

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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8/18/24

Sermon Title: Pray That You May Not Enter Into Temptation

Sermon Text: Matthew 26:36-46

Matt. 26:36 ¶ Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.”

Matt. 26:37 And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled.

Matt. 26:38 Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.”

Matt. 26:39 And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”

Matt. 26:40 And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour?”

Matt. 26:41 Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Matt. 26:42 Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”

Matt. 26:43 And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy.

Matt. 26:44 So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again.

Matt. 26:45 Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.

Matt. 26:46 Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.”

Main Point: God has given prayer as a means to battle the entrance of temptation into our own heart, mind, and will.

Outline:

1. The Command Not to Enter Into Temptation
2. The Command to Pray

Introduction

What a moment we have here before us in this reading. This is one of those passages where as a pastor at first you just think, “Oh my. This sermon will be the easiest I’ve ever preached. There’s so much here.” But that’s also the problem: there is actually so much amazing material here. I started taking notes before I even wrote a word of the sermon, and I had three pages of just rich, deep observations that I wanted to get to, and that I knew I wouldn’t get to.

But what you have here is not only the fear and sorrow of Jesus, but you have the weak and tired disciples. You have the prayer that Jesus prays and his submission to the Father’s will. You have his specific instructions about prayer to the disciples.

There are a thousand beautiful things for us to fixate on. And as I worked on this, I knew it couldn’t be just one sermon. Because look: there are at least two sermons here.

And so next week I want us to look at the prayer of Jesus here as he goes off to pray on his own privately. That’s next week.

But this week, I want us to dwell on the command of Jesus to his disciples here. Because while Jesus is experiencing this struggle in prayer, and in pouring his heart

out to the Father, the disciples are having a struggle of their own that Jesus speaks into, and seeks to help equip them to fight.

And let me just say, it's a struggle that each and every one of us can relate to: the fight against indwelling sin. The fight against the flesh. The daily battle that every single one of us who is a disciple of Jesus understands well.

And so while the struggle of Jesus and the struggle of the disciples are happening around the same time here in this text, I think it will be helpful for us to separate Jesus' struggle from the disciples' struggle.

So this week, Jesus says, "Pray." And he says specifically what to pray for. In particular, let's ask this question: "What does it mean not to enter into temptation?" And then secondly we'll look at the command to pray and see how it relates to that first question.

1. The Command Not to Enter Into Temptation

First, we have the command not to enter into temptation.

Jesus speaks to these men in verse 36, and all he does is ask them to "sit here while I go over there and pray."

Several of the Early church fathers point out something practical from that verse: sometimes it is advisable to set aside a particular place to pray. That's what Jesus does here: he creates physical distance from these other men so that he can do that.

Sometimes this just isn't possible. John Wesley's mother, Susanna Wesley, who at one point had 11 children (at least of those who survived childbirth) was said to have pulled her long apron over her head so that she could have a time of prayer away from her many many children, and the children knew in that moment they weren't to disturb their mother who was in prayer. Sometimes it is nearly impossible to get time alone to pray, but that should not stop us. And Jesus does that here. He's with these eleven men, but he removes himself to pray.

He merely asks the disciples to “sit here.” He returns to them time and again, finding them asleep. He didn’t ask them to sleep. He asked them to keep watch. To be up with him. To support him in his hardest moment so far in his life. Here he is heartbroken, and all he wants is for them to be with him.

When Jesus speaks in verse 40 he says, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.”

Now, we’ll talk about his call to pray here in a moment. But just think about what Jesus says even the goal of this prayer he’s commanding is. It’s this statement: “that you may not enter into temptation.” This is what he wants for them: that they may not enter into temptation. This is his goal for them here.

Here he is, he knows Judas is coming. He knows the betrayal is coming. And his concern is for them above all else. Their souls. Their hearts. He is afraid that they will “enter into temptation.”

So let’s think in this first point about what Jesus wants for them. Let’s get fundamental: what is a temptation?

The Puritan writer *John Owen* says that a temptation is anything that has the force to seduce or draw the mind and heart away from obedience to God even the slightest bit. Anything that exerts a pressure of some kind on you however slight it might be, to disobey God’s will: that is a temptation.

A temptation can really be any thing. If you have something in your life that is a temptation, then you have something around you that pulls you and draws you, and if the temptation were to succeed in any way, then you would at the very least waver in your obedience to him.

Now here is the important thing to know: it is not a sin to be tempted from outside of yourself – for someone or something to introduce to you the possibility of sinning. It’s not a sin that someone cuts you off in traffic, right? But it is a temptation. The same goes for if someone calls you an idiot, or if they tell you that your baby is ugly. It might be a sin for them, but it’s not necessarily a sin for you. But it is a temptation.

But what Owen says is that what Jesus prays for his disciples here is different. He is not telling them to pray that they would not be tempted. He says to pray that they would not “enter into temptation.”

