

Temptation vs. Trials. Understanding the 6th Petition of the Lord's Prayer

- ⁹ Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
¹⁰ Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread,
¹² and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
(Mat 6:9-13 ESV)

Today's question comes from a dear member, and he asks:

The ELCS revised the 6th petition of the Lord's prayer from "and lead us not into temptation" to "save us from the time of trial." This change seems very comforting to me since the words we say so frequently do not sound like they can mean what they sound like. Is the change helpful or scandalous? Please comment considering James 1:13,14 and 1 Corinthians 10:13.

Struggling with Matthew 6:13 isn't so scandalous. It's been a long time struggle for many a biblical scholar. How do we best translate the Greek **πειρασμός** (pi-ras'-mos)? Do we translate it as temptation or trial.

Let's go at it this way. I think for many of us, at first glance the Sixth Petition is kind of unsettling. If we're asking God to lead us not into temptation, are we admitting that God would deliberately tempt the disciples of Jesus into sinning? That answer is a big fat NO!

That's where James 1:13 comes into play: 'Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and **he himself [God] tempts no one**' (emphasis added).

The possibility that someone would think that God could lead us into temptation may "tempt" us to want to gloss over this petition. Or maybe ignore it all together.

In fact, Martin Luther kind of does this in the catechism as he answers the question we're to ask about the 6th petition: "What does it mean?" Luther quickly moves from citing James 1:13 and goes on to say really what the next petition means.

Here's what Luther said:

God, indeed, tempts no one; but we pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us, nor seduce us into misbelief, despair, and other great shame and vice; and though we be assailed by them, that still we may finally overcome and gain the victory.

Luther's explanation does sound much more like it fits with "but deliver us from evil." So in light of "deliver us from", it would almost make sense to translate "lead us not" as

“save us from.” “Lead us not” is a specific Greek phrase that does not imply “saving.” When we make these changes, we’re diminishing the force of what Jesus is saying.

When Matthew chooses to use the Greek noun **πειρασμός** (pi-ras'-mos), or temptation/trial, and its related verb **πειράζω** (pi-rad'-zo), to tempt/ to try, they always have negative overtones wherever he has used these words. In fact, the only other time the noun is used by Matthew is when Jesus and the disciples were on the Mount of Olives before He was arrested. Jesus said, “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mat 26:41 ESV).

For Matthew and Luke these words were understood as temptation or tempting when they recounted the devil (tempter) tempting Jesus. Paul in 1 Corinthians also negates the Greek noun to be translated as temptation, as well as James (see the two references mentioned in the question). Although James does use (pi-ras'-mos) as trial, but it isn’t negated in chapter 1:2.

As stated earlier, Luther quickly moves into using similar phraseology as he uses in describing the 7th petition.

But deliver us from evil.

What does this mean?--Answer.

We pray in this petition, as in a summary, that our Father in heaven would deliver us from all manner of evil, of body and soul, property and honor, and at last, when our last hour shall come, grant us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this vale of tears to Himself into heaven.

Doesn’t it look like Luther blurring the line between the two petitions? Maybe we should be reading the Sixth and Seventh petitions as one!

Scripture already tells us that God doesn’t tempt us. But the devil does. And so when we pray that God lead us not into temptation, we also pray that He would deliver (or save) us from the evil one, the devil.

I’d also like to point out that the coordinating conjunction “but” joins the two phrases together as one petition. We’re asking God not to do something **but** rather do something else.

This fits with beautiful Hebrew poetry that Jesus as a Rabbi and any Jewish person at this day would have been familiar with. It’s the idea that there is a negative action followed by a positive action. The negative action or phrase takes a subordinate position to the positive action or phrase. Let’s compare Matthew 6:13 to Psalm 51:11-12

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. (Mat 6:13 ESV)

Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. (Psa 51:11-12 ESV)

Both passages start with a negation with the phrases of “lead us not into temptation,” “cast me not away from your presence,” and “take not your Holy Spirit from me.” All three phrases would lead us to say, “God could tempt us, cast us away, or take his Spirit away from us.” Is that how God operates?

No! God operates according to His Gospel. David already acknowledges that God won't cast him away or take the Spirit away, in spite of his sin with Bathsheba. Because God doesn't do that.

It's a given that God works according to what is good, the Gospel found in the life, work, death and resurrection of Jesus. Any penitent sinner, any disciple of Jesus, God is going to restore and uphold. The negated phrases become subordinate to the positive phrases. The negated phrase only serves to highlight the positive phrase. We know God doesn't act that way to us because Jesus has made us his disciples. So when we pray, “Lead us not into temptation,” we are already confessing that he won't because he already works through the Gospel of “delivering us from evil.”

Understanding how Jesus uses Hebrew poetry here allows for Matthew 6:13 as very comforting as it has been historically understood.