

“AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION” LORD’S PRAYER 7

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When they are released from prison, some former criminals put behind them their evil ways, and become law-abiding citizens. Others may be determined to go straight, but like a moth drawn to the flame, they start mixing with their old dodgy friends. They go back to their old ways, and despite their best intentions, they finish up in the joint again.

We have been released from the prison of sin and death when Jesus took our sin and guilt on himself. We are set free. But Satan and his allies aren’t so keen for us to enjoy freedom. They don’t want us to escape from their cold embrace.

So, they tempt us. They try to lure us back into sin. They select a piece of bait, something that they know will be particularly appealing to us, and then set a trap with it. The mouse sees only the little bit of cheese, not the spring waiting to snap shut.

Who are these foes seeking to destroy us? In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther refers to the Devil, the world, and our sinful selves. Last Sunday we looked at how sin affects not only our behaviour, but our thoughts and words. The Bible says that we are born with sin. St Paul calls this sinful nature the “Old Adam”, and says that our Old Adam keeps rearing his ugly head.

And ladies, just in case you are feeling left out by my use of archaic terms, you score the “Old Eve”. Just when we think we have got the Old Adam/Eve under control, and that our walk with God is close and wonderful, then we see the presence within us of pride, envy, lust, greed, lack of love and forgiveness, and the like. We fall.

And the secular world doesn’t help, does it? From a very early age, children are taught to question. That’s not a bad thing in itself, but we now have parents who are afraid to be parents. They lack the confidence to set the appropriate boundaries all children need. When children don’t respect their parents or schoolteachers, why would they respect God?

Most high school students would find it very easy to list the failures of the church but would struggle to identify how Christians have served the world and produced many profound changes for the better.

When the sin of a prominent Christian is exposed, when they are revealed to be just as much a sinner as everyone else, then the world doesn’t even bother to hide its angry disdain. Yet when Christians strive to lead good lives, they are viewed as thinking that they are better than everyone else.

The Devil uses our sinful natures and the evil influence in the world to lead us into falling into false belief and despair. He wants us to forget about God’s Word: “You’ve been listening to the Bible readings in church every week for 60 years. Why do you bother? How

can something written a couple of thousand years ago have any relevance whatsoever for today's modern world?

The Devil's goal is to tear us away from faith and from a faithful life. Some Christians wonder why they seem to go from one lot of trouble to the next, while their non-Christian neighbours don't seem to have a care in the world.

It might seem that the Devil and his allies are satisfied with tempting us to fall into sin, but that's only the first part of the nasty plan. The ultimate goal is to destroy the relationship God has with us.

Before I develop this idea, though, I would like to take the time to distinguish temptation and sin. They are not the same thing, even though we often talk as if they are identical. Temptation may result in sin, or it may not.

The story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness demonstrates the difference. The Devil tempts Jesus three times, but in each instance Jesus resists the temptation. Hebrews 4:15 says "For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way – just as we are, yet he did not sin."

The Devil tempts you and I to disobey God's commands, just as he did to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But disobedience to God is not enough to pull us away from God's embrace. Disobedience can lead to doubt of God's Word and to despair that God is merciful and that he loves and forgives us. That's when the Devil is close to achieving his goal of destroying God's relationship with us.

So, Jesus invites us to pray "And lead us not into temptation...". There is another point that needs clarification in this petition, one which depends on where you see the source of the temptation. If God is seen as the source of temptation, then is God any better than the Devil? Does God tempt us in order to see if we are good enough or strong enough?

A casual reading of the book of Job might lead one to conclude that God is the origin of temptation, but that would not be the truth. James 1:13, 14 sets us straight, "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me'. For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desires and enticed."

God, who is holy, cannot tempt anyone. However, God is so powerful and wise that he is able to bring good things even out of something which is evil. When the Devil tempts us, his goal is to try to lead us away from God. Yet God can use this temptation to teach us to cast all our burdens on him, and, in fact, grow closer to him.

When we stop depending on our strength and look to him, as Jesus did in the wilderness, he gives us what we need to pass through the trial unscathed. Temptation can result in sin, doubt, and despair. By God's grace, temptation can result in a stronger faith and trust in God.

Well, if that's the case – that this testing can be good for us – why does Jesus invite us to pray that God would not allow us to be tempted? Luther explains that in this petition we are asking that God would watch over us. We ask him to spare us from situations which would overwhelm us. We are also asking for his strength to confront the temptation we do encounter.

Do you feel weighed down by temptation? If so, take heart from the promises of 1 Corinthians 10:13, that "Every test that you have experienced is the kind that normally comes to people. But God keeps his promise, and he will not allow you to be tested beyond your power to remain firm. At the time you are put to the test, he will give you the strength to endure it, and so provide you with a way out."

There is also the matter of being self-aware and using our sense when we are tempted. There is enough temptation around without going looking for it. Luther said that you can't stop temptations from flying around your head, but you don't have to let them build a nest in your hair.

If I have a craving for sponge cake, for instance, then it doesn't make sense to linger outside the cake shop that makes the best sponge cake in town. If I'm a person who tends to go along with the crowd, then it doesn't make sense to hang around with people who have no time for God.

If I know that I am prone to losing my temper, it does make sense to look for the source of my anger, and to consider what might be better ways of dealing with my uncontrolled expressions of anger.

One last question! What do we do when the inevitable takes place, when we are unable to resist temptation? Oscar Wilde said that he could resist everything, except temptation.

If your standard approach is to try and forget your stumble as soon as possible and to deny that anything ever happened, then you are handing the Devil a powerful weapon that he will keep using to belt you around the head.

If your standard approach is limited to getting cranky at yourself, maybe punishing yourself while promising that you are going to try harder next time, then you are setting yourself up for more failure and for the Devil tempting you to despair.

God's wise and loving approach is his invitation for us to confess our sin and guilt and to ask for forgiveness. There's nothing we can admit to him that he hasn't heard a billion times before. The Devil wins minor victories over us when we sin, but he has already lost the war. God is merciful. He forgives our sin, and he does it again, and again, and again. Amen.