

“Lead Us Not into Temptation”

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“...Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matt. 6:13)

As one of the Lord’s essential teachings, His words about prayer correspond in a wonderful way with the words of that other essential, the Ten Commandments. In fact it’s pretty easy to see, phrase by phrase, how the two things align. First, “I am the Lord your God... Our Father in the heavens,” then “You shall not take His name in vain,” or “Hallowed by Thy name.” Next we are reminded of the Sabbath Day, Sabbath meaning rest, which is what we have when His kingdom comes, and His will is done.

This parallel is fascinating, and while it is not always obvious at first glance, an understanding of the spiritual meaning of each phrase or commandment reveals how they align and helps us to appreciate deeper nuances of both teachings as they apply to our lives.

In that context, it’s not hard to see how today’s topic, “Lead us not into temptations, but deliver us from evil,” relates to the 7th and 8th commandments, “You shall not steal,” and “you shall not bear false witness....”

When we think of temptations we are inclined to think of forbidden or disorderly things that somehow capture our imagination and lure us into bad situations. The word, however, in all three sacred languages, simply means a trial or a test, possibly brought about by a plot of some sort or an attack. There is natural temptation and there is spiritual temptation, but in the classic definition of the Writings temptation is an attack upon some love.

So what does it mean to have one’s love threatened or attacked? Well, if you love a person and that person despises you or says mean things to you, your love for that person is certainly going to be tested. If you love justice and you see justice suffering, your love is definitely under attack. If you love nature and you see pollution everywhere destroying and contaminating it, again your love is being attacked. Finally, if you love the Lord or your neighbor and you are tempted to take something of His and lie about it, claiming it as your own, your love will be challenged. And in all these cases if we can’t overcome the challenge the loves may be diminished or lost altogether, possibly replaced by bitterness, resentment, cynicism or plain old arrogance.

Here’s a passage that expands on this idea and relates it specifically to the Lord: -

“All temptation is an attack against the love present in a person, the degree of temptation depending on the degree of that love. If love is not attacked there is no temptation. Destroying another person’s love is destroying his very life, for his love is his life. The Lord’s life was love towards the whole human race; indeed it was so great and of such a nature as to be nothing other than pure love. Against this life of His, temptations were directed constantly, and this was happening ... from earliest childhood through to His last hour in the world” (AC 1690:3).

So anything that works against Divine or human love causes temptation. Take the love in marriage, for example. To the extent that we are affected by anything lustful or adulterous or disre-

spectful of marriage, that love is under attack, and if we’re not careful it will be weakened or badly hurt.

Given all this, then, why would it even cross our minds to think that God might “lead” us into temptation? Isn’t it perfectly obvious that He would never do so?

Well, let’s think about that for a moment. First of all, it’s not obvious. In fact when bad things happen to us, if we think of God at all we have a natural tendency to blame Him, thinking that He could have prevented it if He wanted to, or we ask “Why ME,” not so much to see where we might have gone wrong but why God didn’t protect us. So let’s be realistic. The prayer that He “lead us not into temptation” is as much as anything a reminder that He doesn’t. And we need that reminder.

And guess what! This is just like many of the other petitions in the prayer. For example, when we really understand the nature of God we know that He cannot BUT “give us this day our daily bread.” He is doing it all the time. He could never NOT do it. Yet in the prayer we ask it of Him, *as if He needed reminding!* It is the same with “Forgive us our debts:” the Lord is nothing BUT forgiveness, it’s just that we can only receive that forgiveness (as we also remind ourselves) to the extent that “we forgive our debtors.” And what about “Deliver us from evil”? Of course He is doing this all the time, too, the only question is whether we can accept it, let go of the past, and begin a new life. “Lead us not into temptation” therefore is a phrase like almost all the other phrases in the prayer, a simple truth put in the form of a request only because it seems *to us* that these things may be in doubt.

Incidentally, the phrase can take on a somewhat different quality for us if when we say it we pause for a moment after “Lead us,” and then move on to the completion of the whole sentence, which includes the words, “deliver us from evil.” This way the primary focus is on what the Lord *does*, that is, lead us, and the phrase “not into temptation” becomes a subordinate clause not essential to the meaning of the sentence (almost like an explanation in brackets). Then the final emphasis again is on the fact that the Lord is always leading us away from evil. “Lead us,” we pray, “not into temptation, but (by Your leading) deliver us from evil.”

