

The School of Prayer
Part 8 – Go Easy On Us, Lord, As Easy As You Possibly Can
Matthew 6:9-13 – Matthew 26:36-46

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ February 25, 2024 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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⁹“Pray, then, in this way:
Our Father in heaven,
 may your name be revered as holy.
¹⁰ May your kingdom come.
 May your will be done
 on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
 but rescue us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:9-13, NRSV)

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When Jesus gives us his prayer to turn into our prayer, he teaches us that when we pray we should begin by addressing God as our Father, reminded every time we come to God that we do so as beloved sons and daughters. As I have said many times over the course of this series, that opening address permeates everything else in the prayer. After we address God as Father, Jesus then teaches us that before we get to *our* concerns, we should focus on our Father’s concerns – his name, his kingdom, his will. But that doesn’t mean Jesus wants us to neglect our concerns, only that the order is important.

It’s in the last half of the prayer that Jesus covers *our* three great needs in this life: provision, pardon and protection. Commentator Dale Bruner says we are being taught to pray for a good present (bread for today), a good past (forgiveness for yesterday), and now a good future (protection in the days to come).¹ And once again, as we’ve seen all throughout the prayer, this final petition for protection from temptation and deliverance from evil flows naturally from the petition before it, our prayer for forgiveness. Think about it, after you confess your sin because you know you’ve blown it, isn’t it natural to then ask for help not to blow it again!

So Jesus teaches us here to pray, “**Do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.**” We’ll look at the first half of this request this week, and the rest of it, regarding rescue from the evil one, next Sunday. As we do, I’m sure that you’re curious why this part of the prayer, in this translation, is not what we are used to praying. We usually pray instead, “**Lead us not into temptation.**” To explain the difference, let me start by defining temptation, and doing so by going back to the first temptation.

Adam and Eve were created and set into paradise to live with the Lord as their faithful and generous provider. All they will ever need is there in abundance. God commands them to be fruitful and multiply, to cultivate the earth in ways that please him, to eat freely of every tree in the garden, all things which would have brought them immense joy and satisfaction. His only prohibition is that they not eat of the one tree in the middle of the garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You know what happens. The evil one slithers into the garden, the one called the Tempter, and tries to deceive them into distrusting God, selling them on the idea that it’s better to glorify creation than to glorify the Creator.²

That’s temptation, the intentional enticement to disobey what God has revealed to us. God tells them not to eat from that tree. “But, wow, the fruit looks so tasty. We know what God said, but maybe God doesn’t always know what he’s talking about. Or maybe what God really meant is... Or maybe he’s trying to keep something from us.” Understand, temptation itself is not a sin. Even Jesus was tempted, and he was sinless. Sin is, as Dallas Willard puts it, “when we inwardly say yes to a temptation, when we would do the deed if the conditions were right, even if we do not actually do it.”³ Adam and Eve did give into the temptation, of course, and in doing so everything good in God’s creation began to unravel.

So here’s the question. Why would God ever lead us into that? Haven’t you ever wondered this as you’ve prayed this prayer? Is God somebody who has a

¹ Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 1 (Eerdmans, 2004), 312.

² See Genesis 3

³ Source unknown

tendency to lure his people to disobey him? Isn't the legal term for that entrapment? Isn't this our good Father in Heaven we are praying to? What kind of father leads his children into doing the wrong thing? It's a fair question.

You might remember that a couple of years ago Pope Francis lobbied the Roman Catholic Church to take the word 'temptation' out of the Lord's Prayer for this very reason. He wrote,

It's not a good translation because it speaks of a God who induces temptation. I am the one who falls; it's not [God] pushing me into temptation to then see how I have fallen. A father doesn't do that, a father helps you to get up immediately. It's Satan who leads us into temptation, that's his department.⁴

James affirms what Pope Francis claims when he writes, **"No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one."**⁵ Temptation is never God's department.

In the original language the word here translated 'temptation' can also be translated 'trial'. It literally means "putting something to proof by experiment, experience, solicitation, discipline or provocation and, by implication, adversity."⁶ That's a complicated way of saying it's a lot like taking your drivers test. I have vivid memories of sitting behind the wheel of our 1972 Chevy Impala beside a stern looking official from the DMV, clipboard in hand ready to record all the things I did right and all the things I did wrong. That was the design of the drivers test, of any test, to show you and others what you are able to do and what you are unable to do. The test proves your capability, or lack of it, as a driver.

