

Prayer and Temptation: God's Providence (Mat. 6.13)

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Introduction

We will have three messages on the sixth petition (Mat. 6.13): 1) Prayer and Temptation: God's Providence, 2) Prayer and Temptation: Our Weakness, and 3) Prayer and Temptation: a Diligent Use of Means. Keep this in mind if today's message seems somewhat incomplete. It will be a unit in itself but today's message is a first step in wrestling with the sixth and probably the most difficult petition to understand. Overall, as you can plainly see from the outline of messages, we are now taking up the large theme of prayer and temptation. Just putting these two things together (prayer . temptation) in a conjunctive way brings up some challenging thoughts. Thus, it seems best to cover this big topic in three smaller stages.

Let me begin with two introductory comments.

First, this petition helps bring clarity to our thoughts about prayer and temptation. It answers the question, "How do we orient ourselves prayerfully to the fact of temptation?" Another way to state the question is this, "How do we deal with the problem of temptation from the posture of prayer?" Answering these questions is very helpful to the Christian walk.

Second, coming at the subject in this way should show us that we do not have instruction on what to do when tempted; that is, on various steps to take in order to escape temptation. What we have here is instruction on how to organize our perspectives and our goals in relation to temptation. Furthermore, to say this in another way, the concern here is not so much what to *do* in the hour of temptation but what to *do* before the hour of temptation. Remember that Joseph in the crisis of temptation did not have time to pray. This instruction is an earlier step before the crisis stage comes. It teaches us to pray *prior* to the dawning of temptation; it cultivates an entrenched posture against temptation in all of its phases.

Therefore, all that we learn about prayer from the sixth petition and how we enter into prayer accordingly are matters of great importance for the Christian life, for saved sinners living in a sinful world. Today then, our focus will be on God's all-embracing providence in the context of prayer and temptation. For an outline, we have two questions: does God lead into temptation, and what does this mean?

1A. Does God lead us into temptation?

Let us immediately state the difficult teaching directly: sometimes God does lead us into temptation. That is, He does lead us into and through temptation. The pathway of our journey as His people may have valleys of perplexing temptation, some very deep, as well as mountaintops of exuberant joy. These valleys and mountaintops come from the hand of our heavenly Father. Thus, the fact of temptation, like all other facts, is within the providence of God; temptation, like all other events, occurs under the watchful and controlling eye of God. (cf. Hymn 94, "Whatever my God ordains is right").

Some expositors want to soften the impact of these words in Matthew 6.13. They suggest that this is figurative language for the exact opposite point: the idea is not that God may lead us into temptation but that He may lead us away from it. However, does this reading do justice to the contrast in the verse? Does it reduce the first half of the verse to the second half? It virtually says that "lead not into temptation" means nothing more and implies nothing more than "deliver us from temptation." That reading may be plausible and we would go there if the difficulty were insurmountable but the difficulty of God leading into temptation is actually part of the doctrine of God's loving control of all things in the perfection of His providence. In other words, this is not a new or more difficult problem and therefore we do not need to reduce and assimilate the meaning of 13a to 13b.

The idea is something to this effect: "Lord, do not lead us into temptation without equipping us and in that way delivering us from it." Similarly, "Lord, do not lead us into temptation but if you do, as we recognize you may, grant us deliverance from evil." Temptation is something that we face in the course of our lives but we may avoid some types of temptation when we are weak and other kinds when we are strong. We may have to face some types of temptation when we are weak and unable to endure. That is why we may voice the prayer in this way: Do not lead us into temptation unprepared and unable to escape but deliver us by bringing us into temptation prepared and able to deal with it and to escape from its clutches. This topic is complicated and hardly simplistic.

A parallel may be in Jesus prayer: do not take them out of the world but deliver them from the evil one. Do not take them out of tribulation (trial, temptation) but bring them into it and safely through it. We need to take it to mean that there are temptations that we may avoid as well as others that we may face. By this petition on one hand we seek to avoid temptation and on the other hand we seek the strength of the Lord to face temptation when the Lord so leads.

Calvin says the following about the sixth petition:

[God's character does] not prevent God, when it seems good to him, from turning us over to Satan, from casting us into a reprobate mind and foul desires, and from leading us into temptations, by a just but often secret judgment. For the cause has often been hidden from men, when it is certain with him (*Institutes* 3.20.46, par.7).

...we do not here [per the 6th petition] ask that we feel no temptations at all (*Ibid.* 3.20.46, par. 3).

Calvin is quite plain and bold with these words and it may be helpful to take him to be referring by the word "us" to both believers and unbelievers. In the unfolding of human affairs, God's holiness does not prevent Him from "leading us into temptations" and this leading is "by a just but often secret judgment."

Consider the case of David in the OT (2 Sam. 11-12.25). He is an example of a saint who faced temptation and facing it, who fell into grave sin (adultery and murder) that led to the deeply painful consequence of the death of his child. To answer the question of divine leading, we should refer to the providence of God. Then we will ask these revealing questions: At what point in David's life was God not in control? Was God in control of all things (cf. Eph. 1.11) when David lusted...when he committed adultery...when he committed murder? God was in control at every point. Nonetheless, He did not intend that David sin, but God did lead him into the assault, defeat, entrapment, and complicated consequences *for a season* (cf. the Westminster Confession of Faith, **Nevertheless, they [saints] may...fall into grievous sins; and, for a time, continue therein.17.3**). In other words, God so ordered things that David faced temptation, sinned, and fell into a

temporary enslavement. We cannot understand all that is going on in the life of David but God knows His own as He works out His purposes for them. As Calvin put it, these things unfold by a secret judgment that is certain to God.

