

5.5.24

Deliver Us from Evil Matthew 6.13a (KJV), James 1.12-16**Pastor Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

Have you ever been awakened in the middle of the night because your smoke detectors went off? One time, when that happened to us, Jill and I quickly got up and started walking around the house, checking smoke detectors and every room including the attic, basement, and garage to make sure everything was okay. There was no fire, most likely a spider got into one of the smoke detectors, but when you wake up from a sound sleep to the beeping of a smoke detector, you're alert very quickly because if there is a fire, time is critical. If you woke up and your house was on fire, what would you do? Hopefully, you have working smoke detectors that would alert you before the fire and smoke were too bad. You might call 911 after you get out of the house. You might grab your fire extinguisher if you could get to it and the fire wasn't too big and try to put the fire out. Sadly, our neighbor Vicki's home was significantly damaged by a fire six weeks ago, thankfully no one was home or hurt when it happened. One thing I'll bet none of us would do if we woke up and found our house was on fire would be to look for a book to read about the origin of fire. We wouldn't sit around discussing, *"What is the nature of fire, why does fire exist at all?"* If our house was on fire, we'd be foolish to take lots of time studying the origin of fire while the house burned down with us in it.

Often though, when it comes to the subject of evil, or the evil one, people want to know – where does evil come from? Who started it? Does evil or an evil one opposed to God exist? Do bad things happen because people choose to act selfishly, violently, or wickedly? Because I'm more of a practical Christian I don't focus as much on the origin of evil as I do on opposing it, or to stay with my image, I'd rather try to put the fire out first, before figuring out why it started. Whatever the source of evil or a particular evil act, evil, like fire, is real. The more relevant question is how do we respond to it? We prepare for a fire by having smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, a couple escape routes, and knowing to call 911. **Today's petition in the Lord's Prayer is teaching us we need to be just as prepared, if not more so, to respond to evil as Christ would, as we are to fight a fire.** The most familiar version of this part of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:13 says, *"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."* I confess,

I've always had trouble with that translation from the King James Version, but it's so deeply rooted for people older than I am, it's hard to get away from it. Compare that verse with **James 1:12-16**. ¹²*Blessed is anyone who **endures temptation**. Such a one **has stood the test** and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.* ¹³***No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.*** ¹⁴***But one is tempted by one's own desire**, being lured and enticed by it;* ¹⁵*then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.* ¹⁶*Do not be deceived, my beloved."*

If James is right, that "God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one," then it seems each time we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," we're praying that God won't do something God never does. On the surface that doesn't make sense. However, the Greek verb translated as "tempt" (peirazein) is often better translated as "**test**." In the New Testament, the word "tempt" frequently doesn't convey quite the same meaning as it commonly does today. Currently, the word "tempt" means something like, "*to seek to seduce into evil or sin*." While "test" implies "*to test one's strength, loyalty, and ability for service*." A good example of this is **Matthew 4:1 (NIV)**, "*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be **tempted** by the devil*." If we understood tempt here in the sense of "*to seek to seduce into evil or sin*" that would make the Spirit a partner in attempting to compel Jesus to sin. But if we understand this to be a test of Jesus' strength, faithfulness, and preparation for service it makes a lot more sense. When we read the word "tempt" in the New Testament, quite often we should think "test."

Tests, even if we don't think so when we've failed one, are not designed to make us fail, but to make us stronger. **The purpose of testing in life is not to cause us to sin or to give in to temptation, but to make us stronger.** If metal is to be used in some great engineering project, it's tested at stresses and strains beyond those which it's ever likely to bear. Without proper testing, buildings can or be deemed unsafe, or collapse leading to injuries and death and millions of dollars lost.