So I agree with Pope Francis, and actually with the translators of the version we read from this morning, that this prayer better reads, **"Do not bring us to the time of trial", or "the time of testing."** This helps us because, while our Father in heaven doesn't tempt us, we ought to know by now that he is going to test us. Peter, who knew a thing or two about being tested by the Lord, wrote, **"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you."**⁷

Isn't this what any good parent will do? Shouldn't children expect their parents, and other adults who love them, to test them? If you are a parent, haven't there been times when you purposely allowed hardship to come into the lives of your children as they grew up. Any good parent, of course, would rather see her children learn the right way to live by simply receiving instruction and following it, motivated by praise and rewards rather than by the threat of discipline. Wouldn't parenting be a piece of cake if children always responded to our guidance by saying, "Yes, Mommy. That makes perfect sense. I will do it. I'm so glad you are willing to teach me and guide me."

When that doesn't happen, as it inevitably does not happen, we have to allow testing in the form of hardship to come. That can come through natural consequences, as we refuse to intervene and instead allow our kids to experience the outcomes of their poor decisions without swooping in to rescue them. It can also come through punishment which we initiate. And unless you're a sadist, you don't enjoy these moments. Parents say, "This is going to hurt me more than it's going to hurt you," and I think that might be right. It's painful to watch your kids go through hardship. But out of love for them we allow it, even at times cause it, because we want our kids to grow and flourish in life. Agreed?

So why in the world do we think it would be any different with our Father in heaven, who loves us and desires our flourishing infinitely more than the best parents on earth wants these things for their children. In fact, sometimes God allows painful testing even when we have not strayed or disobeyed, simply to help us affirm his faithfulness and our faith. His purposes in these times, whether or not we understand them, are always wholly constructive.

Perhaps the best example of this in scripture is the testing of Abraham. Many of you know the story. After 100 years of waiting, God provided Abraham and Sarah with a son named Isaac, along with a promise that through this boy God would eventually raise up a nation of people who would bless all other nations on earth.⁸ But then one day, seemingly out of the blue, God told Abraham to take his son, Isaac, up on a mountain and sacrifice him there on an altar. The whole account opens with these words, **"After these things God tested Abraham."**⁹

had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

⁸ See Genesis 12:1-3

⁹ Genesis 22:1.

⁴ Cited by Wesley Hill, *The Lord's Prayer: A Guide to Praying to Our Father* (Lexham Press, 2019), 71.

⁵ James 1:13. Unless otherwise noted, this and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

⁶ <https://studybible.info/strongs/G3986>

⁷ 1st Peter 4:12 (New International Version). Also 1st Peter 1:6-7 – **"In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have**

What kind of cruel, heartless test is this? I know some people in the church who hate this story so much they won't read it. But that's only because they don't understand it. You see, by this point God had demonstrated time and time again to Abraham that he was faithful, and could be trusted. That's what the writer is pointing to when he says, "**After these things...**" But Abraham had spent most of his life in a pagan culture where it was quite common, if not expected, for firstborn children to be given as a sacrifice to atone for sin and please the gods. Do you ever wonder why Abraham, after hearing God's command, immediately makes his way to the mountain with his son, knife in tow, without putting up so much as a whimper of an argument? In those days God's request to him would have sounded perfectly reasonable, even expected.

But on top of that mountain, just as Abraham is about to plunge the knife into his beloved boy, the Lord stops him, saying, "**Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.**"¹⁰ And then God provides a lamb, caught in a nearby thicket, as a substitute for the sacrifice. Can you see what a beautiful thing it is that God does here for Abraham in this test? Abraham needed to be assured that his God was not like other gods. Abraham also needed to recognize that his faith was real. We think a lot about how Abraham felt as he walked up that mountain. We can only imagine the agony. We ought to consider how he felt walking back down the mountain after both he and God passed the test. His God was even more faithful than he realized before, meaning his faith now grew to what it had not yet been.

Do you see that when tests and trials and hardship come into our lives, we have to trust that God often allows them because such hardship has a special function in his plans. When trials are permitted, we have to trust that it only means that God has something in mind in the long term for us that is better than short term freedom from pain.¹¹ But if that is true, then why does Jesus teach us to ask to be delivered from such trials? If such testing is ultimately for our own good, shouldn't we just suck it up and ask God to give us more tests? But is that what *you* want from God, more testing, more trials, more hardship, that you might

grow in life and faith? Who wants that? Don't you want to pray the way Jesus teaches us to pray here, "Father, no mas. No more trials. Take away the hardship. Go easy on us, Lord. Please keep the pain away. Spare us from the bad things which could happen to us in this life."

