

"LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION"

Luke 11:1-4

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by

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"He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' And he said to them, 'When you pray, say:

"'Father, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; and lead us not into temptation.'"

Luke 11:1-4

The Lord's Prayer ends with the sentence: "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." For the word translated in English, "temptation" stands the Greek word "peira" which is a root for the English word "peril." What does "temptation" mean for us today? Temptation is the planned, arranged breaking of an individual by gradual and indirect means so that he destroys himself. When a man is lured into that direction he is being tempted. This word should not be confused with the testing of something or someone which has a positive and creative purpose. In this case, something or someone may be put under strain but in order that it or he may be strengthened. For instance, a basketball coach who strains the endurance of his team in long practice sessions and tough programs of calisthenics follows such a course so that the starting five will finish the last five minutes with the same speed and skill as they began the game. In this category are usually school examinations and even surprise quizzes. But something is tempted when the purpose of the test is to see it destroyed and humiliated. Temptation is the most brutal of all avarice; it lacks the honesty of a direct attack upon someone; it is devious, indirect; it is an encouragement toward bad choices.

In the fascinating book, A Separate Peace, by J. Knowles, several young boys at a prep school form themselves into a secret society and at one point in their initiation, the leader Phineas has designed a dangerous leap into the stream from a tree on the bank of the river. He personally has succeeded in the jump, but the other youth are enticed by Phineas to face up to the jump in the hope that they will fail either in jumping or in refusing to jump. Either way they have been damaged by the leader. The tree, therefore, takes on special importance as the symbol of evil rather than of comradeship.

Very often the boundary between testing and temptation may be very hard to discern but the goal of testing is creative and not destructive; but

the purpose of temptation is always ruin. After a new jet aircraft has been designed, one of its most harrowing moments comes in the FAA certification tests when the aircraft is placed in flying situations that are highly unlikely but in the opinion of the FAA necessary in order to establish that the safety features of the jet really work. For instance, in the case of the Boeing 707; it is constructed so that if a roll should develop beyond the stress limits of the aircraft, the outward jet engines are designed to fall from the wing which in turn saves the wing itself from cracking. Any volunteers for the test flight that tries to shake off the starboard engine? Here is an example of testing that is at the borderline between the legitimate test and the pernicious temptation.

The origin of temptation is evil. God does not tempt men; he does not break them and he does not lure men into situations where they break themselves; this prayer would be meaningless and a mockery if this bedrock fact about God were not true.

What is Jesus saying to us in the sentence, "Lead us not into temptation.?" It seems to me that our Lord has shown to us a vital fact both about the nature of man and the will of God.

Man and only man in all of creation can be tempted to do what is wrong because only man is free to decide upon major questions. I was walking in our garden this week with our cat "Tiki." Suddenly, without any hint, the cat leaped to the wall and had captured a sparrow in his mouth. Our cat is, among other things, completely independent of all commands I try to issue so I was not able to catch him in time to rescue the bird. The whole incident made me very upset toward Tiki, and I intended to punish him until the fact was impressed upon me that Tiki followed an ancient hunter instinct and the whole incident, therefore, was neither moral nor immoral. Tiki could not be tempted in a moral sense because he unfailingly follows a course of action that does not involve raising the larger questions. He is unaware of the worth of a sparrow. Man is a different creature altogether and he makes all of his choices, even the most routine, within a context where the stakes are higher by far, because he is aware of larger questions and so in this knowledge he stands in his decisions both to gain more and to lose more than all the rest of the created order.

Christ has given this sentence to show the will of God for our lives. God has neither the desire or the need to see us crumble and fall in the humiliation of self destruction. God is so good and so strong within himself that he does not build his own stature upon the ruins of our nothingness. The prayer, therefore, assures us that in the battle against the harmful options of each day we have God himself on our side.

The result of this prayer, as I see it, is twofold: first of all, it profoundly affects our presuppositions and perspectives in terms of how we basically look at life. The prayer sets us free from the need to be constantly on guard against the experiences of daily living. We have prayed that God will protect us from the peril of callous deceptiveness and in a very deep way, just this frame of mind is the best protection against such threats, certainly far better than the conspiracy world view that sees evil possibilities behind every corner and is, therefore, over-protected and brittle toward life. As I see it, the prayer releases us from precisely that kind of rigidity and negativism so that we are able to live at peace with faith in God's power to protect us where we need protection. John

Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress sketches in an unforgettable portrait of a man who is never able to count upon this sentence in the Lord's Prayer.

GREAT-HEART. Why, he was always afraid that he should come short of whither he had a desire to go. Everything frightened him that he heard anybody speak of, that had but the least appearance of opposition in it. I hear that he lay roaring at the Slough of Despond for above a month together, nor durst he, for all he saw several go over before him, venture, though they, many of them, offered to lend him their hand. He would not go back again neither. The Celestial City, he said, he should die if he came not to it and yet was dejected at every difficulty, and stumbled at every Straw that anybody cast in his way. Well, after he had laid at the Slough of Despond a great while, as I have told you, one Sunshiny morning, I do not know how, he ventured, and so got over. But when he was over, he would scarce believe it. He had, I think, a Slough of Despond in his mind, a Slough that he carried everywhere with him, or else he would never have been as he was. So he came up to the Gate, you know what I mean, that stands at the head of this way, and there also he stood a good while before he would adventure to knock. When the Gate was opened he would give back, and give place to others, and say that he was not worthy; for, for all he got before some to the Gate, yet many of them went in before him. There the poor man would stand shaking and shrinking, I dare say it would have pitied one's heart to have seen him, nor would he go back again. At last he took the Hammer that hung on the Gate in his hand, and gave a small Rap or two; then one opened to him, but he shrank back as before. He that opened stepped out after him and said, Thou trembling one, what wantest thou? With that he fell to the ground. He that spoke to him wondered to see him so faint. So he said to him, Peace be to thee; up, for I have set open the door to thee; come in, for thou art blest. With that he got up, and went in trembling, and when he was in, he was ashamed to shew his face."

But if the first purpose of this last sentence of the Lord's Prayer is to grant us peace, the second purpose is to stir us up to courageously follow our guide. We pray "lead us..." and now the question is: How does Christ lead us? He does not lead us into destruction but into life and yet in a way that preserves our freedom and responsibility. In recognizing the possibility of temptation the "Our Father" has proven that Christ has regarded man's freedom with complete seriousness.

Christ leads us in the journey of life in the way a great mountaineer leads his companions through a difficult pass where each member of party must rope in to the whole group. Most people misunderstand this aspect of mountaineering, and as a result completely fail to comprehend the roping procedure. The average person thinks that each climber is tied to the rope and in this tight knot is his security. But as a matter of fact, only the first and last members of the party are tied to the rope; all of the rest in the party snap their own ropes onto the main line by means of a steel ring called a carabiner. This means that they are each free to move along the main rope between themselves and the leader and yet their safety is still guarded. It is a fact that the freedom which the carabiner permits is a safety feature

in itself in that a fall can be gradually arrested by friction along the line, whereas if the connection were fastened without the possibility of movement, then the fall of one man could easily pull all of the group into a fall. This means that in mountaineering there is neither pushing nor pulling but each man must make his own moves and is, therefore, responsible for his own holds and steps. The safety of each is insured in the rope that binds all together, yet with freedom. It is the perfect mixture of the two.

For this solidarity in justice and hope our Lord taught us to pray and now the door is open between mere man and his Creator. Our prayer, the "Our Father" ends in such a way that it is a beginning: we are invited to continue openly from the depths of our hearts.