We see with people in the Bible and in our lives, God will often test us before God uses us greatly in service or leadership. God wants to know if we can stand up to the weight, pressure, or responsibility of a task without cracking and crumbling. **The purpose of any kind of test** – in school, in the military, at work, at the registry of motor vehicles, you name it – **is to help us get better by focusing on a specific area or subject.** Many of us have probably said at one time, *“I can’t stand tests.”* Honestly, how much do you think you would’ve learned if you were never tested? Do you think you would have learned, remembered, and retained more or less? Even in graduate school tests are given. It’s not assumed that students will study adequately on their own without testing. Without testing we learn and grow very little. **1 Corinthians 10:13** states, *“No **testing** has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be **tested** beyond your strength, but with the **testing** he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”*

The Letter of James begins by assuming that we’re all going to face trials and tests. Trials, like death, taxes, change, and Sagamore Bridge traffic are inevitable. The church may have tax exempt status, but no one has “trial exempt” status. The question is not whether we’ll face trials, we will, the question is not, *“Why me?”*, because trials come to all of us, the question is **“What will I do when I face a trial – what will my response, my attitude, my approach be?”** If our response is one of anger, avoidance, or alibis it’s likely that we won’t handle the trial well and the testing won’t lead us to growing in maturity and in our ability to deal with adversity or hardship.

While trials often come through no fault of our own, temptation can be trickier. **Temptation often comes from within.** That’s what **James 1:14** says, *“one is tempted by one’s own desire.”* If there’s nothing within us to which temptation could appeal, then it would be helpless to defeat us. Every person has their weaknesses. The point of vulnerability differs in all of us. What’s an almost irresistible temptation to one person leaves another completely indifferent. I don’t need to list areas of temptation because while a few are common to many people, each of us is unique. God warned Cain, the first child born in the Bible and symbolic of all humanity (**Genesis 4:7**), **“If you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”**

One key aspect to mastering sin and temptation is knowing where it's located because **sometimes temptation comes from within, and other times temptation comes from outside of us and we need to avoid it.**

In her novel about Maine, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Sara Orne Jewett describes the ascent of a woman writer on the pathway leading to the home of a retired sea captain named Elijah Tilley. "On the way the woman notes a number of wooden stakes randomly scattered about the property with no discernible order. Each is painted in white and trimmed in yellow, like the captain's house. Curious, she asks Captain Tilley what they mean. When he first plowed the ground, he says, his plow snagged on many large rocks just beneath the surface. So he set out the stakes where the rocks lay in order to avoid them in the future." Part of what God did with the Ten Commandments which the Lord's Prayer echoes as I said last week, is to point out, "*These are the trouble spots in life. Avoid these and you won't snag your plow.*" To resist temptation there are some places we simply should avoid because nothing good happens there and it can be harmful or destructive. Many of those places are on the Internet.

When we follow James's advice to face our trials **with joy**, the endurance and strength we gain enables us to mature and grow up, or as a grandparent may have told you once when you were going through something tough, "*It builds character.*" Gary Richmond in *A View from the Zoo* describes the birth of a giraffe: *The first thing to emerge are the baby giraffe's front hooves and head. A few minutes later the plucky newborn calf is hurled forth, falls ten feet, and lands on its back. Within a second, he rolls to an upright position with his legs tucked under its body. From this position he considers the world for the first time and shakes off the last vestiges of the birthing fluid from his eyes and ears.*

The mother giraffe lowers her head long enough to take a quick look. Then she positions herself directly over her calf. She waits for about a minute, and then she does the most unreasonable thing. She swings her long pendulous leg outward and kicks her baby, so that it is sent sprawling head over heels.

When it doesn't get up, the process is repeated over and over again. The struggle to rise is momentous. As the baby calf grows tired, the mother kicks it again to stimulate its efforts. Finally, the calf stands for the first time on its wobbly legs. Then the mother does the most remarkable thing. She kicks it off its feet again! Why? She wants it to remember how it got up. In the wild, baby giraffes must be able to get up as quickly as possible in order to stay with the herd, where there is safety. Lions, hyenas, leopards, and wild dogs all enjoy young giraffes, and they'd get it too, if the mother didn't teach her calf to get up quickly and get with it...