Can you see how good Jesus is to actually teach us to pray this way? He knows that this is the way we want to pray and so commands us to do so. As we'll see in a moment, even he prayed this way. Never are we taught to pray, "Lord, give us more hardship." As we instead pray regularly for deliverance, our prayer becomes a humble acknowledgement of our frailty before God. When I ask God to keep me from testing it's a vote of 'no confidence' in my own ability to handle it, an admission that I'm afraid too much hardship might just break me, or crush my faith, as I have seen it do to others.

This is a prayer of vulnerability, realism and dependence. As we pray it, we know that there will be times when the Lord will test us because it is the most loving thing he can do with us, but in this prayer we are essentially asking, "Lord, unless there is no other way, keep me from trial in my life." As commentator J.I. Packer put it, "Testing may be our lot, but only a fool makes it his preference."¹² Or this from the great English preacher, Charles Spurgeon, "In the course of providence, the Lord tests our graces and the sincerity of our profession [of faith]; and for this purpose he does 'lead us into temptation'. We entreat him not to try us too severely."¹³ Isn't that a prayer you can pray to your heavenly Father?

The most beautiful thing about this prayer is that it is a prayer that Jesus prayed before us. Remember, it's his prayer that he is giving us to pray. The night before his crucifixion, as he is fully aware of awaits him in the morning, Jesus is with his closest disciples on the Mount of Olives in the Garden of Gethsemane praying. Matthew, who was there that night, records this scene later in his gospel. Do you remember Jesus' prayer to his Father, a prayer he prayed not once, but three times: "**My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; but not what I want but what you want.**"¹⁴ In Luke's account of the scene we learn that Jesus made

¹⁰ Genesis 22:12

¹¹ I'm indebted here to Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (Harper, 1997), 266-267. Also, recall that after pleading with God to remove hardship from his life, Paul concluded in 2nd Corinthians 12:8-10, "**Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'**" So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content

with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

¹² J.I. Packer, *Praying the Lord's Prayer* (Crossway, 2007), 87.

¹³ Cited by Paul Carter, "How to use the Lord's Model Prayer", *The Gospel Coalition Canada*, July 4, 2022. Read the full article at <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/columns/ad-fontes/how-to-use-the-lords-model-prayer/>

¹⁴ Matthew 26:39

this request so intensely that his sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground.¹⁵

Do you see that this is the same prayer Jesus teaches us to pray? He does not want to go through the trial that awaits him the next day, so much so that he begs his Father three times to find another way forward. But in the honesty of his plea, can you also see the same faith that led Abraham up that mountain with his son, something I'm certain he did not want to do either? But in the end, Jesus trusts his Father so much that if the cross is truly the best way forward, that long term flourishing can only be attained through short term pain, then he is willing to endure.

You may also remember that in that same scene Jesus tells his disciples to pray with him. When they keep falling asleep, he implores them, **“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”**¹⁶ The word translated “temptation” here is the same word in the Greek we find in the Lord’s Prayer, translated in our version as “trial”.

But here I think that ‘temptation’ is the right translation. As we know, these men and women are in great danger of distrusting God, turning from Jesus in the very moment when God’s plans are about to come to a glorious culmination. One of them, Judas, has already given in, betrayed Jesus for a few pieces of silver. Another one, Peter, is about to three times deny even knowing Jesus. The rest will soon run scared, fleeing for their lives. Like Abraham, they each are being asked to trust God when nothing about what is happening around them makes any sense. Why would God command his long-awaited son, the fulfilment of his covenant, to be needlessly sacrificed? Abraham couldn’t have understood the reasons, but the Lord nonetheless helped him to watch and pray. Now these disciples must have been equally confused and afraid. Why would God allow his Messiah, if that’s who this really is, to come to this fate? There was nothing about the cross and the tomb which, in that moment, made sense. The testing was coming. Jesus told them to pray that it would not break them.

In the end, did their Father in heaven answer their prayer? He did. Though the road led them through desertion, denial, doubt, grief, and fear, in the end God delivered each one through the time of trial and from temptation.

