

**You Asked for It: *Lead Us Not into Temptation?* or, Why the
Lord's Prayer Sounds Different at Fairmount
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
21 August 2005
Text: Matthew 6:7-13 and Luke 11:1-4**

Lord, teach us to pray.

The request of Jesus' disciples expresses the universal human longing for connection with the Divine. *We were made for you, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you,* wrote St. Francis of Assisi. Prayer is the language of relationship between God and God's people, a conversation of praise and adoration, petition and intercession, which includes listening as well as speaking. Prayer helps us access the spiritual dimension of life, and heightens awareness of God even in the busiest of days.

The Bible speaks often of prayer, and includes many examples of prayers offered by kings and prophets, mothers and teenagers. Biblical people prayed spontaneously as well as recited ritual prayers, just as the church does today. The gospels make frequent mention of Jesus' praying, often going away by himself for a period of reflection and renewal. Both Matthew and Luke present what is now called "the Lord's Prayer" as imparted from the lips of Jesus himself; Matthew, in the body of core teachings known as "the Sermon on the Mount," and Luke as Jesus' response to the disciple's direct request: *Teach us to pray*. The biblical versions vary from each other slightly, and from the way we offer it significantly. As I read both, I invite us to listen anew for God's word to the church in these ancient words from the gospel according to Matthew in the 6th chapter and from the gospel according to Luke in the 11th chapter. [Matthew 6:7-13, Luke 11:1-4]

"Pastor, thank you for the most inspiring insight I've received in years!" the man coming through the greeting line at the end

of worship one Sunday pumped my hand enthusiastically. Assuming his praise was prompted by something he'd heard in the sermon, I modestly demurred: "No, thank you. I'm always grateful when someone lets me know they've found the preaching meaningful." "Huh?" the man looked puzzled. "Oh, no, not the sermon. I mean the way you all say the Lord's Prayer. I always heard it was *LEAD us not into temptation*, and thought that it meant God tempted us on purpose. But today I learned that it's really *LEAVE us not in temptation!* At last, the Lord's Prayer makes sense: God doesn't try to trip us up, or make it hard to be good. We're really praying for God not to make us face the temptations of life alone!"

And before I had opportunity to say another word, the visitor was out the door, with a smile on his face as wide as the Mississippi. Well okay. Every element of worship is important (not just the sermon!), after all. God uses far more than the theological brilliance and wordsmithing art of the preacher to proclaim truth and engender hope. Plus, I had to admit the man's observations were right on target. The traditional way of praying the Lord's Prayer does make it seem as if God might lead us down the path of temptation, and needs to be persuaded against it.

That troubling translation is what prompted today's sermon topic request. The questioner wondered about the accuracy of Fairmount's translation, but also its meaning. *What is being petitioned of God here? That God should somehow extricate us from making hard choices that we face? Or deliver us from the consequences of our sin?* *This part of the Lord's Prayer remains the most difficult one to understand.*

I'm betting that a good number of worshipers here today know the short answer to this member's query. In a sermon preached on November 16, 1976, then-pastor Hank Andersen recommended the change "to carry fresh and more accurate insights." His study had led him to conclude that the Greek verb translated "lead" is more accurately rendered "allow" or

“leave” which, he said, “puts the whole responsibility for sin where it belongs: upon the free unfettered will of us humans” and not upon God [from sermon archives 11.16.76].

But translating ancient texts is itself an inexact science. A church member, history professor, and student of classical languages challenges the Fairmount translation as weak and ineffective. The verb used here is better translated “bring into,” implying direct action, he explained. “The sentence structure here parallels the Greek translation of the Ten Commandments: *Do not commit murder* is similar in form to *Do not bring us into temptation*. It’s far more vigorous and forceful than the passive ‘Do not leave us in temptation.’” Most of us—myself included—do not feel qualified to make a judgment about such nuance in ancient languages. Yet the preponderance of linguistic evidence leans toward the traditional wording, used in every other Christian church. If we accept that perspective, however, we’re back to the question of intent. Does God, in fact, tempt human beings to sin?