Richmond concludes, *"I've thought about the birth of the giraffe many times. I can see its parallel in my own life. **There have been many times when it seemed that I had just stood up after a trial, only to be knocked down again by the next. It was God helping me to remember how I got up, urging me always to walk with the Lord, under God's care.**"*

If we seek to avoid trials, we won't be successful, they'll come to us anyway, and we'll remain immature and repeat our mistakes if we don't face them with the intention to learn from them what we can. If we face trials with the wrong attitude, we won't gain the fruit of endurance, but instead we may see a growth in bitterness and hardness of heart. Portia Nelson wrote a piece titled: *"Autobiography in Five Short Chapters."* Chapter 1 I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in. I am lost...I am helpless. It isn't my fault. It takes forever to find a way out. Chapter 2 I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I **pretend** I don't see it. I fall in again. I can't believe I am in the same place, but it isn't my fault. It still takes a long time to get out. Chapter 3 I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see it is there. I still fall in...it's a habit. My eyes are open. I know where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately. Chapter 4 I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it. Chapter 5 I walk down another street.

We shouldn't blame God or the Adversary if we keep walking down the same street and falling into the same hole. We should look for another street. God may test us to make us stronger and fit for greater service. Our Adversary may tempt us to try to turn us to evil and to harmful behavior. When you don't feel like participating in worship,

Sunday School, or your small group or serving in ministry – think for a moment about who wants you to feel that way. Who wants you to give in and say, “I’m tired, discouraged, or frustrated.” Who wants you to become complacent, or lazy or to just drift away from participating in and supporting the community of faith – do you think that’s coming from God or the evil one?

On the other side, a study of church attendance and mortality revealed that people who attend church weekly live an average of seven years longer than people who never attend worship services. Researchers say some of the gap may be explained by church’s tendency to discourage unhealthy behaviors (assisting people in avoiding temptation, sin, and evil). And the social ties promoted by church attendance contribute to a network of people that monitor the health of members. God and the angels are pleased when we’re actively sharing in the life of the church and growing in our faith, and we are blessed. Every time an individual or family drifts into less involvement – Satan and his team rejoices. **To “ace” tests and stand firm against temptation requires being alert, disciplined, and taking up what Paul calls in Ephesians 6 “the whole armor of God.”**

All of us face trials, tests, and temptations in life, some of them come from within, some from without. Regardless of their origin, we all need to learn how to pray and live in such a way that we can resist temptation, learn from our tests and trials, and remain faithful even in the face of evil. I enjoy Gary Larson’s *Far Side* cartoons – a favorite of mine shows two pitchfork-wielding demons overseeing hordes of lost souls condemned to slave labor in some hellish mine. As they look down upon one man who is cheerfully whistling as he goes about his toil, one demon says to the other, “*You know, we’re just not getting through to that guy.*” Don’t let the evil one get through to you, don’t quit in your trials; and don’t give into temptation.

Blessing James 1:2-4, *“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Do you think you would have learned, remembered, and retained more or less if you were never tested? What do you think is the purpose of testing in life (such as in school, the military, at work) and in spiritual matters?
2. Currently, the word “tempt” means something like, *“to seek to seduce into evil or sin.”* Do you think it’s true that temptation can come from within or from without? How can we successfully defend ourselves against temptation? What works for you?
3. Read 1 Corinthians 10:13. Have you ever experienced what Paul writes about? Have you gone through a difficult test and seen God provide you a way out and a way forward through it?
4. The question is not whether we will face trials, we will; the question is not, *“Why me?”*, because trials come to all of us, the question is *“What will I do when I face a trial – what will my response, my attitude, my approach be?”* What do you do, or what can you do that’s helpful when going through a time of trial or testing?
5. Read Ephesians 6:10-18 and identify all the things that Paul says we’re to do so that we can “ace” tests and stand firm against temptation and evil.