

## ***Lead Us Not into Temptation***

In the name of him who was tempted in every way just as we are—yet without sin, dear friends in Christ: We have been covering the petitions of the Lord's Prayer in our evening devotions this year. And as we have been going through them, a few weeks back we noted a shift from the grand global needs of mankind addressed in the first three petitions, that the Lord would send us his Word and Spirit, for example, to the more personal and immediate concerns of our day to day lives addressed in the fourth and fifth petitions; namely that the Lord would give us our daily bread and that he would forgive the sins that we're constantly committing. And even in these last two petitions just named, we can detect a change in the rate of how often we need what it is we're praying for. That is, most of us feel the need to eat three times a day or so, however often our stomachs send us those "I'm registering empty" signals; but if we are at all spiritually aware of ourselves, we recognize that our need for God's forgiveness is quite a bit more frequent than that. No doubt about it: we need forgiveness more often than food. And it happens that the same pattern continues this evening as we consider the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer, "lead us not into temptation", because there is nothing that we face more often and more steadily than the continuous stream of temptations that keep coming at us like machinegun fire.

We are surrounded by temptations. They come at us from all sides. They even come from within us. That's because, as Luther explains in the Catechism, the three sources of temptation are the devil, the world, and our own sinful natures. And as long we're in this life, none of these three sources of temptation is going away. With this in mind, we'll do well to spend a few moments considering the enemies that we're up against.

We'll start with the last one first, the sinful nature, because that's the one that's closest to home. In the Scriptures it's also called the "fallen or weakened flesh" or the "Old Adam"; and what it is, is the part of us that naturally gravitates toward sin because it enjoys sinning. It's the seared conscience that refuses to acknowledge that certain pet sins are sins. It's the self-deception in us that believes that through certain other sins happiness can be achieved – sort of like an alcoholic believes that another drink is going to make him feel better. It does for a moment, maybe, but then come the consequences. And with sin there are always consequences – though part of the deception is never to see them until it's too late. The sin nature in us is the part that is inherently self-centered and that drives us always to look out for number one – to think about how this is going to affect *me* before considering the needs of anyone else. It's the part of us that's full of pride and wonders how this is going to look on *me*, whether to my exultation or my being humbled, and that always drives us toward the path that leads to glory. The sin nature in us is the part that imagines that despite my sin, I'm still a pretty good person, because, after all, what few sins I've done (that I can't explain away or excuse) are small and easily overlooked. Everyone else's sins, by contrast, are far more obvious and odious – especially the ones that have been committed against me: *those* are absolutely unforgivable. You know, it's a good thing for our sin natures that they live within us; because if they lived next door they'd be the kind of neighbor that you'd really hate and maybe even want to kill. But as it is we tenderly feed and care for them. We shouldn't. Through repentance we are called to put them to death – and that's more than a justifiable homicide: it's the just and lawful execution of a traitor within.

The second source of temptation is the world in which we live. It's our friends and colleagues who tell us to lighten up and go with the flow because "everyone's doing it". It's our culture that tells men that they aren't real men unless they make so much money and drive this kind of car; that tells women that they aren't real women unless they have the ideal figure, the grand house, the great career, the obligatory 2.6 children (all in that order), and that through it all they still must manage to keep themselves 100 percent independent of men; and that tells our kids that to be accepted by their friends and to properly express their own unique personality they must wear these certain clothes and listen to this certain music, and that they are hopeless rejects if they're not actively engaged in promiscuous sexual behavior by the time they're in their teens. The world is the rationalism that tells us that science is the key to all knowledge and that religion is for the weak,

ignorant, and superstitious. It's the spiritual philosophy that says all paths lead to the same heavenly reward. It's the spirit of the age that proclaims that there are no absolutes and that all that matters is personal freedom, personal choice, and the right to murder babies for birth control or to extract stem cells for medical research. It's materialism, and pornography, and drugs; it's the pursuit of wealth and fame; it's hobbies, sports, food, entertainment, travel, television, radio, internet, and books – yes, there are a few people who still read – with which we are entertaining ourselves to death while we neglect the things that really matter. All of these belong to the temptations of the world.

And then finally there's the devil who tempts us – though he hardly needs to considering everything else that we have stacked against us. But in any case, I think that the temptations of the devil are often misunderstood. Popular images of Satan suggest that he wants you to sell your soul to him in exchange for goods and services, or that he encourages his devoted followers to worship him through ritual sacrifice, murder, and black masses. That's pretty much the stuff of legends. Bear in mind that Satan doesn't tempt you to sin because he's particularly fond of sin. No, his biggest goal is to get you to distrust the Gospel of Jesus Christ; because if he can do that, you lose. He does this by convincing you that your sins are somehow not covered by Christ's atoning death – that they are too many or too severe, or by having you believe that you have to do something in addition to what Christ has done to make up for them. He does it by questioning God's Word, by casting doubt on the means of grace, or by distorting the truth of the Gospel – anything that might undermine the assurance of salvation you have in Jesus. Don't expect to find Satan in dark alleys, grimy taverns, and red-light districts. You'll find him instead in the church, and in Christian bookstores, on Christian television, yes, even on the highest point of the temple, wherever false doctrines are being taught and false prophets are proclaiming his lies.