So a temptation tries to woo you away from obeying God. But what does Jesus mean, then, when he speaks of “entering into temptation”? Well Owen insists that “entering into temptation” is not the same thing as simply being tempted. And this is a point St. Augustine makes as well: temptations are inevitable for anyone living in a fallen world. We know that Christ was tempted constantly – for example by Satan – and yet that he never sinned (Heb. 4:15). Something more is involved in “entering into” temptation than simply being tempted. Here is John Owen:

“It is, as the apostle expresses it, “to fall into temptation” (1 Tim. 6:9), as a man falls into a pit or deep place where [there] are snares, wherewith he is entangled; the man is not presently killed and destroyed, but he is entangled and detained—he knows not how to get free or be at liberty... *When we suffer a temptation to enter into us, then we “enter into temptation.”* While it knocks at the door we are at liberty; but when any temptation comes in and parleys with the heart, reasons with the mind, entices and allures the affections, be it a long or a short time...we “enter into temptation.”

Owen here says that **the moment we allow the temptation to “enter into us,” that is when we “enter into it.”**

So the prayer is not that we would find a way to avoid being tempted, necessarily, but that when temptation comes our way, we would reject it, that we wouldn’t open the door of our heart to it, that we would see it for what it is and call it what it is, and that we wouldn’t let our heart be inclined to it.

Now, this may be easier said than done, but it’s important that we see what Jesus is telling us to pray for here. Pray that when the opportunity comes, we would not let that temptation enter our heart – that it would not persuade us to let it in.

I don’t have time given our limitations here to give a full accounting of how John Owen answers this, but let me see if I can give you something. Let’s say you are tempted (which you will be). How are we respond?

Well, Owen answers that by drawing our attention to this passage. What does Jesus tell his disciples? He tells them to do two things: to watch, and to pray.

First, Jesus says to watch. That is to say, we should be on our guard. We should consider every way and means to be on the lookout for temptation, but also the vulnerabilities of our own heart. That's why Paul says in 1 Cor. 16:13, "Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong." Right? Paul says to be watchful. Be aware. Know your weaknesses. Be ready. Here is Owen again:

"A universal carefulness and diligence exercising itself in and by all ways and means prescribed by God, over our hearts and ways, the baits and methods of Satan, the occasions and advantages of sin in the world, that we be not entangled, is that which in this word ["watch"] is pressed on us."

And Owen draws our attention to the second thing that Jesus tells his disciples here: he doesn't just say to watch, he says to pray. If we only watch but don't pray, then we're like a guard with no signal. There's no one to talk to – there's no one to go to for a prayerless disciple.

To face that, Jesus says we will have to do more than watch: we'll have to pray.

2. The Command to Pray

That takes us to the second point today, which is the command itself to *actually* pray.

Look how integral prayer is to avoid entering into temptation: Yes, he wants them to not be led into temptation, but what is the means for not entering into it? It's not mere willpower. He doesn't say, "toughen up." He says to pray. It's prayer.

Jesus' plan for being led not into temptation was prayer. He was desperate that his disciples would pray that they not enter into temptation. He was insistent that they pray for the personal integrity of their own hearts. Why? Not because prayer is magical, but because the God our prayer addresses is... there. He cares for us, he loves us, he listens to us, and he answers us.

Jesus is instructing us here to pray, before the temptation even comes that we would not enter into it. But often temptation has us on our heels, and we need to know how to pray when temptation is in our face.

Thomas Boston was a great Puritan writer, whose notes on *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* are a theological masterpiece. If you can get your hands on *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* you will be very blessed by it. But Thomas Boston said there are three ways at least that the Christian ought to pray regarding temptation, depending on their situation:

First, Boston said, Christians should pray for deliverance *in* temptation, “That God would powerfully support and enable them to stand in the hour of temptation, that when they are engaged in the battle with Satan, the world, and the flesh, the Lord himself would come in for their rescue.”

Here he quotes from the Apostle Paul in 2 Cor. 12:8 where we learn that three times Paul pleaded with the Lord about the thorn in his flesh that it should leave him. Boston says, we should follow Paul’s lead here. When we are experiencing temptation, this is exactly the moment when we should be speaking and crying out to God: “Lord, lead me out of this temptation. Don’t let it enter me. Don’t let it enter my heart! Give me a greater love for you than for this sin!”

We should pray for deliverance *in* temptation.

Second, Boston said that at times Christians will enter into temptation. But in that case, they will need to pray for “deliverance under temptation.” He said, “Sometimes believers are trod under foot by their lusts and passions: they are lying in the mire, and cannot get out.” Here he quotes from David in Psalm 51 where David is in this position and he prays while under temptation, “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice.”

Boston says, many believers are in this place where they are sunk down in it. Then he says this: “But they look again towards the Lord, as Jonah out of the whale’s belly, that he would afford them his helping hand, and so sanctify their lot to them, as all may work for their good.” Is there sin in your life where you are really in the muck and mire of it, and you cannot get out?

Boston would say, the journey out of it begins thus: “Cry out like Jonah from the bottom of the ocean.”

