

09.09.2018

Sixth Petition of the Lord's Prayer – And lead us not into temptation.
Matthew 4:11

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"After I became a Christian, everything was perfect," said nobody ever. Usually, when we talk about the faith, we present it as if it's the solution to all our problems. "Lonely? . . . What a friend we have in Jesus." "Alcoholic? . . . Jesus can break the bonds of your addiction." "Confused? . . . Well, Jesus is the wisdom of God. He's the way, the truth, and the life." But this Sixth Petition of the Lord's Prayer, "And lead us not into temptation," reminds us that the Christian life isn't so much a fix as it is an adventure, a journey, a participation in the larger drama of God.

Praying this prayer, we find ourselves with more troubles than we'd have, had we never gotten mixed up with Jesus in the first place. Jesus promises us trials, persecutions, big ol' crosses on our backs. And the reason for this is that before we ever met Jesus, the forces of darkness had us in the palm of their hand. There was no need to do battle, because they had you and me right where they wanted us. Their claim on us was real and at the time there was no threat to their power. But once Jesus stamps His name on us at Baptism, claims us as His own, and makes new creations out of us by water and the Spirit, you can bet evil's gonna try to get its hands on us again. And those powers will use any means necessary to do so—that's where temptation comes in. So, no wonder our lives now might feel something like a battleground.

Funny how the same goes for Jesus in today's Gospel. He's not even towed off from His Baptism in the Jordan River, and already that dove that flew down to Him suddenly grabs Jesus by the scruff and flings Him into the middle of a dry, desolate, desert wilderness to be tempted by Satan. I would imagine that for many of us this is where the similarities stop—now we're talking apples and oranges. I mean, when Jesus goes up against the temptations of the devil, it's not even the same. He's the Son of God, after all, so of course He'll be able to withstand these temptations without a hitch. But for poor, lowly, sinners like us, we don't even stand a chance. If that's what any of us are thinking whenever this text gets read in church, then we've got it all wrong.

The first temptation Jesus faces is the prospect of food just when He's at His hungriest. After forty days of fasting, I would imagine a slice of bread would look more like a juicy T-bone. Have you ever fasted, let alone for forty days? His mouth probably salivated at just the thought—whose wouldn't? His stomach gurgled, saying "Feed me!" His taste buds started to dance as they could almost taste that bread. Trust me, Jesus was tempted.

Then, Jesus' second temptation is to affirm that He is God's Son, His beloved Son. No longer in His Father's presence but cast down to earth, Jesus must be feeling the distance between them. He's not talking to God face-to-face anymore but having to pray from afar. And everywhere He turns, there aren't bright obvious displays of blessing. Instead, here He is fasting, having to deny Himself; and that desert is anything but a cushy five-star hotel; not to mention, instead of seeing His Father's smile, He's forced to stare at Satan's scowl. Surely, He'd need to be reminded that God still hadn't left Him nor forsaken Him. A miraculous rescue by God's angels as He fell off the pinnacle of the temple would do just the trick. What a temptation that must've been for Jesus.

Or, how about the third temptation thrown at Jesus—the promise of power. Now, this one's easy, right? Probably not if you're used to being the King of kings and Lord of lords, enthroned in the high heavenly places, then you wind up born to peasant parents from a nowhere town in a stinky, dirty animal stall. And the only people who come and visit you at first are some ragtag shepherds. Then, Herod's out to get you, and you have to run for your life and flee the country. Imagine the chance to finally catch a break from all that. No doubt, the kingdoms of the world and their glory tempted Jesus.

We forget how tough it really was for Jesus because He makes it look easy. Flawlessly blocking every punch without batting an eye, it seems like a cake walk for Him. Effortlessly defeating the devil time after time after time, it's as if Jesus doesn't even break a sweat. Maybe we get this impression because we know firsthand how difficult temptations can be. They're big, ugly, scary monsters that feel like too much for us. They're hungry, with sharp teeth, and wide-open jaws,

ready to swallow us whole. But remember, Jesus is just as human as you and I, so there really isn't much of a difference. So then, what's Jesus' secret?

Well, each and every time, without a second thought, Jesus right away pulls out God's Word and fires back. In Ephesians 6, when Paul talks about putting on the "full armor of God," he tells us that the sword of the Spirit is none other than the Word of God. Which means that when we're equipped with the Word, we have a sword in our sheath, arrows in our quiver, bullets in our chamber. There's nothing we can't take down if we have the Word. So, pull out a pen and take some notes, because here are some Scriptures to help you bring down temptation yourself.

- 1.) 1 John 1:6-7, "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

Brothers and sisters, Satan lulls us into a false security. He wants us to use God's grace as a license to sin—*After all*, he prods, *God will forgive you*. But remember, hell is still a real place, and its threats are real for those who reject God and His will for their lives. Don't be complacent and think your sin can't hurt you anymore if you persist in it. God won't force anyone to live with Him forever if on earth they show time and again how they choose their sin over God and His ways. So, as St. John says, don't lie to yourself and say you're walking in the light when you're still stumbling about in the darkness. Such unrepentance *is* a rejection of the very grace of God. But God's grace is always there for those who repent, turning away from their sin.