Perhaps you’ve heard the expression, “If you’re going through hell, *keep going.*” And let the Lord lead you through it; only He can do it.

In this connection it’s important to understand the word used for “lead” in the Lord’s Prayer. As it happens there are several different Greek words that can be translated this way, but the word used in this prayer is unique. *It only occurs there* – both in Matthew and in Luke – *and nowhere else in the New Testament!* Whereas other words translated “to lead” mean to go out in front (to show the way), this word literally means *to bring, or to carry into*. And the Lord certainly does not bring or carry us into temptation; rather He is constantly bringing us, even carrying us, out of it, so that if we allow him to do so He will lift us up and take us to a better place, thereby delivering us from evil just as a loving father might lift his child out of a threatening situation.

Speaking of which, what exactly is this evil from which we are asking to be delivered, and what does the word, delivered, mean?

Well, first of all, there are several different words in the New Testament for evil. One, *kakos*,

from which we get the word, *cacophony*, carries the broad connotation of anything bad, worthless, ugly, abusive, and, yes, wicked. In the framework of New Church teachings it can be anything that is harmful or disorderly. This is sometimes distinguished from *sin* in that sin is a deliberate offense against the Lord, whereas evil may or may not be deliberate.

But the word most often used in the Gospels, and in the Lord’s Prayer particularly, is *poneros*, which can also mean wicked but carries much more the force of something painful or distressing. A closely related word in Greek means hard work, toil, drudgery, suffering or grief. This is the same word used in the book of Revelation where John promises no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, *and no more pain* (Rev. 21:4). So when we ask the Lord to “deliver us from evil” we are really asking Him to keep us from the *suffering and pain* of hurtful things – not just from those that threaten us from outside but from those foolish things of our own doing that cause us grief.

An illustration in line with the 7th commandment mentioned a few minutes ago might be the temptation to take something that doesn’t belong to us, and claim it as our own. This not only hurts the victim, it tends to undermine our whole social and economic environment, AND it almost always come back to bite us in some unforeseen way. Surprisingly, though, we may actually do this inadvertently, not as a sin but as simple mistake, thinking, for example, that we have the power to overcome evil by ourselves when in fact we depend entirely on the Lord. Still the application of that misunderstanding – which is a form of theft – can cause a lot of pain.

Another illustration might be our tendency to dwell on our misfortunes, or to carry a grudge about some affront or offense. Ironically this harboring of ill will can be worse than the actual offense, since the offense is history but the grudge lives on in our minds. We need to ask the Lord to take that stuff away, to “deliver us” from that sort of suffering and pain.

But of course the Lord can’t do any of this without our co-operation, which is why He puts the burden of responsibility on US by saying “Don’t do it. Don’t take that thing that doesn’t belong to you. Don’t put yourself in that position.” But at the same time He says, “I am here to help you, and I WILL help you, *and deliver you*, if you ask – which is what we’re doing in the Prayer.

So what is this word, *deliver*? Well, in the original Greek (*ruomai*) it means just what you might think – to rescue, or to draw out of harm’s way. It can also mean to draw to oneself. (Obviously in this case it does NOT mean to present, or convey an item to someone, as the mail man delivers the mail). Still, it is the perfect complement to the word, *lead*, as used in the Prayer: we can be drawn or carried INTO temptation and we can be drawn or carried OUT of it toward the Lord. What’s the difference?

The difference is not in how the Lord thinks of us or acts towards us; His love and wisdom extend to all the same, but just as the sun shining on a beautiful garden draws out the wonderful aromas of the earth and flowers, that same sun shining on a stagnant pond or some old garbage raises a stink. Thus the difference is in what we are harboring in our minds.

Now we can’t help it if a nasty, selfish or destructive thought pops into our heads. After all, as we have noted many times, we are subject to all sorts of influences from good and evil spirits *all the time*. But it’s what we welcome and dwell on that matters. As a wise minister once said, “You can’t help it if a crow flies over your head, but can keep it from making a nest in your hair!” So at the risk of trivializing the process let’s consider the analogy of a chess match. One

could say the object of the game is to win, that is, NOT LOSE, for example not lose your rook, your knight, your bishop or your queen. So you want your pieces to be kept out of harm’s way. The rules of the game provide a reliable framework for making decisions about what might work, but the fact is, you never know for sure what your opponent is going to do next, so what you need to win is an evolving PLAN and an effective strategy not only for attacking your opponent but for staying out of trouble in the process.