We should pray for deliverance under temptation.

Third, Boston said that that often the only thing we can sometimes pray for is just that our sin would come to an end. He says, pray for “deliverance completely from all sin, and temptation to it... Thus the petitions of this prayer [to deliver us from evil] end with a longing cry for perfect freedom from sin in another world.” (Boston *Works*, 2:636-637).

I remember my father on his deathbed telling me that he couldn't wait to stop sinning; that it was his favorite thing that he looked forward to. If you have that yearning within your heart, Boston says, you should give voice to it in your prayers.

Now, we need to know our own hearts here. It's not like the road here is smooth for us. After all, the disciples heard all of this, and they still didn't pray. Right? And for us, we should know that there are things that can stymie our prayers.

Temptations that if we yield to them may stop us from praying. I want to mention three that we should be on the lookout for:

The first reason we should identify here is physical. In the disciples' case here, they are tired. What does Jesus say about their lack of staying awake and praying? It's very practical, actually. He says, “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” He knows they aren't praying because they keep falling asleep. The hour is late.

We are often prayerless because we actually aren't taking care of ourselves. Now, I should say that sometimes we are downcast or depressed because of spiritual issues. We need to consider all the possible reasons. But sometimes we are depressed, not necessarily because there is some deep spiritual issue, but because we haven't slept, because we have vitamin deficiencies (here in the Pacific Northwest, getting enough Vitamin D is a problem). But we may be downcast and prayerless because we haven't gotten any sunlight.

It may be because we aren't exercising.

I started dieting and lifting weights back in June because I was the heaviest I've ever been and I found myself sad, lacking in energy, and I saw that it would hurt me and our church if I didn't get myself on track. I now have more energy and feel better. I would really encourage something as simple as increasing your physical activity and eating food that will make you feel better. Or there could be a thousand other physical realities that are being neglected. In this case, these men are limited by their physical bodies. They can't pray more than their bodies will let them because the spirit may be willing, but the body ends up being the bottleneck.

Another thing that can stop us from praying is pride. We aren't willing to see our weakness, our dependence. But look here: even Jesus, who has a human soul, finds himself "sorrowful and troubled" and identifies his sorrow "even to death" as his motivation to pray.

We're often so proud that we think, "I don't need to pray. I need to act!" We talk ourselves out of praying because we think we might just be using prayer as a mask for inaction. And that can be true, right? How often do we try to find practical solutions instead of seeking the spiritual needs that our sorrow reflects? But we are mistaken if we think it's an either/or situation when we refuse to pray. It makes me angry when people mock Christians for saying they will pray because some horrible event has happened. They'll say "thoughts and prayers don't do anything. Stop praying, and do something!" Well that's a false choice, and we should make sure not to buy into that thinking. The choice is not between praying *or* doing. Jesus calls us to do both. But it is the prayer that makes the doing even possible in the first place. Why? Because it's God who enables us to do. But our pride can be one thing that stops us from praying.

Sometimes, our own beliefs in the sovereignty and power of God can hinder our prayers. We can talk ourselves out of prayer altogether because we'll say, "Look: the Lord knows what's going to happen already. Why even bother? Perhaps really prayer is more about me and changing me than it is in seeking God's help. Won't he help me anyway, whether I ask or not?"

Let me say two things to that:

First, notice that *Jesus* doesn't primarily think about prayer this way. Think about this: Jesus is not fatalistic in calling for the disciples to pray. In spite of the fact that Jesus knows they will all fall away (he just predicted it right before this) he *still* calls on them to pray that they won't fall away. He knows what is coming, but he still tells them to pray! We often give in to fatalistic thinking, and we don't even personally know what is coming. Jesus personally knows what is coming, and it *never* stops him from praying.

Second, Jesus shows that prayer is necessary because we are not powerful; we are dependent. We pray for what we depend on God for. We pray for what we cannot do apart from God, right? Prayer is more than just us talking to ourselves and trying to change our own mind or to make peace with the situation. We are not alone when we pray. We pray because God is really *there*; not because we just need to talk something out for ourselves.

Prayer is treated by Jesus as the *means* of avoiding being led "into" temptation. He believes that if they were to pray not to be led into temptation, then they wouldn't be.

St. Jerome, living in the 300s says something helpful here. "It is impossible for the human soul to avoid temptation. Hence we say in the Lord's Prayer, 'Lead us not into temptation,' which we are unable to withstand. We do not refuse to face temptation entirely but pray for the strength to bear up under it." Prayer, according to Jesus is one appointed means to not be *led* into temptation.

Conclusion

And so my prayer for you is also Jesus' prayer for you:

Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation. Temptation is powerful, especially if our hearts are ready to receive its lies.

Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation. Even Christ himself bathed his own ministry in prayer. Why do we think we could do with less prayer?

Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation. We can go to God with our needs, with our weaknesses, with our weariness even, and he will hear our prayers.

Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation.

Let's pray.