

Deliver Us from Evil. Amen.

In the name of him who on this day suffered and died for our sins, dear friends in Christ: in our midweek Lenten devotions this year, we've been going over the topic of Christian prayer in general – and doing that specifically by meditating upon the various petitions of the Lord's Prayer. I think it's fair to say that in the process we've covered a lot of ground. We have, for example, highlighted the most important truths about prayer: that our heavenly Father loves to hear us pray and he invites us to come boldly before him with our requests as his own dear children confident that he will for Jesus' sake give us the wholesome desires of our hearts. At the same time, hopefully we've managed to put to rest some of the prevalent myths about prayer such as that it has some kind of *power* in its own right, or that prayers are kind of like votes – that's the idea that says if we can get enough people to pray for something, the Lord is sure to do what we want because after all, "the people have spoken". The fact is that we cannot stuff the ballot box with prayers, nor is the kingdom of heaven a democracy – and for that we can be thankful. If we were in charge, we'd only mess it up.

Regarding the Lord's Prayer itself, we saw that there's a certain prioritization in the way the petitions are laid out. That is, Jesus directs us to concern ourselves first with the things that matter most to our eternal salvation. Namely that we would receive God's Word in it's truth and purity, that the kingdom of God would come to us by the enlightenment we receive by Holy Spirit who enables us to understand and believe the things that God speaks to us in his Word, and then that we would be enabled to put to death our own sinful, selfish wills and by faith in Christ live according to the will of our heavenly Father – and so doing, follow the example of our Lord who prayed on the night of his arrest, "Not my will, but yours be done." These are the things we ask for in the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer.

Then having put the first things first, Jesus teaches us to pray for the more immediate concerns of our day to day lives, such as the things we need to sustain our bodies, "our daily bread" – that is the food, clothing, shelter, possessions, and what not that we need to keep on living. Then he would have us ask for the gift of forgiveness; both for ourselves and the sins that we are constantly committing, and also for the grace to be able to forgive those who sin against us. And then finally last week we came to the sixth petition: "Lead us not into temptation". And what we're asking for there is not that we be free of temptation altogether; but rather that we be given the strength and will to resist temptations when they come, the wisdom to find the escape that our Lord opens for us when we are tempted, and also grace to be kept free of the sin of tempting God by taking advantage of his mercy and using it as a license to keep on living in sin all the while thinking, "It's no problem. God will forgive me. He always does." That's a terrible abuse of God's grace to us in Christ – one that we surely want to avoid. But in any case, all of this is what's included in the second three petitions of the Lord's Prayer.

And so, like I said, we've covered a lot of ground together – and hopefully while doing so we've come to a greater appreciation of just how much there is in this comparatively short prayer that Jesus taught us—that, and also how keenly attuned our Lord is to our most pressing needs. Clearly, he understands us and our fallen condition a whole lot better than we do ourselves. And by giving us this prayer he teaches us to ask his Father for the things that *he* knows we need the most.

Now having said all that, it seemed fitting to me that we conclude this series of devotions this evening with the last and summary petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Deliver us from evil", for it is on this holy day that we commemorate the great length to which our Savior went to answer that very request; for surely it's in his passion and death on the cross that we see Jesus doing the mightiest of all his works to complete the mission that brought him to this earth in human flesh: to deliver us from evil.

But what does that mean exactly? A question most pastors get now and then is this: "If God made everything good, then where did *evil* come from? Who created that?" The implication is that if God created everything, and evil exists, then God must be responsible for it somehow. However, the very question betrays a misunderstanding of what evil is. Evil is not a substance. It has no tangible existence in itself and therefore

doesn't require creation to begin with. You see the Hebrew word we normally translate "evil" really means "something that's supposed to be there is missing". So evil is not so much a *something* as it is a *lack of something*. It's a shortage, or an incompleteness, or a deficiency. The same word that we translate evil is, for example, in the proper context, also translated "famine". It's "an evil" because there is a lack of food. Likewise, a natural disaster of some kind or an invasion by an enemy army would be called "an evil" because if a tornado comes and blows your house down, or if the enemy burns your crops and village and steals your children to be their slaves that would cause there to be a pretty big hole in your life. That hole – the part that's missing – is the evil.

In the same way when we speak of moral "evil" we're really not talking about some black, satanic substance stuck to people's hearts that makes them do bad things – even though metaphorically we may speak of it that way. No, what we're talking about is the lack of something that's supposed to be there. Remember humans were originally created in the image of God. They were made to be like God – and God is loving, God is compassionate, God is merciful; he is constantly giving and serving his creation, and he does these things sacrificially and willingly. When people choose not to act like God, that is when they are hateful, and self-absorbed, and rude, and unthinking, and unforgiving, and greedy, in these ways they are *evil* – the goodness and kindness that's supposed to be there is not.

