**Matthew 6:13a** August 14, 2016

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*Matthew 6:13 “And lead us not into temptation.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**At Arm’s Length**

There is a saying, “It’s easier to ask for forgiveness than for permission.” I have heard it often enough to think it is the motto of non-commissioned officers. And there is reason. Orders issued in an office don’t always match the facts on the ground. So the NCO orders things done in a *way* his superior might not like, but it is the best way to get things. Having accomplished the goal, he will, if need be, offer the apology. It can happen in a McDonald’s drive-thru too. The employees are trained in the correct way of handling orders and food. But when a bus with 50 people pulls in, not all the normal procedures get followed. You really try to avoid tourists turning blue with anger. So you break the rules. You get the job done. And you accept the fact that you might get your fingers slapped. But you also know that the manager or the commanding officer is actually happy the job got done. “It is often easier to ask forgiveness than permission.”

**I. Forgiveness and Temptation: You’ve Got It Backwards.**

Which is why, I say, that this part of the Lord’s Prayer is all backwards.

First we should pray, ***“Lead us not into temptation”*** and *then* we should pray, *“Forgive us our debts.”* Doesn’t temptation comes before sin? “Lord, I’ll try to do it the right way, but when I just can’t manage, I’ll ask forgiveness. ‘It’s easier to ask for forgiveness than permission, right’?”

When Jesus teaches us to pray in a way that is not our first instinct, he is teaching us something. When Jesus tells us something counter-intuitive, we should sit up and take notice.

Jesus did not get things switched around here. And even though it seems natural to first be concerned about temptation and then *after that* about forgiveness, that is actually the wrong way about it.

Jesus teaches us to pray first for forgiveness because there is no time in our life when we can claim to not need forgiveness. That is a constant. Sin taints even the good and godly things we do. With the prophet Isaiah we concede, *“All our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”* (64:6). Just as a first-grader’s art project is a display of imperfections and a testimony of a lack of ability, so our deeds fall short of what is perfection. That child simply cannot do any better, nor can we. And like that child’s parent, our heavenly Father accepts his children’s service with mercy and grace at all times. While sinful, in Christ we also walk in God’s merciful, forgiving grace.

There was a popular song about four years ago with this line in it, “You forgave, I will not forget…” Isn’t that beautiful? If anyone ever asks you, “So what is it with you? Why do you act differently? Why can’t we ever tempt you to do certain stuff with us?” If they ever ask you that, this might be a good way to answer, “God forgave, I will not forget…”

God forgave us in Jesus Christ even before we were born, before we felt the temptations we feel every day. When we look at that great gift of forgiveness, we hate sin. We want to stay away from it, we want to dedicate our lives to our Savior, and so we pray, in this order, ***“Forgive us our debts… and lead us not into temptation.”*** God forgave and we will not forget. As counter-intuitive as it seems, the Christian prays about forgiveness and then temptation.

**II. The Reason for Avoiding Temptation**

Let me use an example here to illustrate what the Lord’s Prayer is teaching about us and temptation and sin. It is going to be a pretty drawn out example, so stay with me.

I am going to give you one situation, and four possible responses. The situation is that of a school-age boy coming home from school. Each response will tell you something about that child’s relationship with his mother.

Walking back from school one day, a boy is asked by his friends to play a game of tackle football, right there is the tall green grass. He has on a new pair of jeans. A few months ago he had worn a new pair of pants and did just that—he played tackle football in his new pants in the green grass. And did he ever catch it! Those brand new pants and huge dark green grass-stains. It was a lot of extra work for his mom. Eventually, after seeing how upset she was and how much work it cost her, he apologized. She cooled down and even read a book to him that night before bed.

All of that flashed in front of this boy’s eyes as his friends surround him asking, “Hey, you gonna play?” So what are the possibilities? Here are four that come to mind:

1) He could refuse to play because he is a afraid of making Mom angry.

2) Or he could refuse to play because he is concerned about saving Mom a lot of work.

3) Or he could refuse to play because on the way home there is a cute girl he is pretty sure will be sitting on her porch reading a book and he doesn’t want to look dumb, with big grass stains on his new jeans.

4) Or he could go ahead and play even though he knows it would cost his mother a lot of work, thinking “Who cares? She’ll clean it up. It sure is a whole lot easier to get forgiveness than permission.”

Four options: obey from fear, from concern, for a girl, or to say “Who cares?” Each course of action tells you about his relation with his mother?

Obviously, he has a bad relationship if his thought is, “Who cares what it costs Mom? I’ll play now and get forgiveness later.” A celebrity was recently heard to say, “It would be so easy to be a Christian. Do what you want, and then you go back to God and say, ‘Sorry’ and get forgiveness and you’re good to go again.” Like the boy who said, “Who cares?” this celebrity apparently has no understanding of what a meaningful, loving relationship is, nor of what Christianity is.

