

“The World’s Greatest Prayer--Temptation”

We’re continuing in the series we started a few weeks ago on the Lord’s Prayer. If you’ve missed one, I really encourage you to go on line and download it, because this really has been some important stuff about the Christian faith, about prayer, about our connection to God. Today we look at the section of the prayer that Jesus taught us where he says, **“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One.”**

I’ve got a couple things up here that all have something in common: They’re all instruments of death. We’ve transitioned seasons. We’ve gone from summer to bug season. And a lot of bugs don’t know this, but bugs have an enemy. And that enemy is bigger and smarter and stronger than they are. And that enemy stays up late at night trying to figure out ways that it can lure little bugs to their death. And these are some of those means.

And bugs will go to them voluntarily. They will choose to enter into—to participate in—things that will lead to their death. Now, why will they do that? Well, their enemy is smart enough to know you can’t just say to a bug, “Choose death,” and have it choose death. So all of these things involve deception--they involve the promise of life. But they lead to death.

This is **Roach Motel**. And there’s a little food in it. And roaches think this is going to be really good food. But it’s the last meal that roach will ever have. Roaches end their life in this little prison. Now, this is fly-paper and I’m not going to touch it because you all know what happens. There’s a scent that it emits, and flies think that’s a very pleasing thing. And they land there. But once they land there, they never fly again. They fly to their death.

Does anybody know what this thing is called? It’s a **bug zapper**. Bugs look at that light and they think, “That’s a very cool looking light. I’d like to get closer to that.” Then they’d fly in and get zapped. If you sit near one of these on any given evening, it will go on all night long—bug after bug—hundreds of bugs.

I want you to try to think like a bug for just a minute because you’d think that after a while bugs would wise up. You’d think that they’d see that the tray underneath that light is littered with the bodies of impulsive bugs who have gone before them.

You’d think some thoughtful bug would say, “Whoa! Wait a minute. I’m not going to just blindly follow my desires. I noticed all my friends get drawn into this, but they never come back. I’m going to think about just how high of a price I’m willing to pay for the experience of a close look at the beautiful, big light.”

But no bug ever does that. They seem to say to themselves, “I know what I’m doing. I’m strong enough and I’m smart enough and I’m clever enough to handle this attraction without getting burnt. I’m not going to pause for reflection. I’m a buzzy guy.” And all night long it goes that way, “Zap, zap, zap.”

Only a bug would be that stupid, right—only a bug? Or a politician—“Zap.” Or the CEO of finance company—“Zap.” Fabulously wealthy athletes, successful pastors, celebrities, junk bond kings, hotel magnets, ordinary people—“Zap, zap, zap, zap.” What’s going on?

You’ve got to wonder. Every time we read about another person who falls to temptation that just destroys their life—destroys their marriage, breaks up a family, withers up a soul—you wonder, “Why does it happen? Why do we fly to the light? Why do intelligent people engage in stupid, dark actions that we know we’ll be ashamed of?”

Well, the Bible says that at least part of the answer is you have an enemy and so do I. And he’s bigger and stronger and smarter than we are. Paul writes, **“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against...spiritual forces of evil...” (Ephesians 6:12, NIV)**. You, today, are engaged in a battle, and it’s not against flesh and blood. It’s against spiritual forces of evil, Paul says, so put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.

We don’t talk a whole lot about the devil around here because he’s defeated and we don’t want to give him more credit than he’s due. But it’s important to be wise about the Evil One. Because his fundamental identity is tempter. His fundamental weapon is temptation. And this is why Jesus teaches us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One.” Temptation: this subject matters; this is really important.

A good place to go deeper into this is in the New Testament book of 1 Corinthians. First Corinthians 10:6-13 is one of the classic verses in the entire Bible about temptation. Looking at this can help us

understand what Jesus meant when he taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One."

In 1 Corinthians 10:6, Paul is writing about temptations that the Israelites gave in to on the Exodus that just destroyed them. Temptations of idolatry, of sexual immorality, of testing God, of grumbling (yes grumbling is listed!) and they paid the price for giving in to these temptations. Zap! Paul says, "**So, if you think you're standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common among people. God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.**" (1 Corinthians 10:6-13, NIV).

This is one of the central statements in Scripture about temptation. And I want us to walk through some observations about temptation that come from this verse.

And the first one is from the second sentence in it. "No temptation has seized you except what is common among people"— **Expect temptation.** You will be tempted so don't be surprised. Don't get caught off guard. Jesus himself was tempted. You are going to be tempted. We're to pray for deliverance from giving in to temptation. Most of the time you can't control temptation, so you have to develop your ability to resist temptation when you face it. To identify and resist temptation is huge.

