

The Lord's Prayer (7) - And lead us not into temptation

It has been said of the petition "And lead us not into temptation" that of all the statements which comprise the Lord's Prayer none has involved more argument or more explanation than this one. And the reason is this. Recognising the necessity of temptation if we are to overcome our inclinations to evil and be regenerated, why should we pray to avoid it? Why ask the Lord not to lead us into temptation when it is vital that we endure this kind of experience? And, even more importantly, why ask the Lord to do something which He would never do anyway? We pray "Lead us not into temptation", the implication being that there are times when He does. But He doesn't. Why then is this petition phrased as it is?

It would seem that this question has exercised the minds of people almost from the beginning. Biblical scholars and the early fathers of the Church seem to have pondered over it, some suggesting a possible defect of translation and urging a rewording of the petition so that it reads differently. We have been urged by commentators to think of the words in a certain way and to read into them a particular and less troublesome meaning than they have as they stand. And indeed in some cases the wording has been changed despite the fact they can only be correctly translated "And lead us not into temptation". The fact is nothing can change this. For this is what is said.

So then the problem is still with us. There is no legitimate 'get out', so to speak, by way of a different translation or a rewording of the statement. The Lord taught us to pray "And lead us not into temptation". And the question is, why? Why are we taught to pray, "And lead us not into temptation" as if God does so, when yet He doesn't?

It is important for us to understand that this petition of the Lord's Prayer contains what is called an "appearance of truth". The Lord spoke this petition according to the appearance of things, and in line with the understanding of people in His day. This is what is basically involved. The people who listened to the Lord when He was on earth thought of God as All powerful and as responsible for both good and evil. As they understood things, God undoubtedly led men into temptation, and to be taught to ask Him not to, will have suggested no problem for them at all. Whilst we may think they had a very limited idea of God, we must remember that for them, it was an entirely meaningful concept and they

were at the time unable to think of Him otherwise.

There are many "appearances" of truth throughout the Scriptures, such as where God is said to be angry. It is also said He punishes and destroys. Frequently in the Psalms, He is begged to return and asked not to withhold His mercies or to turn away His face from us. The real truth is that He does none of these things. He does not go away or withhold His mercies and He does not set in motion or contrive our temptations. But He has allowed Himself to be portrayed in these terms and to be seen in this light because this has best served the needs of people in those times. Apparent truth is not the real truth. It is a necessary adaptation of the truth to which at times the Lord has found it necessary to resort.

But not only have appearances of truth been both necessary and meaningful to people generally at different stages of the race's development. They are also both necessary and meaningful at different times to us also. There are, for example, times when we also feel the Lord has forsaken us and we beseech Him to return and not to hide His face from us. We pray with the Psalmist, "Why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble". (Psalm 10, 1) For at times it seems as if He does. The Lord Himself prayed, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" In fact He was never forsaken, but it appeared as if He had been. And so also with these words of the Lord's Prayer, "And lead us not into temptation". There are times when it seems as if the Lord leads us into temptation, and we ask Him not to. It is a prayer framed for our use according to the way things appear to us in certain circumstances. The Lord invites us to pray in this way because at the time we cannot see it any other way. 'From our point of view, and according to our limited vision (at the time) the form of the petition is the true one. It is adapted to our state. It is the form which the Divine love and mercy must take in coming down to our apprehension.' (Rev Chauncey Giles, "Perfect Prayer", Page 185)

It has been rightly said that "one of the essential characteristics of temptation is a feeling of despair, an impression that we have been abandoned by God, or that He is mistreating or punishing us". And though this is only an appearance, and the way it seems, nevertheless during the experience of temptation the appearance becomes very real to us. To all intents and purposes we feel as if God is the cause of our temptation, that in some way He is involved. We feel He has so ordered the circumstances of our life where temptation has come about, and He should have planned and arranged things otherwise.

And in this situation the prayer is an entirely meaningful one. We pray to the Lord "Lead us not into temptation" or, in other words, to control the circumstances of our life in such a way that in the future we shall not come into temptation and fall into sin.

All temptation arises from the activity of our lower nature which resists our obedience to the Lord's teaching and our loyalty to Divine truth. If we act rashly or speak unkindly, lose our tempers or whatever, this is how it has come about, that our lower natures and baser inclinations have got the better of us. However, when such things happen, seldom do we firstly turn our thoughts back on ourselves and lay the blame where it belongs. We tend to blame the circumstances, at least initially. 'If only the Lord had not let me get into that spot' we think to ourselves. 'If only He had not led me into temptation'.

The petition has not been badly translated or poorly phrased, and we are not required to read into it what is not there. As we saw earlier, people have tried to make it read other than what in fact it does do. But this is not necessary. We were taught to pray "And lead us not into temptation", for the Lord knows there are times when it seems as if He does. The prayer is adapted for our use according to the way things sometimes appear to us.

"Understanding often comes only through experience", and this is especially true with regard to temptations. If a person will only begin with the right will, a true desire to shun evils, looking to the Lord for help, they will place themselves in a state to receive help in both understanding and will. Gradually, through experience, they will learn the cause of sin is within themselves. Only then are they able to realise, not just intellectually, but from living experience, that neither the Lord nor circumstances are the cause of temptations. Only then can they know the Lord does not will that we face temptations, but simply tolerates their existence as a necessary discipline for our spiritual growth." (Rev William Woofenden, "The NewChurch Magazine", Oct-Dec 1971)

But this is something we grow to appreciate and understand. At first it seems otherwise. This is why we are taught to pray, because it is meaningful to us in the early stages, "And lead us not into temptation".

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