Or you could think of the boy who doesn’t play football because of a girl down the street. He will do what his Mom wants because it just so happens to be good for him. Again, this is a sign of a dysfunctional relationship. What his Mom wants, and how much trouble he will cause her has nothing to do with his decision to not play tackle football. He does the right thing for the wrong reasons. If our obedience to God is nothing more than the convenience that obeying God gets me what I want, then we haven’t really obeyed him, have we? So here we have two examples of a dysfunctional relationship: outright disobedienc or else obedience for selfish reasons.

You can think of a third example: the boy who doesn’t play football because he is afraid of his mother’s anger. At least this boy is concerned about his mother. I think this is better than the other two options. But it is still far short of the ideal. Sadly, many Christians do God’s will precisely for this reason. In the face of temptation, they have a fear of crossing God. Better not do that! God’s laws are laws, and God is the law enforcer. He can pull you over and give you a ticket, maybe even take away your license. Obedience from fear is still far short of the best answer.

But there was a fourth possible response of the boy to his friends’ “temptation.” He remembers what it cost his mother to get the last pair of pants clean, and he remembers how she forgave him, and he remembers how she read him a whole chapter out of his favorite book that evening, and he says, “No, guys, I can’t play right now.” And he walks off maybe just a little disappointed, but mostly happy because he knows he made the right choice. When he gets home and his mom asks him how his day was, he knows he did the right thing, for the right reason, even if she doesn’t know anything about it.

Mothers, which way would you want your child to answer that “temptation”? Fathers, which option would you want your child to do for your wife?

That is why Jesus taught us to pray, “Forgive us” and *then* he taught us to pray *“And lead us not into temptation.”* Because the Christian, does not look at obedience to God with fear for God, or a hope to get as much good out of God as he can, or seeing how much he can get away with. No, the Christian, first thinks of God’s great forgiveness and then he says, “Lord, thank you for forgiving me, and now, please keep temptation away from me. Help me to honor your gift of forgiveness. You forgave, do not let me forget.” So he prays to God: ***“Lead us not into temptation.”***

**III. So what are we praying for?**

So, does God lead us into temptation? The Bible boldly declares *“God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.”* God is not a questionable friend who sometimes leads us into behavior that can get us into trouble. Then why ask God to not do what he has said he won’t do, namely, tempt us to sin? Let’s think about the rest of the Lord’s Prayer. God has promised to take care of us. Then why ask for our daily bread? God has promised to grant growth to his kingdom on earth. Then why do we pray, “Thy kingdom come”? In this petition, we are doing what we do in all the petitions, we are calling on the promises of our faithful God. In addition to that, we are reminding ourselves of God’s promises and aligning our will with God’s.[[1]](#footnote-1) And so we pray, basically, for two things.

1) That God keeps temptation far from us.

There are many opportunities we have to stay completely off the playing field of sin. Remember the children’s sermon? We can learn about temptation even from a cookie jar. If your mother told you not to eat a cookie before supper, you can open the cookie jar, look in, sniff the aroma, even hold the cookie in your hand. In fact, why not even open your mouth and pretend you are about to eat it? But that would be sheer foolishness if you are really intent on obeying your mother. Wouldn’t it be better to not even look at the cookie jar? Recovering addicts know how important this is. One of the best ways to not fall into a bad behavior is to avoid situations that can lead to that bad behavior. Avoid temptation and you avoid much sin!

We do not do all the things that we can do, because we want to keep sin, and even temptation, at arm’s length. We ask God to strengthen our resolve to train ourselves to stay far from sin. We do have some control over our proximity to temptation. And that involves hard choices some times.

2) As long as we live in this world, we cannot completely avoid all temptation. So the second thing we pray is that God strengthens us to resist temptation and escape temptation’s trap.

When we pray, ***“Lead us not into temptation,”*** one of the main things we pray for is what God promises in 1 Corinthians 10:13: *“God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out.”*

When we hesitate from entering into sin, that is God answering our prayers and providing the way out. Seize that moment. When your friend suggests that “Maybe we shouldn’t do this,” that is God again keeping the trap of temptation from closing in on you. Listen. When your conscience plagues you that you should stop hiding your behaviors, that is God’s answer to your Lord’s Prayer. That is God leading you out of temptation.

Dear fellow Christian. In the joy of forgiveness, may God strengthen you to joyfully stay far from all the temptations our heavenly Father wants to protect us from. ***“Lead us not into temptation.”*** Amen.

1. Fredrich, J. *The Lord’s Prayer: Exegesis of Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4*, 23-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)