

AUGUST 7, 2016

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

“THE LORD’S PRAYER---PART 6, ‘LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION...’”

This summer I am taking a few Sundays to preach a series of sermons on the Lord’s Prayer. It is the most important and most perfect prayer as it was composed by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself—and He told us to pray it. And so we do—a lot! In all our services, in our own personal prayers.... And because it’s so important and because we pray it so much, it’s important for us to understand its meaning--- so we can pray it with meaningfulness, not just rattle off the words.

So we are going through it Sunday by Sunday, homily by homily, line by line. Today we are up to part 6, where the Lord taught us to pray these words---“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

The words, “Lead us not into temptation”, are not meant to imply that God *might* lead us into temptation if we don’t ask him not to! It is not possible that our good God would tempt us to do wrong. We know this from what Jesus’ stepbrother, St. James, wrote in James 1:13---“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’, for God cannot be tempted with evil and He Himself tempts no one.” That’s pretty plain! God doesn’t tempt anyone.

What “Lead us not into temptation” means is that we are, in those words, asking God to help us stay out of situations and circumstances where temptation is just too strong. And as we pray this, we need to remember that we have a part to play, too.

There was a little boy who was saving up his money to buy his mother a nice birthday present. He didn’t get much allowance so he had to save pretty much every penny. But it wasn’t working out too well. Every day the ice cream truck came rolling down his street, with its little song playing loudly, tempting the boy.... And most days he gave into that temptation. He would open up the box where he had the money for the gift for his mom and take some out and run after the truck to get a treat. One night he counted up what he had and he could tell he wasn’t going to have enough money for the gift if he didn’t quit spending. So in his bedtime prayers that night, overheard by his mother, he prayed, “God, help me to stop running for the ice cream truck. Instead, help me to run away from it!” (in “Our Daily Bread”, 6/1/90)

That’s about what it means when we pray the Lord’s Prayer---“God, help me to run away from temptation.” We are praying that He will protect us from what is more than we can handle. And He will do that, but we have to let Him work in us.....

In fact, if we cooperate with God in this, then no temptation is too strong for us. St. Paul told us this in I Corinthians 10: 13---“God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

But we do have to work together with the grace of God---to use a word from the New Testament and Church Fathers, we have to *synergize* with God’s grace in order to overcome temptation. As St. Paul wrote in I Corinthians 3:9, “we are God’s fellow

workers” (*synergoi* in Greek). We work together with God by deciding to allow His strength and grace to work in and through us---He’ll provide the power and the grace. We provide the will to allow Him to do so..... And then we can overcome temptation.

But sometimes we do something senseless. We ask God to not lead us into temptation—and then we go ahead and lead *ourselves* into temptation! Remember the little boy and the ice cream truck---do we run away from the ice cream truck or do we chase it down the street? Just have to see how much the fudgesickles cost today....

Some examples...

Lust. For some people, that is a very strong temptation. But do we lead ourselves right into that temptation by what we watch on TV, what movies we see, and where we go on the internet?

Judging others. A very strong temptation for many of us. But do we lead ourselves right into that temptation by listening to gossip about others?

Forgetting God—maybe the worst temptation of all. But do we lead ourselves right into it by missing church and skipping our daily prayers?

If we ask God to not lead us into temptation, but then lead ourselves into it---then whose fault is it if we fall?

There was a man who loved doughnuts. And on the street on which he drove to work each day there was a wonderful doughnut shop. He had the habit of stopping there every day in the morning and picking up a few doughnuts to munch on during his commute. But he needed to lose weight and figured all that sugar was no good for him. So he made a solemn commitment to never stop at the doughnut shop again. But it was so, so tempting to him every day as he drove right by it! He successfully resisted for some days.

Then one morning as he drove by it, he noticed something unusual. The parking lot was packed—no room for another car. He thought to himself, “Never seen it like that before---I think I’ll drive around the block and see if it’s still packed when I get back in a few minutes. Just out of curiosity.....” So he went around the block and got back a few minutes later and noticed the lot was still packed out. He again thought that was very unusual and decided, just out of curiosity, to go around the block again to see if it would still be full. He did this a couple of more times—still full. Then, on his fifth circuit around the block, as he drove towards the shop, he saw a car pulling out. He said to himself, “What a coincidence! The lot has been full for quite a while and now, just as I approach the driveway, a parking spot opens up. Amazing! It must be an act of God! It would be unthankful to God to not drive in and grab that spot.” So he did---then he went inside to buy a dozen doughnuts to celebrate finding the parking spot! (in “Our Daily Bread”, 11/9/91)

Don’t be like that hungry fellow. If you pray “Lead us not into temptation”, don’t keep driving around the block!