There was a famous experiment in psychology that was started a few decades ago. It's been continued for many years. It's about resisting temptation. The way that it works is an experimenter would leave a little kid—four years old—with a **marshmallow**. They'd then say, "I'm going to leave the room. There's one marshmallow here. If you wait until I get back, you can have two marshmallows. But if you eat this one while I'm gone, you'll only get the one marshmallow." It's a test to see if kids can resist temptation. Some kids grabbed the one marshmallow and ate it, others resisted the temptation and got two.

They followed up on these kids years later. This is an amazing thing. Those who resisted temptation at the age of four went on to get higher SAT scores. They got into better colleges and had, on average, better outcomes as adults. The children who ate the marshmallow the quickest were more likely to become bullies. They received worse teacher and parental evaluations 10 years later and were more likely to have drug problems at age 32.

So...what's your marshmallow? Let me toss out a few possibilities. Maybe it's the letters S-A-L-E. Maybe it's an adult-site on the Internet. Maybe it's in a bottle. Maybe it's keeping up a certain image. Maybe it's the joy of passing judgment on other marshmallow eaters. Where are you most vulnerable to temptation?

Let me explain something about the word for "temptation" that Jesus uses. The core idea of this word is **allowing yourself to be torn away from God**. In the Bible, temptation is never trivial. In our day, we trivialize the word and people will use it for certain foods, etc. In the Bible, it's not about fattening desserts or petty indulgences. What's at stake is the human soul. Giving into temptation is allowing myself to be torn away from the God who loves me. That's what's at stake. And the tempter is not stupid. He's not going to say, "Choose death." He's not going to try to tempt you with something that is obviously destructive and repulsive to you. The most dangerous temptation you face is probably the one most likely to subtly lure you away from intimacy with God.

Sometimes the Evil One tempts you to do something that is wrong, but he also tempts you to **not** do what's right. He wants you to not go deep with God and to not do the things with your life that God's created you to do. And maybe the biggest temptation that some of you face right now, is just busyness. That's what's keeping you from deep prayer—deep love for God, deep trusting faith. Just busyness. Maybe the biggest temptation that you face is the Lazy Boy and a television set.

Remember, the Evil One does not have power to destroy you. He cannot kill you. He cannot wrestle you away from God. The Evil One is, by no means, the equal of God in terms of power. Essentially, the single power the Evil One has is to tempt you. So be ready. Expect it. You are no exception to the rule.

The second observation about temptation is in these words in verse 13, "**And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear**" (1 Corinthians 10:13, NIV). God knows just how much you can bear, and he will not allow you to be tempted beyond that.

I worked out a couple of sometimes with a guy from church, and he's really fit and knows a lot more about the body and physical conditioning than I'll ever know. And he had me do some things I had never really done. A one point I was lifting some weight, and every muscle in my body was screaming, "Stop! Put it down!" But he was saying, "You can do two more reps. You've got two more in you." In my mind I said bad words to him. But you know what? He was right. I don't know how he knew, but he knew just how much I could bear.

God knows just how much temptation you can bear. God knows. I don't know how he knows, but he knows. And he will not allow the Evil One to go beyond that point. He will not. That is a promise from Scripture.

Now that ought to be very encouraging to everybody in this room. God says, "This far and no further." You can have that hope. But there's also a big reality check here: We can't rationalize giving in to sin by saying, "I couldn't help myself. I just couldn't resist any further." God doesn't leave that excuse open to us.

James 4:7 says, "**Resist the devil and he will flee from you.**" (James 4:7). He will flee, but it will take some resistance. One of the greatest forms of resistance is to see the bigger picture. When temptation looms it slaps blinders on you so you don't see consequences, you don't see the impact that giving in has on your family, your business, your church, your community, your reputation. When temptation strike and puts the blinders on you, take them off and look at your family, look at your friends, look at the impact. Many temptation tragedies are avoided every day because people choose to see the bigger picture.

A third observation about temptation, Paul says, "**...But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out...**" (1 Corinthians 10:13, NIV). That's good news. When you are tempted, God himself will provide a way out so that you can stand up under it, so that you don't cave in to it. God will make a way.

