

## PASSING THE TEST

Scriptures: Matthew 26:36-42, James 1:12-15

This story was passed on to me last week, just in time for this sermon. A minister parked his car in a no-parking zone because he was short of time and couldn't find a space with a meter. He put a note under the windshield wiper that said, "I have circled the block 10 times. If I don't park here, I will miss my appointment. Forgive us our trespasses." When he returned, he found a ticket on his windshield with a note that said, "I've circled this block for 10 years. If I don't give you a ticket, I will lose my job. Lead us not into temptation."

It is significant how the Lord's Prayer moves from forgiveness to temptation. Forgiveness is not a free pass to sin. Jesus did not give his life for us on a cross so we could fall back into the same mistakes, the same dysfunction, the same conflict-ridden lives we had before. It is not enough to be forgiven, we also need to be saved from temptation and delivered from evil.

But what exactly does that mean? On the back of the bulletin I have listed 9 verses in the New Testament that use the Greek word *peirasmos*, the word in the Lord's Prayer that is usually translated "temptation." The problem is that *peirasmos* actually has two meanings. It can mean "temptation" in the normal sense: something that entices you to sin, but it can also mean something more like a "trial" or a "test," as in something that tests your patience or endurance.

Look at I Timothy 6:9, the sixth verse down on the page. It says, "But those who want to be rich fall into *peirasmos* and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." In that verse *peirasmos* clearly means temptation in the way that we normally think of it. Greed—wanting to be rich—can set you up for temptation. It can make you desire things and do things that will lead to your destruction.

Now look at Luke 4:13, the third verse on the page. It says, "When the devil had finished every *peirasmos*, he departed from him [Jesus] until an opportune time." This verse comes at the end of what we call the temptations of Jesus. Three times the devil tempts Jesus to do something wrong. That is what we normally think of as a temptation, an enticement to sin.

But now look at James 1:2-3, the third citation from the bottom. It says, "My brothers and sisters, when you face *peirasmos* of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance." In this case *peirasmos* cannot mean temptation in the ordinary sense. No one should rejoice when they are tempted to do something wrong. In this case *peirasmos* means some kind of test that comes into your life because you are trying to do what is right. Sometimes following Jesus makes your life harder than it was before. It forces you to deal with situations and people you might rather have avoided. Those are not temptations; they are more like a "trials"—things that tests your patience and endurance. They are a sign that God is doing something good in your life. That is why you can rejoice over them. They are a sign that God is working in your life to make you more patient, more compassionate, more committed to the messy business of loving people.

Look at the next one: James 1:12. It says, “Blessed is anyone who endures *peirasmos*. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promise to those who love him.” A temptation is not something you endure; it is something you should avoid. A trial or test is something you endure. In this verse also, *peirasmos* is better understood as a trial or test of your faith.

Okay, so what does Jesus mean in the Lord’s Prayer when he says, “Lead us not into *peirasmos*”? Is he talking about temptations that entice us to sin? Or does he mean trials that may come into our lives because we are trying not to sin?

The answer is both. Jesus certainly wants us to be saved from temptation. Jesus does not want us succumbing to greed, lust, vengeance, power, addictions or anything else that could separate us from him. But he also knows that following him could get us into trouble, and he wants us to pray for God’s help in those situations as well.

Look at the second reference on the page: Matthew 26:41. Right after their last supper, Jesus and his disciples go out to a place called Gethsemane. Jesus knows he is about to be arrested and executed. Matthew tells us that he is grieved and agitated. Jesus is a real human being. He is sad and anxious. At that point he tells his disciples, “Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of *peirasmos*.”

The disciples do not realize it, but Jesus is moments away from being arrested. In less than 24 hours his lifeless body will be hanging from a Roman cross. The disciples’ whole world is about to crash in on them, and they don’t know it. But Jesus knows it, so Jesus tells them to pray that they may not come into *peirasmos*. Basically, it is the same thing he taught them to pray in the Lord’s Prayer: “Lead us not into *peirasmos*.” When the time of testing comes, we need God’s help, either to spare us from the trial or to help us get through it.

That is basically what Jesus prays for himself in Gethsemane. He goes off by himself and prays, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” He is praying, “Father, lead me not into *peirasmos*. Do not bring me into this time of trial.” But then he prays, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” In this prayer Jesus combines both parts of the Lord’s Prayer that we are studying today. He prays, “Let this cup pass from me.” Do not bring me into this time of trial. But then he prays, “Your will be done.” Deliver me from evil.

Just to prove I am not making all this up, look at the translation of the Lord’s Prayer in our pew Bible. Turn to Matthew 6:13 (NT, p. 6), and look at how the New Revised Standard Version translates this part of the Lord’s Prayer. It says, “And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.” When Jesus teaches us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation,” he is not talking only about temptations to do wrong. He is talking about the trials that may come to us for trying to do what is right.

Let me illustrate with a story told by Caroline Kurtz, a former Presbyterian mission worker to Ethiopia. In 1998 a small group of Christians, mostly government workers, began meeting for worship and prayer in the town of Ameya, Ethiopia. Within a year 31 Christians were meeting regularly for worship in a rented room of an old mud-walled bar in the middle of

town. All was quiet until the Christians tried to buy a small piece of land on which to build a church. The son of a Kalicha, a kind of tribal medicine man, organized a protest. For four days all the businesses in town were shut down: no market, no school, and no clinic.

This was a good indication of the power the Kalicha held over the town. The Kalicha prohibited the people from riding mules or planting trees, and they took a huge share of the people's crops, in exchange for which they guaranteed protection from evil spirits. It was a kind of spiritual protection racket, which apparently included hiring thugs to murder people, if the spirits did not do their job.

Once when a Kalicha discovered that one of his subjects had become a Christian, he put a curse on the person. He predicted that the cursed individual would die before the end of the month. Fearful for his safety, the Christian congregation prayed for him every day. At the end of the month when he had not died, the Kalicha gave him one more week. At the end of that week, the Christian was still alive, but the Kalicha died, unexpectedly of natural causes.

Suddenly people of the village began planting trees and riding mules. The son of the Kalicha, who confessed to hiring assassins to kill the Christian leaders, became a Christian himself, a kind of Ethiopian apostle Paul. Today he travels all over Ethiopia starting churches, with support from American Presbyterians. The Christian churches in Ameya, Ethiopia, and neighboring towns now have over 10,000 members (*Global Prayer Digest*, a publication of Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship, April 2002).

In Ameya, Ethiopia, they know what it means to pray, "Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil." And when we pray the Lord's Prayer we are joining them, and Christians like them, all over the world, asking God's help to pass the test.

-Ken Onstot  
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