and pray.

Hear the victors who o'ercame;
Still they mark each warrior's way;
All with one sweet voice exclaim,
Watch and pray.

Hear above all, hear thy Lord,
Him thou lovest to obey;
Hide within your heart His word;
Watch and pray.

Watch as if on that alone
Hung the issue of the day;
Pray that help may be sent down;
Watch and pray.

The Wesley's compiled their hymnal not only to gather cheery songs, but to teach. They held that if the early Methodists learned several of the hymns off by heart, they would have learned a lot of practical theology! I have included this old hymn in full because it is so rich in practical truth. If we begin to understand it, we will not need all the cheering up that we go after, and will find that we are growing spiritually into men and woman of God from days of infant and feeble living – 'Rise up O men of God.' That's another good hymn!

What then does the petition, 'lead us not into temptation mean.'

Look at Deuteronomy chapter 8 and verse 2. God permits things to come into our lives to bring us to places of decision. God sees what is in our hearts, but we do not, until we are in the situation of testing. When confronted with something we would like to do, but are told that it is not to be done, how do we respond? It is of course never a cold simple choice, because our desires and passions and feelings get stirred up and this is the arena of temptation!

An example of this is the story of Achan. We find his story in Joshua chapter 7 and verses 19-21. Despite being told to take no plunder from the enemies they had just defeated, Achan saw some gold and silver and clothing which tickled his fancy. He took it and hid it in his tent, after all, there was so much stuff no one would notice it or know it

was gone! After all, it was a responsible thing to provide for one's family and old age, was it not? The last bit I added, but isn't it amazing how temptation can turn things which at any other time we would never think of doing into something desirable, and even turn it into a virtue! That is the seduction and deceit of sin, and it led to his destruction, literally!

This story shows us the purpose of testing arising out of the cut and thrust of daily life. Will we lie to save face, or will we own up and be humbled? Will we give the credit where it is due, or will we respond in such a way that we get a boost too. Will we do what we have said we would do even if it is now inconvenient or costly. All these little tests arise in daily life.

These tests let God see, and us see what we are like! God knows what we are like, but it is for our good that we see what we are like and see that God sees what we are like. It is much easier to take the task seriously when the boss is doing it with us. We take the mistakes and sins we have committed seriously when we see what we have done and see that God sees it as well.

As we see how we do when tested, it should cause us to turn more seriously to God, repent if we need to repent, which mostly we will need to. Then seek God to infuse us with transforming grace, grace to change and purify this aspect of our heart and character which is prone to be subject to temptation and sin. Each of us has a different make up with different weakness and strengths. Both of these need transforming grace, but the devil knows the particular things that will stir us, so every one of us is assaulted in different ways.

Notice this. Achan was the only one who sinned in taking spoil. None of the other people did this, so his falling into sin in this way was not inevitable, but he was seduced and deceived by his own desires and passions and fell. God let the situation arise, and Achan's response was inadequate. He did not pray, he did not agonise, he did not resist, but he yielded. If he had cried out to God that he was burning with desire for these things, help would have been sent down, but that was not what he did.

The petition could be stated in this way. God, help me when life throws me a choice, and all my feelings and desire is to make the wrong choice because I want it so much and it appears to offer so much pleasure and make me feel good. Please God, take me by a different path so as I avoid it, or take me through it. Don't let it get me like it got David and Achan, but go with me in it and through it, and cause the test to turn out so that I grow and not sin.

As an aside, if we find that there is a sudden onset of temptation almost as if it came out of the blue, this is often an indicator that it is a direct dart from Satan. If the temptation is so fiery that we feel that there is no other course of action than to yield, then that indicates a great deal of direct Satanic involvement. If the temptation seems like petrol being thrown on a fire, then you have hit an evil day. Resort at once to Ephesians 6 and be sure we understand the armour of God.

This petition not to be led into temptation is not telling God what to do, that is not a profitable attitude to take. However it does contain a request for mercy, that God in mercy steer us clear of such dangers and if not, that He would uphold us while we pass through the fire of temptation.

Temptation arises from the interaction of our fallen and corrupt and yet incompletely transformed hearts, with the world. It does not arise from God. The surest way to avoid the test is to seek first God's kingdom and its righteousness, which is essentially attending to the Beatitudes which begins the Sermon on the Mount and from which this Lord's Prayer arises. This is but a light skim over the subject of temptation and sin. If you really want to get to grips with this, it means looking to old authors and for many of us today, challenging authors. The Puritans were the masters of practical theology, and one of the greatest of these was John Owen. His piece on 'The Mortification of Sin' is a standard and classic work. However, it takes serious application to read and re read, but it will pay off.

In the meantime, watch and pray, 'spare us from the test.'