What do those ways out look like? John Ortberg has some amazing insight about this. He says that **the single greatest resource against temptation is joy**. In Nehemiah 8:10 is a classic statement in Scripture, "**The joy of the Lord is our strength**" (Nehemiah 8:10). Experiencing authentic, God-honoring joy may be the single greatest weapon against temptation a human being can have. Because think about this, joylessness is always a setup for vulnerability to sin.

I have seen so many people over the years, people who are leaders in the community, in churches, people who are pastors, bail on God and fly into some stupid life because month after month, year after year, their life was filled with one duty after another, and all the joy got choked out of it, and they couldn't trust that God really would care for them. They led miserable lives for a long time, and they became more and more vulnerable.

You're miserable in life, which makes you miserable in your marriage, which makes you vulnerable to the flirtation of that woman or man at the office. See how this works? If you have authentic joy, then the deceptive illusion of joy is not going to be very tempting. It's just not.

This is very, very important. The joy of the Lord, when it comes to temptation, really is strength. So the question here is what do you need to do to increase the joy factor in your life? What do you need to do? What are the activities and relationships that are God-honoring that bring authentic joy? Maybe it's being in nature. Maybe there's music you love to listen to. Maybe it's time with certain friends.

Maybe it's physical challenges that you love. Maybe as you pray, "God, lead me not into temptation. Deliver me from the Evil One," this needs to be part of what you pray for. "God, help me be a joyful person. Help me to find those things that would fulfill me with joy." But you are responsible to arrange your life so that the joy of the Lord can be your strength. You've got to do that. No body's going to do that for you. And if you don't, you're a sitting duck. You're a target for the Evil One.

Okay, that's one way out. The joy of the Lord is our strength. Arrange your life for joy. The second way out is you and I need to **develop relationships of accountability**. You see, temptation always involves hiddenness and darkness. And I just want to say this as frankly and directly as I know how: If you think that

you can handle sin and temptation on your own, you are deceiving yourself. You just are sadly deceived because you've got an enemy and the enemy is stronger and smarter.

You and I need to have somebody that we can go to and say, "I want you to know this is my marshmallow. And I want you to ask me how it's going with my marshmallow on a regular basis. And I want you to feel free to confront me when you're concerned about my behavior. I give you an open door."

That's real community. Relationships where you don't have to fake it and say, "That used to be my marshmallow, but I don't have a marshmallow problem now." Real community, the kind we strive to have around here, really is a just a bunch of people who have marshmallow problems.

We are a church where you don't have to pretend like you don't have a problem. A church where grace and truth break through, and people can be part of little communities, small groups, ministries and places and spaces where we get help from God and give help one another.

So, who knows what your marshmallow is? Who do you call when you want a marshmallow really bad? And if you don't know, if you can't come up with a name right now, then I challenge you to start praying today. Say, "God I need somebody like that in my life. Help me think about who that might be. Help me understand what the next step is that I need to take to deepen my relationship with that person until I know them well enough and can trust them deeply enough that I can share that with them."

If you do have somebody like that in your life, take some time this week and tell them how it's going with your marshmallow. Let them know. That's a fundamental way out. You need to arrange your life for joy. You need an accountable relationship.

And here's another way out: **Think excellent thoughts. "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-- think about such things" (Philippians 4:8, NIV).**

You see, the best way to not eat a marshmallow is not by trying really, really hard not to eat marshmallows. The best way is by making sure you're eating better stuff on a regular basis. That's the best way. And if you don't eat the good stuff, you'll eat the bad stuff. But you're going to eat something.

That's why reading scripture is so important. It gives you something excellent to think about. That's why worshipping weekly is important. That's why we talk so much about getting connected to a small group. These are the things that give your mind plenty to turn to that is excellent, and true, and praiseworthy.

I thought about showing you some of the dark corners of my soul, some of the ongoing temptations I face, but I decided that's information for my small group and I share that stuff with them. Just know that my temptations are the same as yours and they're just as dark. Just know that I need God's strength just like you do, and I need God's grace when I fall just as often as you do.

I know in a room this size, with this many people, that every one of us wrestles with this temptation business. I know some of you are wrestling with it big time right now. And I want you to remember something. Your soul is precious to God. And I don't care how hard the struggle is, and I don't care how many times you've fallen before, you can get back up. God will help you, and it's worth the struggle. You pray this often enough and mean it and you begin to have the strength to resist temptation and find the closeness to God. "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One."

We have an enemy, and he is strong, but there is one who is stronger still. And he has won the battle. Whatever your struggle, whatever your temptation, you don't face it alone. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. John Ortberg, Senior Pastor, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, for his resources in this message.