- 2.) James 1:14-15—our Epistle today—"But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."

It is tempting to think that if we only give in just this once to sin, that it'll stop. *Just one more bite, just one more binge, just one more indulgence*, we think, *and we'll get it out of our system*. But that never works—in fact, it's just the opposite. Once we get a taste, we always want more—our appetites grow hungrier and hungrier until it's too late. You always wonder how people on the news get where they are, well they got their start somewhere—it seemed innocent at the time, but now for them it's spiraled out of control. The other night a fly told me a parable about this. There I was sitting out on my back patio with a glass of wine. When this fly comes and gets a sip from my glass. Then after a moment it comes back and takes another. Then more hastily this time, another. And pretty soon, that fly got stuck in the wine and eventually drowned.

- 3.) 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

Most times, temptation seems unbearable. We Americans aren't very good at willpower or saying no. And so we almost always quit before we even get started, we give in because we figure it's no use. But that's only because we're used to going it alone, without the Word of God. Today's petition, "And lead us not into temptation," goes to show that God refuses to hand us over to temptation, but always provides a way out. For every temptation, there's an exit sign. Don't give it a moment's thought, but before you start making excuses, begin justifying your actions, pick up those knees like Joseph this morning—*run!* Find the nearest exit and get out of there! Move away from sin and instead go toward the waiting arms of your heavenly Father.

- 4.) Romans 6:20-23, "When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

When tempted, we're like Adam and Eve with the forbidden fruit—when we look at sin, all we see is what we think we gain. Which means if we don't give into the temptation, then we're afraid we'll lose out. But imagine Adam and Eve eating the fruit, and there we are as bystanders looking on in horror. "What are you doing!" we'd cry, "Put that back—

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it'll kill you!" When we're tempted, we should take a step back and look at our situation through the objective lens of God's Word. When we do, sin won't look so good anymore, and we'll come to appreciate all we have to gain by obedience to God—a good conscience, a sense of triumph, the ability to live with ourselves, health and enjoyment, and best of all a stable relationship with God.

5.) Hebrews 12:1, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us".

In the thick of it, we might wonder *Why me?* We can feel as if nobody knows what we're going through. Like we're the only ones who've ever had it so tough. But we're not. We're not the first, and we're not the last. Believe it or not, some have even gone through worse. And y'know something—they're our cheering section. Our great cloud of witnesses prove that there's always a way out, that you and I are part of something much, much greater; much, much better than sin could ever offer us. Even Jesus Himself has gone before us, blazing a trail for us to follow. Earlier in Hebrews (4:15) it says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." Just think, when faced with temptation, we are not alone, but are in good company.

But as great as these Scriptures are, so helpful in times of temptation, maybe there's one temptation right now that still feels too big to handle. As we've been talking this morning about battling temptation, perhaps more defeats come to our minds than victories. If you're anything like me you're running through all the times you've just surrendered, didn't even go down fighting. And if that's what you're thinking then you might also be feeling useless, worthless, hopeless. Maybe you're even wondering who are you to be called a Christian, a disciple, a child of God. There's no use in talking about strategies against the devil, when after being beaten so many times you feel like you've got LOSER tattooed to your forehead. Now, how do we fight that temptation to just give up and give in?

Well, the same as before—with God's Word. You see, His Word tells us that while we might've lost some battles here and there, we've already won the war. In fact, those failures have been erased from the score books. On every page, there's not recorded even one defeat—only victory. How can that be, we wonder?

Well, when John the Baptist sees Jesus coming toward him he says, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). There are as many miles between you and those failures as the east is from the west, declares the psalmist (Psalm 103:12). Isaiah 43:25 says, "I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins." You might still have record of them (up here), but *don't* because God doesn't. No, by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who bore the sins of all on the cross, every last fault and failure that still haunts your memory has been crucified. It is erased . . . gone . . . replaced instead with the triumph of our risen Lord. Make use of this Word of God and you'll be more than a conqueror through Him who loved us.

But the Bible tells us that there was one other thing besides God's Word that could help Jesus face every temptation head on. Hebrews 12:2 tells us, "Let us look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." What was the joy set before Him? What warmed His heart? Kept Him going that entire time? YOU. He was able to say no to the devil's temptations, because you meant more to Him than anything. Turn those stones into bread? Be lifted up on the hands of angels? Have all the kingdoms of the world and their glory? Not if it means He can't have you! You are His joy. You were the joy set before Him, the reason why He could endure the cross. *You*.

For me, that's the greatest Scripture of all—the magic bullet. Knowing that He did it all for me, makes me want to do it all for Him. To be washed in His grace, swept away by His love, caught up forever with Him. When you have all that, what else could you possibly want? Remember this Word of God, keep His Gospel close to your heart, never lose this Scripture, and you can endure anything. He will be that joy set before you.