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**Title:** Teach Us to Pray: Lead Us. Deliver Us

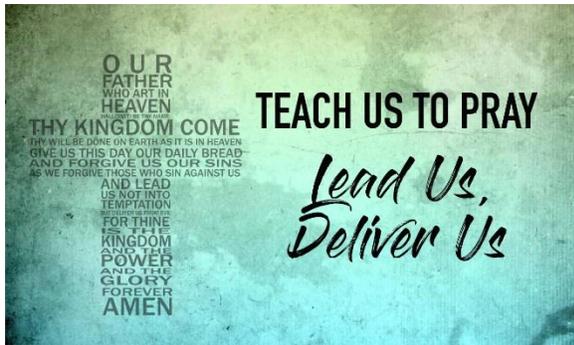
**Date:** March 17 & 18, 2018

**Preaching:** Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

**Scripture:** [James 1:2-4](#)

**Text:** [Ephesians 6:10-13](#)

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We are on the last lap of what has been for many, a challenging series. It has been for me. I've been praying the Lord's Prayer for longer than I can remember. Many of you have said the same. You've acknowledged that it is a constant companion, not just when we gather for weekly worship, but it is often prayed in times of need, when

feeling stressed, tempted or tested. That makes sense given this final petition of six that are found in the prayer.

Again that has been a surprise to many who've never stopped to take the prayer apart. It has a form. A salutation that is followed by six petitions, three for God and three for us. The three are about God's name, God's reign and God's will. Our petitions about our deepest needs, are about our hunger, guilt, and fear. The prayer closes with a doxology which we will look at next week on Palm Sunday.

Today we are looking at the last people's petition, a prayer request about our fears of temptation and evil. Let's take it apart and look at it. I'm confident there is new insight into a petition that we may not pray elsewhere. And if you are new today, to sharpen the focus, we've been using saying short phrases aloud, letting the power of the voice get our attention. So, let's get started. Repeat after me. Lead us.

Is there anything familiar sounding in that phrase? Does it connect with any other verses of scripture? How about this one. "He leads me beside still waters." Or this one, "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." Have you ever made that connection? The Lord's Prayer with the "the Lord is my shepherd", the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm?

It's an interesting word that Jesus uses here. It's not the usual word for "lead," which means "to direct" or "to go in front." The word used to mean "to bring" or "to carry." It implies personal involvement and assistance. It's

not a general directing of his troops from the safety of a distant hilltop. It's more like a shepherd walking alongside the flock, hence the connection with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. It is not surprising that when you look at the first-century depictions of Jesus in art, you never see a crucified Jesus hanging on the cross. Rather, it is the image of a shepherd, often times carrying a lamb on his shoulder. It connects with Jesus' own promise as the Good Shepherd. You remember what said, "I am the good shepherd....My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." John 10:14, 27)

If we would ever pause long enough on these two words to see that picture, it might be helpful. We quickly jump to the fears of this petition that we fail to pause and consider what is implied in the first two words. It is a statement about our relationship and with it, it infers obedience. To pray "lead us" is to suggest that we will follow, that we have dropped our nets and committed to following the leader, the Good Shepherd. We are asking the Lord to lead us, not just past which we fear. It isn't an insurance policy petition. Rather, it is a statement about the way you will be led every day, in every way. It is a statement of identity. I have shared with you before that when I was a teenager and would leave the house in the evening to enjoy the company of friends or go on a date, my father would always say, "Remember who you are."

When we pray, "lead us" we are remembering who we are. Within every "us" is the implied me. We are praying "Abba Father, I am yours and I will allow your will and your ways to lead me and to direct my walk because it is a path of righteousness." It is the Lord's Prayer because we have a guide, a shepherd. One who will walk with us and when we say "lead us" we are praying for companionship, guidance, leadership even as we promise to follow. When you consider lead us in that context, there is a question. Do you let him lead? Pray it that way, as a pledge and promise to follow. Repeat after me. Lead us. Now, "not" "Lead us not." Repeat that.

