

## Sermon Series: Praying Like Jesus

Deliver Us

Matthew 6:9-13

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And so, we come to the end of our sermon series on the Lord's Prayer and today Jesus teaches us to pray... "And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one." Faith in Christ is not some kind of talisman with which we ward off all of life's challenges and difficulties. It is not insurance against struggle, or suffering, or temptation, or evil, or hardship.

As Bishop Willimon thoughtfully reminds us, "The Christian life is no safe harbor, secure from storms and struggle. Those who are members of this promised Kingdom are, with Christ, at war with the powerful. We are those who pray to be saved, to be delivered... because when we pray to God to save us, we are not asking for some altered self-understanding, some new way of feeling about ourselves, something to put meaning and energy into our lives."<sup>1</sup>

Willimon asks, "How often have we heard salvation presented as some sort of helpful solution to everything that ails us? Are you lonely? Come to Jesus and get that fixed. Confused? Join the Church and find all the answers. Your career or finances not going like you had planned? Come and let God bless you. When the gospel is presented in this way, and too often it is, salvation is reduced to the solution for all our problems, the Bible becomes a recipe book for quick answers, and faith becomes the mechanism or the way to fix whatever ails us."<sup>(87)</sup> But Jesus seems to suggest that there is much more at stake.

Now it is true that God is concerned with our lives, but salvation in Christ, participation in this Kingdom for which Jesus teaches us to pray, is not about finding easy answers for all of life's problems. Salvation is not self-help. So in his book, *Lord, Teach Us*, Willimon says something really interesting and challenging, offering a corrective to the ways in which many of Jesus' followers have come to understand precisely what it is that he does for us and the life he calls us to. "In praying for deliverance from evil, and help in time of trial, we are reminded that salvation in Christ is an adventure, a journey, a larger drama. Praying our Lord's Prayer is not the solution to all of life's problems, rather it is the beginning of a whole set of problems we would have never had, had we not met Christ and joined up with his people. The forces of sin and evil do not relinquish their territory without a fight.

After all, they hung Jesus on a cross. And in being saved, God's newly won territory is *you*. In following Jesus we become the virtual battleground where the living God fights the principalities and powers."<sup>(88)</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Willimon, *Lord, Teach Us*. p. 87.

I said this a few weeks ago when we talked about praying for God's Kingdom to come. Jesus wasn't crucified because he had a slight difference of opinion with the religious leaders on a few theological matters. He was crucified because he challenged the principalities and powers. He was crucified because he was a threat to their power and authority. He was executed as a political agitator and disturber of the peace because he had the holy audacity to remind the powers of his day that God is God and they were not. That God saves, not the High Priest and not Caesar. And so he prayed, "Do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one."

The earliest Christians knew this. And they lived it. They had a sober understanding of the perilous position they were in. Somewhere along the way we've lost sight of this. Our cultural Christianity is not really helping us. A couple of weeks ago we celebrated the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He's obviously well-known and respected for his ability to preach and speak and rightly so.

But, I think one of the most profound words we have from him comes from his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* written in April 1963. King writes, "There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "intimidated." By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests.

But things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent, and often even vocal, sanction of things as they are. But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for our century." (MLK)

This is precisely why Jesus teaches us to pray that we might not give in to the temptation to be accommodating, or relevant, or popular with the powers that be, and to pray that we might be delivered from our captivity to the devices and designs of evil, or those powers that seek to thwart God's will and God's way.

Jesus calls us to resist evil. He reminds us that we are in fact engaged in a real struggle, not with flesh and blood, not with God's other children whomever and wherever they may be, but with what Paul terms the principalities and powers. Hard as they might be to describe or define, they are those real, active, powerful forces that are at work, standing in opposition to the Kingdom of the Gospel. They are sometimes embodied in people, sometimes in institutions, sometimes in government and elsewhere, but they are not to be equated with those people or institutions. They are more than the sum of our poor choices or sins. They are not the same as our idiosyncrasies or personal faults and temptations. And the powers work through economies, social and political structures, and control the imaginations and behaviors of individuals and institutions. They have a life all their own, they grow as we feed them and fail to resist them, and we must take care in how we respond to them.

