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Matthew 6: 9-13 (3-18-2012)

### **Trials and Temptations**

In case you weren't aware, all of us are in constant danger. Everywhere we go, signs and labels alert us to the danger all around us. There are warnings like:

"Caution: The content of this bottle should not be fed to fish." - On a bottle of shampoo for dogs.

"Not intended for highway use." - On a 13-inch wheel on a wheelbarrow.

"Not suitable for children aged 36 months or less." - On a birthday card for a 1 year old.

"Do not use as ear plugs." - On a package of silly putty.

"Fragile. Do not drop." - Posted on a Boeing 757.

"Beware! To touch these wires is instant death. Anyone found doing so will be prosecuted." - On a sign at a railroad station.

"May be harmful if swallowed." - On a shipment of hammers.

"Warning: May contain nuts." - On a package of peanuts.

(found at [www.rinkworks.com](http://www.rinkworks.com); Funny things people said)

With all of these dangers around - airplanes that can't be dropped, hammers that can't be eaten, and peanuts that contain nuts - it's amazing that anyone is still alive!

Seriously, we know that there are true dangers, evils, trials and temptations out there that could easily take us down the wrong path. We also know that living a Christian life is no safe harbor. Our commitment to Christ will not shelter us from the storms and struggles of life, unfortunately.

But because we are followers of Christ by our baptism, and we know we are God's beloved, we have each other to keep us safe and to keep us accountable to one another and to God. The Lord's Prayer, as we continue our series on "How do I pray", I think is a prayer that does both, saving us and holding us accountable.

Before I launch into my chosen passage for today, "And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil," I want to reiterate that this prayer we say

together every Sunday or whenever we worship, is a radical prayer. It certainly was 2000 years ago.

When Jesus taught this prayer to his disciples, his words were deeply imbedded in the historic and cultural context of his world. The Romans were in charge. The ruling class was small and powerful. The peasant class, the biggest social class of which Jesus was a part of, was working harder and harder for less and less.

The land that had been used to sustain their every need had been taken away from them. They worked the land for its fruits to be exported to Rome. They were paid in coin and then told to buy what they need, like daily bread. If they could not afford what they needed then they would go into debt. If they could not pay their debt they became indentured servants. If you did not have land to work then you were a day laborer.

Life was hard for the 'little people,' and it was against this empire that Jesus decided to stand up against. This is the world in which Jesus said God's justice be done on earth, give us daily bread, and forgive us our debts. This is the Empire Jesus was executed for protesting.

John Crossan, whose book "The greatest Prayer" is our guideline for our sermon series, said that particularly the three lines, "Give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our debts, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil" need to be seen in the historical/situational context which is an interesting thought.

It makes sense. For my passage, "and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil," the specific temptation was violent vs. non-violent resistance toward the dominating power, aka The Romans. Jesus, according to Crossan, asks God "not to lead us into" – yes, lead us into – the temptation to violent resistance to Rome's violent domination. Instead, it asks God to deliver us from that evil action or that evil one. It is, in other words, about avoiding violence even or especially when undertaken to hallow God's name, to establish God's kingdom, and thereby to fulfill God's will "as in heaven so on earth." (p. 168, Crossan, The Greatest Prayer)

I was surprised by that interpretation. Actually, it was really news to me, and in some ways challenging. And yet, it is not as far-fetched as it seems; Jesus was not the sword-swinging messiah that the people hoped for.

In the Sermon on the Mount he lays down new guideline of non-violent resistance, of how to live into the kingdom of God, how to bring it about:

- no more "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" but "Do not resist an evildoer";

- if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;
- if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;
- if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile;
- love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. (p. 249, Marcus Borg, Jesus)

Jesus does not like the Empire forces, but he also knows that violence only begets violence, and that in the end, everybody will lose.

It's a radical prayer in Jesus' time, and even after 2000 years, it remains a radical prayer. Our situation of course is different from that of 2000 years ago. We live in a place and time and country where we have the ability to shape our lives with a good amount of freedom and independence.

Why is it still a radical prayer? It is a radical prayer because when we pray it we cannot just pray it with ourselves in mind, or our community, or just fellow Christians. It is a prayer to be prayed for all of humanity and for the world we live in. We don't make the jump necessarily and/or easily into the world, into the places where daily bread is hard to come by, where the justice and peace of God's kingdom is elusive, where temptations of greed and oppression are the way of life. Maybe I am wrong but I think it's hard for us to take that step. I could see how some of us might struggle to take what seems to be a very personal prayer of help and encouragement into the context and reality of the world we live in. But then, we need to ask the questions:  
 Don't all people on this earth deserve what they need for their daily life?  
 Don't all deserve dignity and hope?  
 Don't all deserve to be kept from being plunged into crisis that are impossible to handle?  
 Should not every one person be saved from the destructive power of evil?

It is a radical prayer because it helps us to admit that we live in a very vulnerable place. "And lead us not into temptation" expresses this vulnerability. We live in a world where God's will is far from people's minds, where uncertainty is a daily companion and where evil is powerfully at work. The Lords' Prayer is brutally honest about that.

Any prayer, first and foremost, is about God, and addresses God. But honest prayer is about our own frailty and addresses the ways in which our lives are at risk. Honest prayer is about confronting our temptation, dealing with the trials head on, and figuring out how we can rid ourselves of all that is evil. All prayer has to acknowledge our need of forgiveness and our need to forgive.

Jesus has given us the nerve/gift/ to call God Father which we hope will give us the strength and courage to say with confidence to God: Please God, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

Accepting God's guidance in either facing our trials or leading us away from the temptations in life, opens us up to the real opportunity to be delivered from the evil that hold us back to become truly human, and truly free. Now we could spend hours thinking and talking about what constitutes evil. There is no time for that discussion. But whatever evil is to us, it always finds an opening, especially when we have lost our path, when we are fearful or weak or uncertain of what the future may hold, or faced with trials or temptations that seem too much to handle. It is then that evil comes in and manipulates us and reinforces all that is most inhuman in us.

To stand with dignity and freedom in a world like that, we need to know that God is Our Father. We need to know that whatever happens to us God is God, God's name and presence and power and word are holy and wonderful and freeing that by being God's children we can be safe, and saved.

It's not an easy prayer. It's not a prayer that pretends and it's also a prayer that requires our lives to change. It requires that we become different sorts of people, but it acknowledges that change will only happen when we learn how to depend freely and lovingly on the God who made himself Our Father.

Every single bit of the Lord's Prayer is radical because every single bit of it challenges our assumptions about who we are and who God is and what the world is like.

As we pray this prayer, we need to hold God's precious and precarious world before us, to try to sum up the world's and our own often-inarticulate cries for help, for rescue, and for deliverance.

I do not believe we can pray these words from a safe distance. We can only pray them when we are saying "Yes" to God's Kingdom coming to birth within us, even when we really might not understand why.

Let me close with a little bit different version of the Lord's Prayer. It is called a progressive Lord's Prayer, and I feel it sums up what I have hoped to share with you this morning.

Let us pray:

God in all things, Sacred is your name, justice and compassion come, love and transformation be done, on all the earth. May we give daily bread to all. May we forgive ourselves as we forgive others and their debts. May we choose what is right and just over evil. For all is in you. Forever and ever. Amen.