Not requires a little bit of a linguistic lesson. Have you ever heard of a "litotes?" You have, even if you don't know its official name. Litotes is a figure of speech that employs a understatement by using a negative. It comes from a Greek word meaning "simple" or "spare." We use it all the time in common speech. For example, if you were to ask me how much weight I lost last week, I might reply "Not much," and you would know what I meant. Even though the descriptive adjective used was the word "much," you would know that by attaching the negative to it, I would be saying something exactly opposite. If you were to ask me how much longer this sermon would last, I might say "not long," and inwardly you might whisper "Yes." <sup>1</sup>Actually you might even say it out loud. But you would know what I

meant. We use the litotes device all the time. You're not as young as you use to be. You won't be sorry. Litotes are common place.

This might give us a clue as to what we are actually asking for when we pray, "Lead us not into temptation." If we understand the clause to use a litotes, we realize that our prayer is to be led in the opposite direction of temptation. It would it seem to suggest that we are back to requesting divine guidance, for being lead again, on a path of righteousness."<sup>2</sup> So, say "lead us not." Now, add the fear, "into temptation." How about that? Do you really want to be led away from temptation?

Let's face it. If it weren't for the Lord's Prayer, very few of us would ever pray, "Lead us not into temptation." It's like the t-shirt reads, "Lead me not into temptation. I can find the way myself." Someone said, "If you pray, 'Lead us not into temptation,' God might answer your prayer and make life a drab and dull affair." No, we like temptation. We fantasize about it. That's why we read certain books and watch certain films. What we would like is to dance and not have to pay the orchestra. We don't want the consequences.<sup>3</sup>

But of course, that makes this prayer petition about what is classically known as sins of the flesh, the temptations to food, alcohol, lusty desires, and greedy want, the carnal sins of giving into someone or something. When we think about these type of temptations, we often use words like seduced or enticed. But temptation can also denote turning away from something and this may be more of what Jesus getting at in this prayer. Not carnal sins but spiritual sins, turning away from God when our faith is put to test, our fidelity is on trial. This is the type of temptations that Jesus experienced in the wilderness when he was being put to test by Satan. At stake wasn't just desires of the flesh, but separating Jesus from God, a test of loyalty. In that light, trial might be a better word and it is now being found in many translations.

The Greek word for temptation is the word *peirasmos* (πειρασμός). Scholars today believe a better translation is "trial" or "test" rather than temptation, a word that St. Jerome first suggested when translating Greek for Latin Vulgate in the 14<sup>th</sup>. Thus temptation is the solicitation to evil, something to be feared, a time when your faith and fidelity is on trial and being tested. When you tempt someone, you want them to fail. When Satan tempted Adam and Eve, he wanted them to fall. He wanted them to eat of the forbidden fruit and thus alienate themselves from God. But in remembering this story, we need to be reminded of a truth about God. Scripture teaches us that temptation is something that God would never do. James says, "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone." God never solicits us to evil.

God doesn't want us to fall. God wants us to stand. God wants us to do the right thing, the good thing.

This is what is behind Pope Francis' suggestion that we change the Lord's Prayer, something that bothered some of you and which was incorrectly reported by some of the news media. There has been a movement since 1988, by ecumenical councils to clarify the language of the Lord's Prayer and there have been changes. Last week, when I asked for a show of hands, a good 2/3 of you raised your hands as praying, "trespasses" when first praying the Lord's Prayer. In our community, we pray sin and sins, something that I have done all my life but was suggested as a universal change in 1988.

Pope Francis suggested that liturgy of the church change the prayer to, "Don't abandon us to temptation." That's an English translation of the Italian phrase suggestion, something the Italian bishops actually suggested in 2008, well before Francis was Pope. And being from Argentina, he had been praying already for years in Spanish, "Don't let us fall into temptation." The NRSV translation by Bible scholars read, "And do not bring us to the time of trial." (Matthew 6:13) At this point, no one is suggesting any changes around here.