In the case of our spiritual lives this means being aware of the risks and dangers we are facing and taking decisive steps to avoid them. We call this shunning evil – and note, this doesn’t mean shunning *people*, because we all have our problems, and we’d be pretty lonely if we avoided everyone who did or said anything wrong; it means choosing not to *identify* with the evil or *endorse* it or *support* it. The ultimate plan for victory is the Lord’s, and we can learn that plan as well as the risks and dangers we face by reading and reflecting on the Word, especially as it is now explained to us in the doctrines of the New Church that are drawn from it.

Regarding temptations, the truth is that the combats or struggles we face really are the combats or struggles of evil spirits with good ones – on the battlefield of our minds! This is a scary thought in some ways, since it may make it seem as though we are mere chessmen in somebody else’s game. But that’s not how it is at all. Actually, in that analogy the chess *board* represents all the opportunities that we have to move or act in one way or another, the chess *men* represent our powers of choice, and the good or evil spirits are the ones who battle for our commitment, one way or the other. WE are the ones who ultimately decide which way to MOVE, just remember, every move has its consequences right to the end of the game.

To summarize, the Lord never leads or carries anyone into temptation; rather He leads or carries us OUT if we co-operate with Him. So in the end the purpose of the Prayer He taught us is to help us remember and rededicate ourselves to that work. Can we do it? Of course we can!

“That it is not so difficult to live the life of heaven as some believe, is now clear from this, that when anything presents itself to a person that he knows to be dishonest and unjust, but to which his mind is borne, it is simply necessary for him to think that it ought not to be done because it is opposed to the Divine precepts. If he accustoms himself so to think, and from so doing establishes a *habit* of so thinking, he is gradually conjoined to heaven; and so far as he is conjoined to heaven the higher regions of his mind are opened; and so far as these are opened he sees whatever is dishonest and unjust, and so far as he sees these evils they can be dispersed... When he has made [this] beginning, the Lord does all the good deeds with him, and causes him not only to see the evils to be evils, but also to refrain from willing them, and finally to turn away from them. This is meant by the Lord’s words, ‘My yoke is easy and My burden is light. Matt. xi. 30’” (HH 533).

Amen.

Lessons: *Deut.* 4:1-2 & 30:15-16 & *Joshua* 1:7
With an introduction to a children’s pageant about the 10 Commandments

Matthew 5:1-12 – noting the benefits of temptation
Arcana Caelestia #751:selections (see next page)

Arcana Caelestia #751

“(T)he subject here is the temptation of the member of the new Church called Noah, and since few, if any, know what temptations are, because nowadays few people undergo such temptations – and those who do are not aware of anything other than the feeling that it is something within them which is suffering in this way – let a brief explanation be given. There are evil spirits who at that time activate a person’s falsities and evils, as has been stated. Indeed they draw out of his memory whatever he has thought and carried out since early childhood. Evil spirits can do this so cleverly and wickedly as to defy description. But the angels who are with him draw out his goods and truths, and in this way defend him. This conflict is what the person feels and perceives in himself and is what causes the sting and torment of conscience.

“There are two kinds of temptation, the first involving things of the understanding, the second those of the will. When a person’s temptation involves those of the understanding, evil spirits activate only the evil deeds he has carried out, which are meant here [in the story of the ark] by ‘unclean beasts.’ And with these they accuse and condemn. They even activate his good deeds as well, which are also meant here by the ‘clean beasts;’ but these they corrupt in a thousand ways. At the same time they also activate his thoughts, which are also meant here by ‘birds,’ and in addition they activate the things meant here by ‘things creeping over the ground.’ This kind of temptation however is mild and is perceived only through the recollection of such experiences, and a kind of mental anguish resulting from this.

“When however someone’s temptation involves things of the will, it is not so much his deeds and thoughts that are activated. Instead there are evil genies, as evil spirits of this type may be called, who inflame him with the evil desires and the foul loves in which he is steeped, and in this way direct their attack through the person’s very desires. They do this so wickedly and secretly that one cannot possibly believe it is they who are doing it. In fact they worm their way in no time at all into the life of his desires, and almost instantaneously twist and convert the affection for good and truth into the affection for evil and falsity. They act in such a way that the individual inevitably thinks that these things come from himself and flow forth of his own free will. This kind of temptation is very severe, and is felt as inward pain and burning torment.”