In his book *Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis warns us both against taking evil too seriously as if it represents an equal and opposing god standing behind every problem, suffering, or misfortune. You know, the devil made me do it, or Satan caused A or B to happen. Likewise, Lewis warns us against mocking or making light of evil. That is, simply avoiding all talk of evil because it's simply too unsophisticated an idea for us enlightened folk. Both of these tendencies land us far afield from where Jesus calls us to live and pray by asking God to deliver, or rescue us from evil.

One of the most helpful ways I've found of thinking about evil comes to us from Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas argued that evil really is the absence or depravation of good. Now that may sound nebulous or vague but that does not mean that evil is therefore not something we should be worried about.

As NT Wright points out, "If there is a hole in the road where I expect solid stone, the fact that there is an absence of pavement, there is 'nothing there' is very dangerous. The fact that a rung is missing halfway down the ladder into the basement is neither nebulous nor vague when I'm feeling my way in the dark. And that is the point to be made, idolatry and sin, in all its forms, causes potholes in the road, causes rungs to drop out of ladders, where we and others need them to be. Evil is then the moral and spiritual equivalent of a black hole."<sup>2</sup>

This absence of good, this absence of the Kingdom will of God, isn't benign. It actually has the force to potentially pull into itself anything that gets too close. And that Jesus says we are to guard against and to ask God to deliver us from, that we might live faithful lives that enable others to avoid the potholes and missing rungs of life and connect with the Savior who loves them and longs to set them free.

The good news in all of this is that evil is not a problem for us to solve. It is not like some super

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<sup>2</sup> NT Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*. p. 113.

complicated mathematical equation that we have to get right or else we're doomed. Because, in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ the powers have been defeated and disarmed. We're not called to defeat evil, Christ has already accomplished that. We are called to resist the powers of sin and evil. We're called to resist the temptation to exchange the liberation and power that come from the cross of Christ for the false freedom and security the powers offer us. In Christ, we've been set free from the principalities and the powers. Even though they may be like a black hole and their pull is strong, in Christ we have been given the grace and the power to resist. It's right there in our baptismal vows: "Do you resist the powers evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?" Now we say a simple "I do." But what's implied in that is, "Yes, by the liberating power of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we do and we will."

As Marva Dawn suggests, "The Church's unique message is that the only source of hope is God and not the powers – not the power of any government, not the power of the economy, not the power of medicine or science – no, our hope is in the power of God which has defeated the power of sin, and evil, and death, and thereby sets us free for life and life abundant. To live into this wisdom requires not a Zealot-like effort to bring the powers to their knees, as if we can defeat them simply by our own will and might; nor does it call for a Herod-like stance of collaboration and cooperating with the powers, getting along and going along. To live into the freedom and the fullness of life that comes because Jesus is the Victor requires a nonconforming servanthood that includes a life defined by practices of resistance, like prayer, daily, humble, spirit-filled speaking and listening to the Father. The way Jesus prayed. Practices like prophetically preaching the gospel of Christ crucified, speaking the truth to the powers in love and naming them for what they are and holding them accountable. Practices like working to transform those structures that have aligned themselves with the powers and now stand against God's Kingdom and will. Practices of resistance like holding fast to the promises of God in spite of the allure the powers sometimes possess." In daring to pray like Jesus we are called not to defeat, because Christ is the Victor, but to resist in a way that makes possible the in-breaking of God's Kingdom. We're called to pray, to speak the truth, to serve, to undo those systems and structures that are unjust, to resist evil so that our life together might be a holy space on earth where God's Kingdom can come.

It's why the apostle Paul encourages us,

*"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the*

*cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.” (Ephesians 6:10-13)*

“In the new heavens and the new earth there will be no more sea, no more chaos; no more monsters coming up from the abyss. And...the best news of all is that we don’t have to wait for the future to start experiencing our deliverance from evil. When Jesus says, pray in this way, he is inviting us, summoning us...to start living this way here and now.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus is inviting us to be people of his prayer, people whose lives make God’s name holy, Kingdom people, forgiving and forgiven people, grateful people who live by their daily bread, resistance people - unbound and set free.

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, p. 165.