But what about Jesus’ prayer for the same thing? Did the Father answer his Son’s desperate prayer to deliver

him from temptation? He did not. New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, explains this so well, let me quote him at length,

We therefore have to come to grips with the fact that Jesus gave this prayer to his disciples, but that when he prayed it himself *the answer was ‘No’*. He put it together with an earlier part of the Lord’s Prayer (‘Thy will be done’). When he held the two side by side, he found that God’s will involved him in a unique vocation. He would be the one who *was* led to the Testing, who was *not* delivered from Evil.¹⁷

In the garden we see that none of us can bear the full weight of testing and trial, certainly the full weight of temptation and sin. So Jesus bears it in our place. Though never giving into temptation as we do, he nonetheless willingly sacrifices himself and, because it was his Father’s will, takes upon himself the natural and agonizing consequences of our sin, which we do not, and cannot, ever bear ourselves. On that mountain Jesus becomes the lamb caught in the thicket that is sacrificed in our place. And because of this, whenever we pray this prayer, asking God to deliver us from trial and temptation, we know that God has, in fact, already done what we have asked of him. Though we will not be spared from testing along the way, as our good Father in heaven sees fit to help us grow we know that no trial or temptation will crush us as we remain in him, and he in us. Remember Paul’s words in 1st Corinthians 10:13, **“No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”** As the great theologian and humanitarian Albert Schweitzer once put it, “Jesus was called to throw himself on the wheel of world history, so that, even though it crushed him, it might start to turn in the opposite direction.”¹⁸

There are going to be times in this life when our good and loving Father in heaven, in his mysterious but good purposes, will need to allow, or even cause, times of hardship and testing in the lives of his children. Let’s not be surprised by this. Still, Jesus not only encourages us, but models for us, that it is right and natural for us to keep asking our Father to go as easy on us as he possibly can, because we know that we are dangerously vulnerable in times of testing and hardship. In praying this prayer we are watching and praying just as Jesus taught us to do so.

¹⁵ Luke 22:44 – **“In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.”**

¹⁶ Matthew 26:41 (NIV)

¹⁷ N.T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (Eerdmans, 1996), 50.

¹⁸ Cited by Wright, 51.

But we are also praying with great confidence, knowing that because the Father said ‘No’ to Jesus, he will say ‘Yes’ to us, that in fact the very Spirit of the risen Christ already dwells in us to provide the moment-by-moment grace we need in this life not only to keep trusting our Father in Heaven, but find forgiveness when we fail to do so.

In the end, and even along the way, we will see that our Father is faithful. I love how C.S. Lewis once put it, saying, “They say of some temporal suffering, ‘No future bless can make up for it,’ not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory.”¹⁹ The time of trial will not last forever. For those who keep hold of Christ, all suffering, even sin and death, will end in resurrection and glory. In the meantime, let us pray with Jesus, “Father in heaven, go as easy on us as you possibly can.”

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the passage from Matthew 6:9-13 again. In the past when you have prayed, “Father...lead us not into temptation,” what have you imagined you are asking from God? How do you see it now?
2. What is God’s purpose in testing us, in allowing us to go through hardship? If you see his good purposes in this, are you able to remember this is true when you are in the midst of hardship and testing?
3. As you look back over your life, can you identify a time when you believe God allowed you to be tested in difficult ways and now, looking back, you see how good it was that he did?
4. What might we learn from the story of God testing Abraham in Genesis 22:1-19?
5. There was a time when Paul himself prayed this prayer, pleading with God to remove hardship from his life. When God said “No,” this is how Paul responded in 2nd Corinthians 12:8-10, **“Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it**

would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” What do we learn here?

6. What does it mean to you that when Jesus asked his Father to be delivered his Father said, “No.”?
7. What do you think about praying this part of the Lord’s Prayer this way: “Go easy on us, Lord, as easy as you possibly can.” Is that a prayer you have prayed, or could pray?
8. What is the main thing that you believe Jesus is wanting to teach you in all this? How will that change the way you think or live in the days to come?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



Why do you think that our Heavenly Father, even though he loves us, allows us to go through difficult and painful things in our lives?

¹⁹ Cited by Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, (Dutton, 2008), 34. Also consider this claim by Fyodor Dostoevsky, “I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world’s finale, at the moment of eternal

harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, for all the blood that they’ve shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened.”