Unmistakably therefore, the sixth petition of the Lord's family prayer challenges us against being presumptuous and it restrains us from skating along unconcerned about temptation and the sin to which it may lead us.

In the very language of prayer (lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil), a view of God emerges. He is our Father and helper. We look to Him for help with confidence. He is holy as suggested by the fact that we look to Him to help us deal with temptation and sin. However, the wording of the sixth petition penetrates deeply into the ongoing reality of temptation and sin. In a profound way, God's leading and guiding His people in the context of His rule of all human affairs may include leading into temptation. In other words, in perfect wisdom, knowledge, holiness, and justice the Lord may lead us into temptation *and pondering that fact can only cause us to do one thing: pray as God tells us to pray, that He not lead us into temptation* Thus, there is a fact here we must recognize (God's good providence includes the reality that He may lead us into temptation) and there is a duty here we must take up (seek God's face and petition Him to not lead us into temptation but to deliver us from evil).

Thus, one of the ways that God has ordained for us to avoid temptation and to have great strength in the face of temptation is that we pray, that we ask Him to not lead us into temptation but if He does so lead us that He deliver us from evil. This fact can only do one thing: cause us to pray when we consider the reality of trials, tribulations, and temptations that occur in the Christian pilgrimage under the controlling providence of God. Concisely ("in a nutshell"), the conjunction of prayer and temptation makes us reflect on God's all-embracing providence, and this kind of reflection points us to prayer.

Does Jesus imply that God may lead us into temptation? We must say, yes, and this fact moves us to pray. Now consider the second major question: what does this mean?

2A. What does it mean to say, God may lead us into temptation?

We need to try to explain what this means and what it does not mean so that even if we do not understand it all fully we can absorb these things for our profit in a way that strengthens our prayer life.

1B. It is important that we indicate what leading into temptation *does not mean*. We should put some key passages on the table in this discussion.

1) James 1.13

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.

We have to say immediately that leading into temptation and tempting are distinct things. To lead into and through temptation is different from tempting. God is holy and He does not seek to generate sin by temptation. To understand this point, we have to keep firmly in our grasp the distinctive element in tempting: it is enticement to sin in order to ruin. A tempter intends to lure others into sin to bring about their ruin. God never does this. He never designs to lure us into sin to elicit sin from us and thereby ruin us. This is good to know. It comforting and encouraging.

It may help to use the distinction between trial and temptation. We might then say that God tries us and the devil tempts us. More fully, per our text, we may say that though God may lead us into trials, tribulations, and temptations, He never has the goal of luring us into sin and by that to harm us. The latter is the work of the evil one.

2) Matthew 4.1; Mark 1.12; Luke 4.1 respectively:

- **Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.**
- **The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.**
- **And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness**

If we note how these passages mutually inform each other, we get this emphasis: the Holy Spirit drove (Mark) Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted (Matthew); in other words, this is a classic example of divine leading into temptation (cf. "led" in Matthew and Luke). Clearly, however, God did not tempt Jesus for He was "tempted by the devil." In the temptation of Christ, we have the testing by God that is a tempting by Satan. God leads into temptation without tempting; the tempting is a work of the evil one.

2B. *What does it mean to say that God leads us into temptation?*

It means that God is advancing our good. It is part of the great doctrine of Romans 8.28. He has a good end in all the circumstances we face including temptation; profoundly, He has a good end even when we stumble and fall along the way. It may at times be a difficult journey but the direction is always forward and upward!

We have to weigh this fact carefully and prayerfully: God's leading into temptation may include the fact that we show ourselves in need of sanctifying grace. It may include the fact that we succumb to temptation and that we sin against the Lord. One lesson is that it shows us our need of sanctifying grace; it not only shows it to others who witness our failures and sins but the Lord intends it to teach us and in that way to sanctify us. Profoundly, our sins are stepping-stones in our growth in holiness! This is true without encouraging license or eliminating the fact that the consequences for our sins may be very severe.

The design is not to harm us by enticing us to sin. Instead, the design is to advance our good by proving us and in many "mysterious ways" to even use sin in our lives to move us forward in holiness. Here is how Calvin states this point:

...we do not here [per the 6th petition] ask that we feel no temptations at all, for we need, rather, to be aroused, pricked, and urged by them, lest, with too much inactivity, we grow sluggish..the Lord daily tests his elect [Gen. 22.1; Deut. 8.2; 13.3, Vg.], chastising them by disgrace, poverty, tribulation, and other sorts of affliction. But God tries in one way, Satan in another. Satan tempts that he may destroy, condemn, confound, cast down, but God, that by proving his own children he may make trial of their sincerity, and establish their strength by exercising it; that he may mortify, purify, and cauterize their flesh, which unless it were forced under this restraint would play the wonton and vaunt itself beyond measure. Besides Satan attacks those who are unarmed and unprepared that he may crush them unaware. God, along with the temptation, makes a way of escape, that his own may be able patiently to bear all that he imposes upon them [I Cor. 10:13; II Peter 2:9] (*Institutes* 3.20.46, par. 3).

Conclusion

This petition forces us to consider some weighty facts in the big picture.

- 1) It forces us to recognize that in His providence, God does not tempt but He may lead into temptation.
- 2) We learn that in His providence, God does not seek our ruin but He in fact, always, advances our good.

Both of these things put a fire under our feet to *drive us to pray in earnest* knowing that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is holy and His ways are past finding out (Rom. 11.33-36).

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" ³⁵ "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.