

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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The Lord's Prayer: The Sixth Petition (Part I)

Apostasy is a dreadful word. When a person who has professed faith in Christ and has given evidence of Christian maturity (even serving as a minister) over a long period of times turns away from faith- this is what the Bible means by apostasy. When this happens, especially when the person is a trusted leader in the church, or a close friend, other Christians feel betrayed and crushed. Jay Adams makes this helpful observation, "First, let's make it clear that when someone repudiates the Christian faith, there is no reason for other Christians to question their past commitment to the Lord. It is the *Lord Jesus Christ* who promised never to leave us or forsake us (and He has kept that promise). It is in Him that we have believed, and He has not failed us. If your faith is in someone else rather than the Lord, then of course you will have reason to doubt when the one in whom you have trusted caved in. But the Lord will never do so. Persons who are so badly shaken by the desertion of some leader or friend give evidence that their faith is at least in part wrongly placed. The desertion which rocks them to the foundations provides an opportunity for them to examine the object of their faith, and to place it properly in Jesus Christ for the future. Those who leave the Lord and never return repentant were never with Him in the first place: "They went out from us, but they weren't of us; because if they had been of us, they would have remained with us. But this happened that it might appear that they aren't of us (1 John 2:19)."¹ The sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer addresses this concern. The Greek word translated "temptation" in the ESV is PEIRASMOS, which, depending on the context, can be translated "temptation" or "testing". Here the latter is to be preferred, because God does not lead into temptation (cf. James 1:13); He does, however, allow His people to be tested. "To be tempted" is to be enticed to sin; "to be tested" is to be brought to difficult circumstances that try one's faithfulness. The two are similar, since sin can result in either case; yet they are also to be differentiated, since the former has a negative purpose, the latter, a positive one. The petition in this instance concerns severe testing that could eventuate in apostasy.² The Puritan Thomas Watson in asking "Whence do temptations come?" answered: (1) *Ab intra* [From within], from ourselves. The heart is *fomes peccati* [the kindling of sin], the breeder of all evil. Our own hearts are the greatest tempters: *quisque sibi Satan est* [everyone is Satan to himself]. 'Every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust.' The heart is a perfect decoy. James i.14. (2) Temptations come *ab extra* [from without], from Satan. He is called the Tempter. Matt iv.3. He lies in ambush to do us mischief: *stat in procinctu diabolus* [the devil stands girded for battle], the devil lays a train of temptation to blow up the fort of our grace. He is not yet fully cast into prison, but is like a prisoner under bail. The world is his diocese, where he is sure to be found, whatever we are doing- reading, praying, or meditation. We find him within, but how he came there we know not; we are sure of his company, though uncertain how he came by it. A saint's whole life, says Augustine, is temptation. Elias, who could shut heaven by prayer, could not shut his heart from temptation. This is a great molestation to a child of God; as it is a trouble to a virgin to have her chastity daily assaulted. The more we are tempted to evil, the more we are hindered from good. We are in great danger of the 'Prince of the air;' and we need often pray, 'Lead us not into temptation.' That we may see in what danger we are from Satan's temptation.³

I. GOD'S LEADING: THE NARROW WAY

In John Bunyan's *The Pilgrims Progress*, there comes a point where Pilgrim encounters two men who have not entered at the gate but have "come tumbling over the wall, on the Left Hand of the narrow Way." Their names are Formalist and Hypocrisy. The dialogue that follows between the two of them and Christian is instructive. Christian asks them why it is that they have chosen not to enter in at the Gate. They respond by saying that it was too much trouble and the shortcut was easier, besides, it has been customary for people to do this for a thousand years. Turning the tables upon Christian, they challenge him, "Thou art but in the Way, who, as we perceive, came in at the Gate; and we are also in the Way, that came tumbling over the wall; Wherein now is thy condition better than ours?" Christian points out that they are working on the basis of their feelings, whereas he is trusting in the words of his Master, and so he declares, "You come in by yourselves without his Direction; and shall go out by yourselves without his

Mercy.” The biblical foundation for all of this is the statement of Jesus, “ I am the gate; whoever enters through Me will be saved” (Johns 10:9). This succinct statement affirms the Christian claim that God has spoken, uniquely, savingly, and finally in Jesus (Hebrews 1:1-2). The writer to the Hebrews drives this home, “But now He has appeared once for *all* at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (Hebrews 9:26, italics added). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13-14). Alistair Begg perceptively points out, “we must immediately recognize that the exclusive nature of these claims flies in the face of our pluralist society. We are not simply a society in which we recognize the existence of and the differences between, a variety of religious beliefs to be equally valid. From that perspective there is only one kind of heresy, namely, to claim that one view is ultimately right, where others are wrong. In granting plausibility to everything, we may grant certainty to nothing. Toleration has been embraced at the expense of truth.”⁴

A. Jesus’ Temptation (Matthew 3:16-4:11)

The Lord’s Prayer follows directly upon the heels of Jesus’ return from the desert. As such, our Lord’s words reveal the close connection between His own temptation and this particular petition.

B. Does God Tempt His People?

James 1:13-14 emphatically denies that God ever seeks to lure us into sin. Having said that, it also needs to be said that the Scriptures do teach that God allows His people to be tested and tried (e.g. Job, Jesus, Peter). An important element in Christian maturity is learning how to recognize our weaknesses and to resist temptation.