Seeking the most accurate translation of the original text is an important principle of biblical interpretation, but it is only one of several. Another is to “let Scripture interpret Scripture,” which means that biblical truth cannot contradict itself on essential matters of faith. So, for example, Paul’s admonition that women should keep silent in church eventually had to yield to the more inclusive statement (interestingly also attributed to the apostle) that in Christ there is neither male nor female, for we are all one (Galatians 3:22). In the question at hand we look at other texts to see how the matter of temptation is treated. We find the most direct refutation of divine temptation in the letter of James: *Blessed is anyone who endures temptation....[but] no one, when tempted, should say, ‘I am being tempted by God; for God tempts no one. . . . One is tempted by one’s own desire...[James 1:12-14]* Jesus’ own time of temptation in the wilderness is clearly attributed to Satan, not God. I suspect that’s why we have persisted in using an unorthodox translation of this Lord’s Prayer petition. It fits

better with our understanding of Scripture's overall view of temptation. As Presbyterians we don't interpret the Bible literally word-for-word, but instead seek God's Word among the human, culturally-bounded words. "Leave us not in temptation" seems to reflect more accurately the theological conviction that God is not the author of human temptation. Life presents us with moral choices and we pray for God's help to make the right ones. Don't leave us to our own devices, O God! Come and guide us toward the good.

Maybe the problem is not so much on the "lead/leave" translation question, as it is on the meaning of "temptation." My own research for this sermon led me to claims that the Aramaic phrase refers more to "testing" than "tempting" with its connotation that humans have an inclination to choose wrongly. This perspective suggests that God tests us as a way of helping us clarify our identity and purpose. What are you made of? How strong is your faith when confronted by complex choices, tragic conditions, or morally ambiguous options? Just as gold is refined by being subjected to high heat, so may our faith be strengthened through trial. The Lord's Prayer petition then becomes a plea that we not fail the test. We pray for God's mercy to save us from the courtroom in which we will undoubtedly be found guilty. We pray for God's mercy to deliver us from the threat of evil. Note that this isn't a cry to get us out of the messes we create by our bad choices. It is instead an acknowledgement of the reality of evil and the depth to which we are vulnerable to it. In the end, only God's grace will bring us through trials and lead us safely home.

So why fool around with the wording of the Lord's Prayer? In a world of shifting sand, why change one more thing, and this a tradition that has stood for 29 years? I've thought long and hard about that one, friends, and ask you to consider this: language matters. Words not only reflect reality, they actually create it. Our language about God, of course, always falls short: the finite and fallible cannot "create" the infinite and infallible, the Holy One who is ruler of heaven and earth. But

what we put into words about our relationship with God is significant. What we ask of God says something about what God asks of us. This prayer, attributed to Jesus himself, is both a simple and profound description of the purpose of human life, to glorify God and work to bring God's kingdom here on earth. It is so foundational to faith that we pray it every week. We teach it to our children so that they may know it by heart. By heart! So that it's imprinted upon them deeply enough to be a light to their path, a lamp to their feet.and ours, too.

The Lord's Prayer is a teaching tool, but more than that, it provides a common tongue amid diverse voices in the Christian world. Churches of every denomination and stripe, Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Orthodox, from every nation on earth—all pray this prayer. In a time when the church is fractured and diminished, to pray in a single voice for God's Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, could be a powerful unifier.

An international, ecumenical group was formed over 20 years ago to develop common wording for the Lord's Prayer to be shared throughout the Christian Church. Their version is gaining traction with its use of "sin" rather than "debts" or "trespasses," and this phrase: *Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.* I believe it is time for us to join together with this broader body in praying the Lord's Prayer, not "the Fairmount version" of it which sets us apart. I'll ask the Worship Council to recommend this ecumenical version to the Session for use in worship.

A few years ago, the Presbyterian Church (USA) developed a teaching document for children set up in a catechism style, with 60 questions and answers. The final section discusses each of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, ending with question 60 which is "Why does our prayer end with "Amen"? The answer seems especially appropriate today: "Amen" means "so be it" or "let it be so." It expresses our complete confidence in

God, who makes no promise that not be kept and whose love endures forever. Amen and Amen.