

The pastor and his wife invited a number of people to dinner one night. The pastor’s wife said to their eight year old daughter, “Would you like to say the blessing?” “I wouldn’t know what to say” she answered. “Just say what you hear Mommy say” her mother encouraged. The little girl bowed her head and said, “Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?”

In prayer we may think that there are things that we shouldn’t say, that are off limits. It’s possible we may think that about this particular line of the Lord’s Prayer because of what James writes in his epistle: “*For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone...*” (1:13). Sitting around the dinner table with invited guests may not be the best time to blurt out a painfully honest prayer, but when it comes to personal prayer there are no topics prohibited. Fact is, there is a good chance God has heard it all before.

If God doesn’t tempt anyone, why does Jesus teach his disciples to pray this way? The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that Christians have three sworn enemies: the devil, the world, and our own flesh. Jesus teaches us to pray this petition because he knows the softness of our convictions and the hard reality of temptation that comes from the devil, the world and our own sinful nature. He also knows our tendency to follow the path of least resistance.

You may be thinking like other sophisticated 21st century folks, “The devil? Come on?” But let me assure you the Bible takes the devil seriously. It says, quite clearly, that we have an adversary, the destroyer, the deceiver of the whole world. The devil misrepresents God and creates confusion. He is sometimes called the Accuser, for he despises God’s love for us. Other times, he is called Diabolos which means the splitting one—because he seeks to divide us from God and against each other, and even against ourselves, by causing us to disintegrate. He prowls around this world like a lion looking for his next victim to destroy. I have always thought of him like Sauron, the Dark Lord, in J.R.R. Tolkien’s grand trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*.

But we should not restrict our understanding of the evil one to just a personal threat. Consider also what the Apostle Paul calls the “*principalities and powers*” (Colossians 2:15)—those organized, pervasive cultural forces that oppose God and rage against God’s kingdom. These include uncompromising ideologies related to economy, nation and race. The “world” (the term used in the Bible for the cultural forces that defy the Kingdom of God) tells us that when it comes to the powers, we should simply accept them or adapt to them. Jesus, on the other hand, tells us to pray for protection from the seductive powers of our age, the cultural forces that rationalize and perpetuate evil.

If you haven’t heard about or read about the national anthem protests in the NFL you probably live on a desert island or on a remote mountain top. Anyway, while attending a pastors’ retreat in Ligonier earlier this week with about 40 church leaders, I had a revealing conversation with Pastor Brian Edmonds from Macedonia Baptist Church in the Hill District. Brian is a thirty something African American man who grew up in Baltimore and attended the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Because he went to school there, Brian had a personal interest in Charlottesville and the nation’s response to what happened there. He said they don’t talk very much about racial issues at Macedonia Church because their church

members live and work in the reality of a racially divided world every day. He also shared with me what he has told his congregation about the anthem protests: “Instead of taking a knee, we should all take *two knees*, and sincerely pray for our country, our communities and our church.”

Praying is what Jesus wanted all of his disciples to do when he taught the twelve to pray, “*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one*” (Matt. 6:13a). Having taught his disciples how to deal with their past sins in the petition of the Lord’s Prayer we looked at last Sunday... “*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*” ...Jesus turns his attention from the past to the future and addresses their vulnerability to sins that reach beyond today and into tomorrow.

By teaching his followers to pray, “*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one*” Jesus showed that we are to ask the Father to spare us from the temptations and the spiritual attacks that can lead us into new sin. Once again, James teaches in his epistle, “*When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone*” (1:13). James goes on to explain that enticement and temptation to sin arise from within, mainly from our own evil inclinations and desires. External temptations can come to us from fellow sinners because “miserable loves company,” or because Satan himself is tempting us, who the Bible identifies as “the tempter.” But God himself does not engage in temptation to sin. How, then, are we to process this line of the prayer?

R.C. Sproul* writes: In the Scriptures, in the New Testament Greek, the word for evil is *poneron*. The last two letters, -on, indicate something particular. In the Greek language, as in many languages, nouns can be masculine, feminine, or neuter. We sometimes do this even in English when we talk about ships or cars and call them by feminine pronouns. Well, the -on ending puts this Greek word in the neuter form. In this form, it refers to evil in the abstract. But this is not the form in which the word appears in [all translations of Matthew 6]. In some versions, the Greek word is not *poneron*, it’s *poneros*—and the -os ending in the Greek indicates a masculine noun. Therefore, what Jesus is saying here is best translated “*deliver us from the evil one.*”

Remember Job, who though he was a member of the fallen race of Adam, nevertheless distinguished himself by his extraordinary righteousness and obedience? Satan, (the evil one) we are told, comes to heaven after walking to and fro across the earth. In that encounter, God asks whether Satan, in his wanderings, had taken notice of Job. God adds, “*There is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil*” (Job 1:8b). Satan responds with sneering contempt: “*Does Job fear God for nothing? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But now, stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse you to your face!*” (1:9b-11). God says, “*Behold, all that he has is in your power; only do not lay a hand on his person*” (1:12). God tells Satan, “*You...can’t make him suffer physically.*” Satan doesn’t hold back. If any man in the history of the world is subjected to every dreadful attack that Satan could make, it is Job. All his livestock, his servants, and his children all are taken away, but job refuses to find fault with God’s providence.

That leads to Satan’s second visit to heaven, where he once again discusses Job with God. God mentions that Job “*holds fast to his integrity*” (2:3b). To that, Satan replies that Job would curse God if he were to suffer in his body. Once again God acquiesces and once again Satan goes after Job with all his fury, so that Job is afflicted with boils all over his body that he scratches with a pot shard. In the midst of his

hellish suffering, Job's wife, who wants to comfort him and release him from his pain, becomes an instrument of the deceiver. She says, "*Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!*" (2:9). Job can hardly speak, but he says, "*Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?*" (2:10b). Later, Job makes an even more powerful statement of his trust in God: "*Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him*" (13:15a).

You see, dear friends, Job aced the test. God blessed him and restored everything he had lost. But God knows all too well our tendency to follow the path of least resistance. God will not tempt us. But God will certainly test us.

In the midst of our testing and troubles of our own making, let us put our trust in God. Praise his holy name! Amen.

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