II. DEALING WITH TEMPTATION

Beneath the act of temptation lies the fact that there is a real distinction between right and wrong, good and evil. In fact, if no such distinction exists, then the whole concept of temptation is meaningless. “These distinctions, “ notes Robert Mills, “are especially important for postmodern Christians. For, if we mindlessly accept our cultures contention that right and wrong are merely matters of personal preference, we will have no reason to reject temptation. And if we no longer believe that evil exists, we will see no need to pray ‘Lead us not into temptation.’”⁵ This does not mean, however, that God will always shield us from meeting temptation. Rather, it means, “Do not succumb to temptation.” See 26:41; Mark 14:38, where Jesus tells them, “Watch and pray lest you succumb to temptation,” even though temptation has already confronted them - they have fallen asleep! But what is temptation? PEIRASMOS, as we have already seen, can connote either enticement to sin, or testing of faith. But it would be a mistake to distinguish the connotations sharply; for every enticement to sin tests faith, every test of faith holds an enticement to sin.⁶ The realization that we are “prone to wander,” as one old hymn put it, should alert us to the potential danger we face. We also need to be aware of self-deception – the heart, as Scripture reminds us, “is deceitful above all things and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9) Our narcissistic society is revealed in a number of ways. If you check the most recent data on books in print, you will discover over 800 books with the word “self” in the title: *self*-esteem, *self*-help, *self*-improvement, *self*love, *self*hate, *self*-confidence, and *self*-analysis are just a few of the subjects that cater to our cravings. What does all this self-centeredness tell us about ourselves? It tells us that we are programmed by our therapeutic society to believe the myth that all our personal problems can be traced back to the notion that we need more *self*-esteem. But as David Wells writes, “The reality, actually is quite the reverse. Part of the problem is that we think too highly of wrong, it is almost invariably someone else’s fault. This is the thesis that psychologist David Myers had advanced. He cites a variety of studies that have, at an empirical level, demonstrated the self-centered and self-congratulatory bias to human nature. For example, of almost one million American high school students who were studied, 70 percent rated themselves in the top 10 leadership ability, and only 2 percent thought themselves to be below average; in their ability to get along with others, none rated themselves below average, 60 percent rated themselves in the top 10 percent, and 25 percent in the top 1 percent! In another survey, 94 percent of a college faculty thought that they were better than their average colleague. So when pay increases based on merit were announced, there were many who felt that injustice had been done! Experiments have also been done in which people have to cooperate with someone else in order to make money, but most blame their partners when failure occurs. Other experiments show that when people admire a particular trait, they are quite likely to think that they possess qualities they admire if the quality is hard to measure. People also see

themselves as more cooperative, more competitive, more likable than most others. What is at work throughout this pattern of behavior, rather obviously, is self-deception, a deception made easier where standards are vague or absent. And self-deception leads easily into self-justification, the inner mechanism of exculpation, and each feeds in to conceit. We enter our own private moral universe where we are about average and where responsibility for what goes wrong rests almost invariably, with others. We refuse to bear the pain of moral recrimination, or accept the reproach that such self-scrutiny may entail.”⁷

CONCLUSION: Every person possesses a unique combination of cognitive abilities and emotional traits, and, as such, each one of us are prone to temptation in a particular area (or areas). Some are susceptible to acting on feelings and emotional needs or fears. For example, Peter’s cowardice in the courtyard (Mark 14:66-72) was probably motivated by fear of his own physical well-being. We are also conditioned by our social environment. The desire, for instance, to be accepted by our peers or social group will have a tremendous influence on our personal behavior. Social pressure from society at large may cause us to compromise our Christian convictions out of fear of being labeled an “extremist” or called a “fundamentalist” (with all the negative associations that term denotes).⁸ “The cause of moral weakness (and failure),” writes James Spiegel, “are various. Human beings not only have original sin to contend with in striving to live the good life, there are numerous ‘natural’ causes which serve as further obstacles. In our moral struggle, therefore, the development of the virtue of self-control is essential. Since a moral virtue is a skill or ability of a certain kind, deliberate training to enhance one’s self-control is appropriate, and many strategies can be helpful toward this end.”⁹ It is the recognition of our weaknesses and, as the hymn “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” reminds us, we need have God “bind my wandering heart to thee.” “This petition,” writes Bishop Ryle, “teaches us that we are liable, at all times, to be led astray, and fall. It instructs us to confess our infirmity, and beseech God to hold us up, and not allow us to run into sin. We ask Him, who orders all things in heaven and earth, to restrain us from going into that which would injure our souls, and never to suffer us to be tempted about that which we are able to bear”(I Corinthians 10:13).¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ Jay Adams, *Winning The War Within: A Biblical Strategy for Spiritual Warfare* (Timeless Text, 1996), p. 134.

² Cf. the extended discussion in Donald Hagner’s *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13* (Word, 1993).

³ Thomas Watson, *The Lord’s Prayer* (rpt. Banner of truth, 1982), p. 258.

⁴ Alistair Begg, *Made for His Pleasure* (Moody, 1996), p. 124.

⁵ R.P. Mills, *The Layman* (Vol. 36, No. 1, Feb. 2003), p. 12.

⁶ Cf. the explanation by Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbooks For a Mixed Church Under Persecution* (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 109.

⁷ D.F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 185.

⁸ “We live, work, and study next to people of other religions, philosophies, and world-views in a way that never happened even a hundred years ago. This change to a religiously more plural society does not make relativism true, but it may make it seem true. Tolerance is rightly seen as a virtue. But today, what is often implied by the word is *relativism*, thinly disguised under the positive connotations of the word tolerance. If you do not tow the line to relativism, you are branded as intolerant, which is not tolerated. There is enormous pressure to conform.” Dick Keyes, *Chameleon Christianity: Moving Beyond Safety and Conformity* (Baker, 1999), p. 26.

⁹ J.S. Spiegel, *Hypocrisy: Moral Fraud & Other Vices* (Baker, 1999), p. 130.

¹⁰ J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels I* (rpt. Baker, 1977), p. 58.