With this in mind we can see that the ultimate evil is *hell* because it is the absence of everything good that comes from God. In hell the flames are never quenched, and the flesh-burrowing worms never die. In hell there is no light, no love, no compassion, no mercy, no caring, no comfort, no rest, no relief ... no end to eternal suffering, and no hope for the demons and damned souls assigned a place there. It is the ultimate evil not because of what's there but because of what is not. And to that evil place will be condemned those people who in life on this earth were evil – who were incomplete ... who were in a moral sense less than what God created people to be.

And so, when we pray, "Deliver us from evil", we are praying to be kept from every great need, affliction, calamity, and crisis that has the capacity to rob us of our faith and trust in Jesus. We are praying that we not become so overwhelmed by grief and despair by the things we suffer in this life that we lose our confidence in God's love for us in Jesus and the great salvation he achieved for us – the work he did to make us whole and acceptable before God. Most crucially, we are praying to be delivered by God's grace from the ultimate evil. We are praying that our own evil, our tendency to stray and to abuse God's grace, and our unfaithfulness to the Word and promises of God not prevail over the loving kindness of God and the work of his Spirit to keep us in the saving faith until we die. We are praying for nothing less than to be delivered from hell.

And that is why it's so appropriate that we discuss this particular petition this evening, because all the evil that is hell is precisely what the Lord Jesus suffered for us on the cross when he gave himself as the atoning sacrifice for our sin. To deliver us from evil he himself had to endure all evil. A short while ago we recited the verses of the twenty-second Psalm. And what we hear in those verses is the prayer of Jesus on the cross. It is the prayer of a righteous man suffering evil unjustly. In it we hear the confusion and bewilderment of someone who has lived in perfect communion with God all of his life, who knows what it is to be always confident that he is surrounded by the love of the heavenly Father, and who knows that God is pleased with him – who now suddenly finds himself rejected and cut off from the perfect unity he'd always known. The opening sentence, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" is a cry of absolute desolation; it's the lament of a soul bereft of comfort, calling out in the darkness to the now silent God whose goodness and grace have been unaccountably revoked leaving behind an emptiness – an *evil*, I should say – so vast, so limitless as to defy description.

You know, in discussions of Christ's passion on Good Friday there's often a focus on the physical torments he endured. And let me say that they were indeed horrific; the unrelenting brutality of the beating, scourging, nailing, and hanging from the cross—we've been over it before: Roman crucifixion was designed to be the worst possible way to die; but what we often fail to consider is the spiritual evil Christ experienced within himself. I'm talking of the yearning and thirst for some positive sign of God's gracious presence, some feeling of a divine hand on his shoulder saying, "I'm with you in this, my Son, and I will see you through it." But no – even that was denied him. This is what Scripture means when it says, "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us." It means that he was utterly forsaken – that he became an object of loathing and wrath and

hatred—not just to the people who put him to death; but to God. I am absolutely certain that of all the deprivations our Lord suffered on our behalf, for him that was the worst. But that’s the evil he had to face to save us because that’s the evil we deserve. And by taking the entirety of this evil upon himself he did what he set out to do: he delivered us from all evil.

And I want you to see that he did through faith. We have spent the past seven weeks talking about prayer. And prayer is really nothing more than the response of faith to the Word and promises of God. He opens his arms and says, “Ask me for what is good for you, because I’m your loving Father and for Christ’s sake I want to give you my gifts.” But we often don’t ask. Or if we ask, we hedge our bets. We really don’t expect to receive. We think that God is not listening to us or that he is angry with us – no sense in asking because he’s only going to say no.

But isn’t it interesting that when Christ our Lord was on the cross completely cut off from his heavenly Father, he still prayed to him – he still prayed in faith expecting to receive. I know I’ve made this point before, but it bears saying again: our Lord Jesus, though he is God, truly lived and suffered as a man. He had to live and die as one of us to be sacrifice for our sins – he had to be the *perfect* substitute, both sinless and yet like us in our limitations. What that means is that in his earthly life, he did not use his divine power and foreknowledge to see past the grave to the resurrection. No, all he had is what you have now: the Word of God recorded in Holy Scripture. The difference is that he believed it. He trusted in God’s goodness and loving kindness. He trusted in the promise of the resurrection. Even when he was literally experiencing all hell, without the slightest inkling of favor or goodness from above, he trusted in God’s Word. And he prayed.

How much more should we pray knowing that through Christ we have been delivered from all evil? — that because of what he did we will never be forsaken? How much more should we pray in confidence the prayer the Lord himself taught us to pray knowing that they are God’s own priorities for us? It’s what he wants us to ask for. How much more should we give a hearty “amen” – yes, yes it shall be so – to the prayers we offer to our heavenly Father in Jesus’ name? On this day we commemorate exactly what our Lord Jesus did to open the way for our prayers to be heard and to answer our prayer to deliver us from evil, how much more should we pray to be remade in his image and restored to what we were created to be? Having given his Son for us, can we have any doubt that our gracious Father will withhold anything good that we ask of him?

No. Therefore, let us pray earnestly, faithfully, and daily, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!