

# Deliver Us from Evil

James 1:12-18

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First Central Congregational Church

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We are nearing the end of our autumn worship series on the Lord's Prayer. Today we come to the line "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

The earlier scripture reading from Habakkuk was a prophetic cry for deliverance. Our reading from the New Testament is a passage from the Letter of James about temptation. Hear now the word of the Lord.

James 1:12-18

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 God.

No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil and God tempts no one. But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. Do not be deceived, my beloved. Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Parent of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of God's own purpose she gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of her creatures.

For the Word of God in scripture,  
For the Word of God among us,  
For the Word of God within us,  
**Thanks be to God.**

Back in 2017 Pope Francis caused a kerfuffle in some quarters when he said that the wording of the Lord's Prayer should be altered.

[Lead us not into temptation] is not a good translation because it speaks of a God who induces temptation. I am the one who falls. It's not him pushing me into temptation to then see how I have fallen. A father doesn't do that; a father helps you to get up immediately. It's Satan who leads us into temptation – that's his department.

Pope Francis' point is a fair one. "Lead us not into temptation" does seem to imply that God tempts us. Do we really think that God could be leading us into wrongdoing? I would call that bad theology. One reason I think it is bad theology is because James rejects the idea in his letter we just read. James stresses that God doesn't tempt us; we are tempted by our own desires.

Various biblical scholars have noted that "lead us not into temptation" is the best translation of the actual Greek words of the Lord's Prayer as we find it in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Even if the theology makes us uncomfortable.

Earlier this year the Catholic bishops of Italy did change the Italian translation of the Lord's Prayer to read "do not let us fall into temptation." Other national bodies in the Roman Catholic Church are considering whether to make changes to the prayer.

Let's agree that when we pray the Lord's Prayer we aren't worried that God is going to compel our wrongdoing. What, then, is the general idea?

In this petition of the Lord's Prayer, we admit that we humans are weak, that we can and do fall to temptation and sin. And the prayer is asking for God's help to avoid this situation. In fact, we are asking God to go further and to deliver us from evil. We might summarize the petition this way: "God please help us to avoid the worst parts of ourselves and our fellow humans."

The second part of the petition—"Deliver us from evil"—has a couple of different shades of meaning. One is what I just mentioned—save us from the evils we are capable of ourselves.

"Deliver us from evil" also means something similar to the cry of the prophet Habakkuk—save us from the evil that others do to us. Or the evils run rampant in the world. The great Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote of Habakkuk that he was a "tormented man" "distressed at the fact that violence prevails" who was "agonized by the thought that God tolerates evil." In that context, the prayer is a plea for God to act decisively in response to evil.

What then is evil? Why do we do it? Why do we personally do bad things, and why do we humans do bad things to one another? And how do we fix it? How do we become better people? How does God deliver us? These questions take us beyond the particulars of the prayer into the wider field of moral development.

So this week I looked back at a delightful book I read last year entitled *Wickedness*. The book was written by the English philosopher Mary Midgley. Midgley died in October 2018 at the age of 99. In her obituary the Guardian described her as a "philosopher who brought a sharp critical intelligence and a gift for vivid metaphor to her writing on human behavior."

In *Wickedness* Midgley addresses the reality that "people often do treat each other abominably," and she wants to know how and why this happens. Wickedness appears to be a part of our human nature, but our human nature also contains many wonderful and good things. Why do we do the bad things, when we are capable of great things?

Midgley writes that we need to think of "wickedness not primarily as a positive, definite tendency like aggression. . . but rather as negative, as a general kind of failure to live as we are capable of living." Evil, she argues, arises from our failures to manifest our amazing positive capabilities as human beings.

How, then, are we to be delivered from evil? We must first learn not to deceive ourselves about our actual nature. We need to acknowledge our failures. She writes, "To deny one's shadow is to lose solidity, to become something of a phantom. Self-deception about it may increase our confidence, but it surely threatens our wholeness."

Even the author of James emphasizes this point. In verse 16 he writes, "Do not be deceived, my beloved." We Christians try to avoid self-deception by making confession of sins an important part of our spiritual practice and our worship life. Every week in our liturgy we draw attention to and acknowledge that we are weak, that we do bad things, that we are responsible for our actions. Rarely does the confession receive the emphasis in a worship service, but its presence helps us to avoid the self-deception that Midgely believes can get us into trouble.

Once we have avoided self-deception, the next step in avoiding evil is to better understand our motives. James emphasizes that we are tempted by our own desires, not by some outside force. What, then, are the desires that entice us to bad behavior? Other questions about our motives are also important. What are our hidden biases? How do anger, fear, and aggression lead us astray? What role does resentment play in our actions? Introspection and self-examination are critical.

In order to better understand our motives, Mary Midgely writes that we must strengthen our ability to think and reason well. For Midgely this is an important point. She stresses that our wickedness, our evil, is intelligible. And if intelligible, then we can work to address the problem. Evil is not some mysterious force that overpowers us.

Developing our moral judgement, according to Midgely, is a matter of developing our inner lives and creating "a map by which we can orient ourselves and plot our own course when we have to make decisions." Which means we need to have thought through various possibilities ahead of time. But even the best conceptual schemes encounter unexpected possibilities. We are fallible creatures.

For Midgely, what explains most of our inexcusable actions is negligence. She writes, "The general recipe for inexcusable acts is . . . a steady refusal to attend both to the consequences of one's actions and to the principles involved." To put it simply, we must learn to think well in order to avoid wickedness. She worried that technology has the tendency to keep us distracted from what we are doing, which over time will make us worse.

Overcoming self-deception, understanding our motives, and improving our thinking all lead to the next concern, which is handling our fear, anger, and aggression. Midgely writes that these are natural emotions that do function for good purposes. In fact, their function is to point out for us when something is wrong. These emotions themselves can alert us to the presence of evil.

But these emotions also have the tendency to lead us into wickedness. Later in the Letter of James, he writes, "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." If we are to be delivered from our evil, then we must learn how to effectively handle these emotions. James writes, "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." Endurance through trials makes us more resilient, more complete.

Mary Midgely also emphasizes that life is full of conflict, and that we must develop the skills to handle this. We must learn self-control and deliberation and the development of good habits.

Lest that moral project sound daunting, one thing I appreciate about Mary Midgely's analysis is her emphasis that the best way to avoid evil is to strengthen our good capacities. For wickedness seems to arise out of an emptiness in the individual. Individuals with rich and varied interests and full lives are not empty and, thus, evil doesn't really have much room to grow.

James seems to make a similar point—"Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Parent of lights." Earlier in the letter he wrote, "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously." The good gifts of God are abundant and freely given. Let us learn to enjoy the blessings of God, enjoy the good life we have. The focus on the good helps us to endure temptation and is one of the ways God delivers us from evil.

To review then: avoid self-deception, better understand your motives, improve your thinking, develop the skills to better handle your fear, anger, & aggression, and lead a rich, full life that focuses on your strengths. Do that, and you will be equipped to avoid temptation and will be less likely to contribute to the evils of the world.

When we pray this prayer, we are asking "God please help us to avoid the worst parts of ourselves and other humans." And God has promised to help us. The prayer is a starting point that should launch us down the path of developing moral character.

When we pray as Jesus taught us to pray, "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," let those words also be a commitment to do the good, joyful work of becoming our best selves.