

Lead Us Not into Temptation

Message for Sunday, March 9, 2014
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11; Matthew 6:13

Children's Message: from Matthew 6:13, "Lead us not into temptation" in the Lord's Prayer.

[Before: place \$20 bill upright on a table, where everyone can see it.]

To the children: *I'm going to tell you a story, but I'm not going to use any words. When I'm done, you can tell me what you think the story was about.*

Walk by, glancing at the table as I pass it. Stop suddenly, swerve around so I see it. My eyes go wide; my mouth drops open; my tongue licks my lips; my breathing becomes rapid. Reach out to touch the \$20 bill, then draw back, fearing someone may have seen me. Furtively look around, then reach out again.

I almost have it, then slap my wrist with the other hand. The "good" hand wags a finger at the "bad" hand. The bad hand reaches out once again, but then looks back at the other hand. It pulls back on its own. I fold my arms across my chest and shake my head "No." But then I break down and reach out again. There is an internal battle as the arms reaches out, withdraws, then reaches out again. Stop, fold hands together and pray for strength.

Finally, the hand withdraws one last time. I put both hands in my pockets, take one last look, shake my head and walk away.

Ask, "What was that person doing?" Talk about how the person wanted the thing, but knew it was wrong. What helped the person to say "No" to the temptation? (the prayer, asking for God's help).

Sermon "Lead us not into temptation"

1) Does God lead us into temptation?

Jesus gave us the Lord's Prayer as a model for how we should pray. In part of that prayer we ask God to "lead us not into temptation." Yet look at what we read in the Bible:

Matthew 4:1, Today's English Version:
Then the Spirit led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the Devil.

What on earth is going on here??!! This is more than just curiosity. Every one of us faces temptation in our lives.

As we look at how Jesus deals with this situation, I believe we can find help for ourselves in our situations.

Setting the scene

The temptation of Jesus comes right after he is baptized, as he is about to begin his ministry. There is a Biblical tradition of people retreating from the busy-ness of life, fasting, and being alone with God, all in preparation for making a major step in life. Moses did it when he went up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28). So did Elijah, when he was thinking of quitting as a prophet because the king wanted to kill him (1 Kings 19:8).

Jesus was about to enter the public arena and begin his ministry. He had to choose what approach he would use to win people over to God. He could have chosen the way of power and wealth (these are alluded to in the temptations). During this time of testing he chose the way of serving, suffering, loving.

Why did the Holy Spirit lead Jesus into temptation? As I understand things, God does not tempt people, or cause trouble, but desires to help people.

But that's just my opinion. That and \$1.50 will get you a cup of coffee. You've heard me say before, "Never believe your preacher! Test what he/she says by what is in the Scriptures." I did some reading in the Bible about this, and was I surprised! I found that there are plenty of passages where God tests people, to see whether their hearts are pure. Here are just a couple:

James 1:12, New Revised Standard Version:
Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

1 Peter 1:7, New Living Translation:
These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold.

So here's what I'm thinking now:

- Temptation is when we are encouraged to do wrong; God never does this.
- Testing is when God checks to see if we choose the right.

God still desires to help us, but may choose to do that by testing us, to refine and purify us.

2) How did this help Jesus?

If my reasoning above is correct, then Jesus was helped by this experience. Here are some possible ways.

a) Jesus now knew that he could resist the devil

The assurance that this knowledge brought would help him in their later encounters.

b) Jesus knew that his Father would not leave him helpless

Jesus was not alone when he was in the desert. He had the Holy Spirit to guide and lead him.

c) Jesus confirmed his priorities

Jesus had his convictions, but they had never been tested. In this temptation he had the opportunity to follow the temptation, but instead had kept to God's will.

d) It allowed Jesus to confirm his own faith

Jesus knew that he had a big job ahead of him. So big it was frightening. Could he go through with it? Going through this period of temptation helped him to confirm that he would do it.

3) How can testing and temptation help us?

In a similar way, when trials come in our lives, it can be a time of growth and renewal. It may not seem that way at the time. Indeed, it may be years until we are able to look back and see how God was at work in our lives.

I'm going to go through the same points that I outlined above, with Jesus, and apply them to our own situation.

We need a warning, though! This power is not something to play with! Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation." It is one thing to have a time of testing thrust upon us. It is something else altogether to go seeking it!

A wealthy businessman was talking with a group who were applying to be his chauffeur. He asked, "When we're driving in the mountains, how close can you drive to the edge of the cliff, without going over?"

One confident applicant said, "I can drive to within a foot of the cliff, no problem." The next one boasted, "I can drive six inches from the cliff, easy."

The third one, however, said, "If you want to look over the edge of the cliff, you can get out and walk! I'm going to stay as far away from that as I can." The businessman smiled and said, "You're just the type of person I'm looking for. You're hired."