The second phrase in this part of the Lord’s Prayer reads, “But deliver us from evil.” A more literal translation would be “But deliver us from the *evil one*.”, referring to the devil. It’s fine to pray it that way. After all, our Patriarch John, when he visited our archdiocese last year from Syria, in one of his teachings said he prefers to say “evil one”. Can’t argue with that!

The evil one our Lord is referring to is our great enemy, Satan. He is not a fairy tale

character. He is not imaginary. He is not a symbol of evil or of our own “dark side”. He is real. He is a fallen angel who rebelled against God ages ago. He wants to snatch us away from God. As St. Peter wrote in I Peter 5:8—“Be sober, be watchful. Your enemy the devil prowls around, like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

Satan is strong, but the Lord is much, much stronger. Christ came to our world to defeat our enemy, the devil. St. John tells us this in I John 3:8---“The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.” And he who defeated the devil on the cross and through His descent into hell, and through His glorious Resurrection---our Lord Jesus Christ, lives within us Christians. And so He gives us victory over Satan, too. Quoting again from St. John, in I John 4:4---“He who is in you is greater than He who is in the world.” Jesus Christ, living in us, is stronger than the devil.

So if we cling closely to Christ, we will be protected from the devil’s attacks on us. So we pray every day in the Lord’s Prayer—“Deliver us from the evil one.” And then we need to cling closely to the deliverer, our Lord Jesus.

Don’t ever think the evil one is weak or that we can handle him on our own. Don’t ever think that we can safely neglect prayer, Holy Confession, Holy Communion, and spiritual disciplines because we are strong enough to beat him. The devil is weaker than Christ, but he’s stronger than us. And so we should never take him lightly; we should do all we can to keep a far distance from him and his works.

Back around 400 years ago, the Spanish explorer Lasalle was carrying out a big expedition---he was probably the first European to venture into some of the southern areas of what is now the United States. He and his explorers spent some time in what is now northern Texas. Their biggest food supply was the bison, the buffaloes, that were thick in that area. Many days, some of the Lasalle’s men would go out and kill a few---then they had plenty to eat. There were a couple of Catholic priests along on the trip with the explorers. One of them, Father Zenobe, had a very strong personality and was full of energy. One day he told Lasalle he wanted to try out hunting buffalo—so Lasalle let him go out with a few other men that day. They came upon a herd and went into action. Father Zenobe took aim at one of the largest of the beasts---he shot and hit the animal which fell down and lay still. He was very proud of what he had done and got off his horse and walked over to check out his prize. The other hunters yelled at him to stay back---one bullet often wasn’t enough to kill a huge buffalo. He had better wait a while before he approached it. But Father Zenobe was so full of self-confidence that he ignored them and walked right up to the animal. It looked dead, but to make sure he gave it a good kick. Not a smart move! The buffalo, only wounded, jumped up. Before Father Zenobe could get away the buffalo attacked him. The other hunters quickly all fired at the animal and really did kill it. But the priest was hurt badly enough that it took him 3 months to get back on his feet. (in Francis Parkman, Lasalle and the Discovery of the Great West, New American Library, 1963, p. 295)

The devil is like a wounded buffalo---very, very dangerous. If we are wise, we will stay far away from him, we won’t play around with him or with the temptations he directs against us.

He truly is “the evil one”, and we pray in the Lord’s Prayer that we will be delivered from him by our Lord. So keep praying that God will not lead you into temptation and

then, with God's help, flee from temptation every day.

Cling to the strong one, the mighty one, our Lord Jesus Christ. He is strong enough and mighty enough to deliver us from our enemy, the evil one, and to help us be victorious in times of temptation.

Let us live each day clinging to His hand as we walk through this life—the hand of our strong and mighty and victorious and loving Savior.