Whether it is temptation or trial, I think it is important to hear what is going on, what Jesus wants us to understand. The word temptation brings to mind the serpent-like Enemy in the Garden of Eden, a seductive-voice whispering, "Do it your way, not God's." Trial or test reminds us of Jesus himself, doing battle with The Enemy who wants him to turn from God. This is not just a prayer, "Lord, keep us from being naughty girls and boys." This is to recognize that there is an enemy after our souls, a force that wants us to separate us from God, to convince us that our kingdoms matter, that our names have to be established, that our will is more important than God's will. The temptation is what causes us to think we can live without God. It's all around us, encountered every day with just about every message you receive. You are in charge, you are number one, and you don't need God. It was then and it is now. Jesus says, "Pray this way." Pray that you don't fall into the trap that you begin thinking, I don't need a deeper relationship with God. Jesus knew this was coming because he experienced himself. And so in the Garden he said, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Mark 14:37-38)

Say it recognizing this, understanding that God's isn't leading us into temptation but rather, guiding you away from tests and trial, leading you along a path that keeps you faithful, a path of righteousness. Repeat after me. "Lead us not into temptation." And now, "But deliver us from evil.

Notice a couple of things here. The prayer isn't "Keep us from evil." This is not a prayer for immunity from trouble so that bad things won't happen to us. In fact, Jesus assumes that they will and that is why he chooses the word "deliver." To deliver someone is to rescue them. God delivered the people from Pharaoh, parting the Red Sea and leading them out of Egypt. God delivered Daniel from the lion's den. God delivered Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace. Deliverance isn't an exemption from trials; it is an intervention. <sup>4</sup>

Note it is "Deliver us from evil," not from harm. This isn't about our physical safety. It is again about spiritual safety. Evil speaks of those dark forces in the world and in our souls that threaten to tear us away from God and to thwart God's good purpose in our lives. "When human beings worship that which is not God, they give authority to these forces of destruction. Those forces gain a power, collectively, and down through the centuries of Christian experience, it has caused wise people to personify them, to give it the name of Satan, the Accuser, the Evil One. That's why some newer versions translate Matthew 6:13, "And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one." (Matthew 6:13, NRSV) The Evil One is not equal and opposite to God; but "he" or "it" is a potent force, opposed to God's good creation, and particularly to the human beings who worship God and yield their lives to His authority.<sup>5</sup>

Make no mistake, evil is real and powerful. We need only to look around us today to see its sign whether it be the holocaust or 911 or the recent abuse of gymnasts or shooting in Parkland. This list could go on and on. But it is not only 'out there', in other people, but it is present and active, around us. Jesus says the evil is like "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy, to oppose the life and abundance that he came to offer us." (John 10:10) Peter said to "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8) We sense this, know it. Jesus is teaching us to pray not that bad things will never get to us. That's impossible. Rather, that they won't turn us away from God or derail the good work that Jesus has begun in us. It is why Jesus, on the last night before he goes to the cross, prays for you and me. "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one." (John 17:15) Jesus is praying what he is teaching us to pray for. Knowing that evil would inevitably show, he prayed that in those difficult moment, faith would not fail. <sup>6</sup>

It is a difficult petition because temptation and evil are difficult subjects. But Jesus taught us to pray it because he knew there was so much at stake. Temptation is strong and evil is real, too powerful for us to overcome by

ourselves. So Jesus teaches us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation" and since we are praying a litotes, we are actually asking to be led away from temptation or testing. It is a request divine guidance "to lead us to a path of righteousness." And when we join this petition with "deliver us from evil," we cry out for help when we walk through "the darkest valley where even the shadow of death is present," knowing that there is a power greater than evil, greater than death, the very power we call upon when we pray to Our Father, in heaven.

In light of this, pray it with newfound understand that this last petition addresses our fears that tempt us and evil that can harm us. Repeat after me. "Lead us not into temptation." And "But deliver us from evil.

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<sup>1</sup> The Lord's Prayer: "Lead Us Not Into Temptation", David E. Leininger, retrieved by subscription at sermons.com

<sup>2</sup> Leininger

<sup>3</sup> The Disciples Prayer. Haddon Robinson. Retrieved by subscription at preachingtoday.com

<sup>4</sup> I Pray the Lord my soul to keep. Brian Wilkerson. Retrieved by subscription at preachingtoday.com

<sup>5</sup> Wright, N.T., The Lord and His Prayer. Eerdmans. page 53.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremias, Joachim. The Prayers of Jesus. SCM. Page 105.