Like I said, we are surrounded by temptations – even in the church. And absolutely anything has the potential to be a temptation. And the devil of it is, so to speak, they all work together against us. An effort to escape one temptation often leads us straight into the jaws of another. Let me give you an example: I've heard of Christian men who like to watch football on television and especially the Super Bowl; but they make a point of not watching the commercials for fear of seeing one of the many ads in which some scantily clad swimsuit model is hawking beer or some other product. In this way, they say, they are trying to avoid the temptation to lust after those nubile young bodies on the screen. Okay, good for them; it sounds very pious. The trouble is that they then sit there either imagining what salacious scenes of revealed flesh they're missing (their imaginations being far more explicit than anything that might actually be shown on television), or they fall into the trap of self-righteously thinking how much better they are than all those guys out there who say they're Christians and yet watch those awful commercials. Worse still, they could very easily be doing both the graphic fanaticizing and the smug self-congratulating at the same time, without even recognizing that by doing so they're twice as guilty as the guy who drooled on himself watching the commercial – and ten times more guilty than the guy who saw the bikini clad girl in an ad, said to himself, "Hmm, that's nice", and promptly forgot about it.

You see, it's impossible to avoid being tempted altogether – which sort of begs the question, "Then what exactly is it we're asking for when we pray, 'Lead us not into temptation'?" I mean, it seems that the only way for the Lord to do that for us would be to remove us from this life entirely. And one day, of course, he *will* do that for us, and then we'll be free of temptation and sin forever; but for the time being what we are actually praying for in this petition is not that the Lord would keep temptations away, but rather that he would give us the will and strength to overcome the temptations that do come to us, and give us the means to escape the temptations that we are not equipped to withstand.

How does he do this? In many ways; but first we need to stress that merely to undergo temptation is not sin. Jesus was tempted and yet committed no sins. Now, of course, compared to him we are at a decided disadvantage because of the sin nature in us – the result of which is that to some extent *everything* we do is sin. This means too that temptations are naturally going to appear more attractive to us, and to the extent that we entertain them favorably at all, we are indeed sinning. But Luther said it this way: "I can't prevent the birds from flying over my head; but I can prevent them from building nests in my hair." And what this means is that you can't prevent the passing thoughts of temptation, nor can you make them seem less attractive to your sinful nature; but you can keep yourself from welcoming and dwelling on them.

And certainly, the Lord helps us to do this. He does it primarily in the same way he accomplishes everything that's for our spiritual good: through his Word. By the Word he shows us our sins and brings us to repentance, by the Word he sends his Spirit to give us faith in Christ who died for our sins, and by the same Word and Spirit he raises up in us a new person that delights in his will and truly desires to do what's right. It's this new nature in us that wants to resist temptation – and wants to do it for the right reasons: not because it imagines itself to be righteous in the eyes of God by doing so but trusting in the righteousness which is ours by faith in Christ it wants to behave in ways that show forth his love. All this being said, the most obvious way that we can resist temptation is to let God's Word into our lives where it can do its work.

Another way the Lord helps us overcome temptation is through our external circumstances. The fact of the matter is that to keep us faithful – to keep us relying on his Word and grace – we must be under a certain amount of stress. If life for us is too easy, then we don't see our need for the Lord and his Word and we fall by forgetting him; but if things become too difficult, we might fall by giving in to despair. That's why the writer of the proverb asked to be neither too rich nor too poor. He saw the wisdom of the being under the right amount of stress. The point is that for each of us the Lord knows exactly how much stress that is, and what we're asking for in the petition is for him to provide it.

We need this stress too in order to keep us from another form of temptation that I've not yet mentioned, and that is the temptation to abuse the Gospel by testing God. I'm talking about is what's sometimes referred to as "planned repentance". This is a sin unique to Christians in which someone says to himself, "I have this sin I want to commit, and I'm going to do it; but afterwards I'll repent and ask Christ for forgiveness and then everything will be all right." What this foolish notion imagines, however, is that repentance is something that I can work in myself. That's not true. It takes the Spirit to bring us to repentance – the same Spirit that's being rejected the moment I say, "I'm going to commit this sin" and begin to do it. So what a person who does this is effectively doing is throwing himself off the Temple of God's grace in the hope that God will catch him before he hits the ground with a big splat. It's a dangerous game to play – the spiritual equivalent of Russian roulette. And the Lord warns us not to do it. We are not to trifle with his grace to us in Christ.

Instead we are to honor, uphold, and trust in God's love and forgiveness in Christ Jesus all the more knowing that we are surrounded by such persistent peril on account of the continuous bombardment of temptation to which we are subject. We know too that Satan, our adversary, is always about looking for opportune moments to lead us astray – and unfortunately for us, pretty much every moment is opportune. All the more reason our Lord Jesus taught us to pray and pray often, "Lead us not into temptation". In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***