Likewise with temptation, the wise person will steer clear of the edge.

a) You now know that you can resist the devil

James 4:7, New Revised Standard Version:

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

[I realize that some people don't accept the idea of devil being. That's not a topic for today. Just substitute "temptation" for "devil" if that helps you.]

To love and serve God is a matter of choice. The choice is not a one-time thing. It is a decision that must be renewed every day, in every situation. Once you've faced temptation, and dealt with it, you'll be better prepared for the next time.

b) You know that your Father will not leave you helpless

The presence of God is a tremendous source of strength. Once you've gone through trials, and you knew that God was with you, that will help you to stand firm the next time.

It's one thing to read this promise in the Bible:

1 Corinthians 10:13, New Living Translation:

Remember that the temptations that come into your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you can't stand up against it. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you will not give in to it.

It's another thing altogether to be able to say, "Hey, it's true—it really works! Thank-you, God!"

c) It helps you to confirm your priorities

It's a good feeling to be able to say to yourself: "I could have gone for the easy way, but I didn't; and that has made all the difference. Yes, this really is what I want in my life. I could have the other way, the way that people tell me I should go, but I know it isn't right. I can be my own person."

d) It helps you to confirm your faith

The best way I know to tell what I mean here is to tell a story. Fred Morris had an experience of confirming his faith as a result of testing. Fred was an American, a minister in the United Methodist Church. He worked as a missionary in Recife, a port city on the east coast of Brazil in South America.

Recife is like most cities in developing countries. There are the luxury suburbs and the downtown high-rises. There are also the slums: squalid, stinking villages built on the river banks. These are the people that Fred

worked with. Each day, when the tide went out, they groped in that stinking sludge for a few polluted crabs to eat.

Recife was a revolution waiting to explode. The whole area was desperately poor. Almost 30 percent of the people were unemployed; most of the rest were underpaid.

The land was fertile. That area could have grown enough vegetables and grain to feed almost the entire country. But Brazil's "economic miracle" called for industrial development and export dollars. So some farmland was used for automated factories, that threw more people out of work. And the rest grew sugar for export. As a result, fertile northeastern Brazil became the only part of the western hemisphere to regularly experience starvation.

Fred Morris used to get very angry about what was happening to ordinary people. Once in a while, he got angry enough to write a letter for U.S. magazines, about what he called "The Other Side of the Economic Miracle." About peasant farmers, machine-gunned because they had tried to keep a small plot of land as a vegetable garden for their own families. About Brazilian church leaders who dared criticize their government, and who repaid for their courage by being tortured, hung from trees, dragged behind cars, and shot.

And then one day the police came for Fred. About a dozen of them. With machine guns. He knew they were police; he had met some of them before. They took him to a building where he knew others had been tortured.

And he was very afraid.

They tortured him. They clipped electrodes to his toes, his fingers, his nipples, his ears. Then they turned on the current, and laughed at him as the white explosions went off inside his skull.

They mocked him in other ways, too. They called him a Communist and a traitor. They told him they had his wife and their son, too.

Fred turned to his Christian faith for strength. "I repeated the 23rd Psalm, every time they came for me," he said. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil..."

And he got an unexpected lift from one of his torturers. The man jeered, "All your friends are over at the church, praying for you!" It was supposed to convince Fred that prayer was useless.

But the ploy backfired. Just to know that his friends would risk their own safety by publicly praying for him was enough for Fred.

And in the middle of his terrible experience, under torture, Fred discovered something about himself.

"All these things I had been saying that I believed for the past 20 years were true," he said. "I wasn't just saying them. I really believed!"

He realized that nothing, not even torture, could separate him from the love of God. He found that he could not hate his torturers, in spite of what they were doing to him. *"I felt sorry for them. They degraded themselves, more than they degraded me."*

And he said, "There was a time, during those four days, when I really thought I was going to die — and I was able to face that without fear."

He didn't die, of course. Because Fred Morris was an American citizen, his friends contacted the American embassy, and got him released after four days. Brazilian citizens aren't that lucky.

He left Brazil. But in a strange way, he said later, he found himself almost grateful to his captors. Because, like everyone else, Fred Morris used to have some doubts about what, and how much, he really believed. But now he has been tested. Now he knows for sure.¹

I don't know what your situation may be. But God knows.

Proverbs 3:5-6, Today's English Version:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Never rely on what you think you know. Remember the Lord in everything you do, and he will show you the right way.

Next Steps:

- Where have you been toying with temptation? You need to confess that, and turn your back on it.
- When you go through a trial, instead of asking "Why me, Lord?", it's far better to ask, "How can I cooperate with you, Lord, so that good will come out of this?"
- Choose now whom you will follow: God, or something else. Confirm that in your heart and soul.

¹ Story in *An Everyday God*, by Jim Taylor, Wood Lake Books, p. 32-34.