

The Lord's Prayer – Who's Leading Whom?

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It was brought up by the class a couple of weeks ago that perhaps our biggest concern with The Lord's Prayer has to do with the petition, *Lead us not into temptation*. Why would God, who values us and provides for us like a father, want us to be faithful, but then tempt us not to be?

God wouldn't do this, says the author of the *Epistle of James*. Using the same Greek word that translates into the noun "temptation," *peirasmon*, or the verb "to tempt," *peirazein*, we read:

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. - James 1: 13-16 (NIV)

Lead us not into temptation is not to be understood in the sense of God tempting us to be unfaithful. It's to be understood as our tempting God to get our way. *Don't let us tempt You with our wants and ways.*

Granted, this petition is not altogether clear as it appears on the page. But remember that Matthew wrote for those who knew the stories of what we call the Old Testament. And in the Septuagint, the Greek-language version, *peirazein* is translated as both "to test" or "to tempt." And the main story that comes to mind is this one.

The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink."

Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?" (Or "Why do you tempt the Lord?")

But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?"

Then Moses cried out to the Lord, "What am I to do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

The Lord answered Moses, "Walk on ahead of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink."

So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord (or "tempted the Lord"), saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" - Exodus 17: 1-7 (NIV)

The Israelites weren't into hydration nearly as much as we water-bottle-toting North Americans. The people were thirsty beyond our experience and demanded water. And it wasn't that God was going to refuse them. Their needs would be provided in God's time and way. But the people were so impatient that they committed an offense. Moses named the place of offense Massah, which can mean "Test," as in putting God to the test, or "Tempt," as in tempting God to do it their way.

Note: this temptation was of the form, "Are you really there, Lord, or not? If you really love us, God, produce now!"

Another relevant use of *peirazein*, "to tempt" or "to test," is the second temptation of Jesus.

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is also written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (Or better, "Do not tempt the Lord your God," else they will pick you up with a spatula. It's more than ten stories to the ground.) - Matthew 4: 5-7 (NIV)

How many messes are made by our doing as we please? Maybe we assume that God will go along. Maybe we assume our way is God's way. We may not actually say the words, but the form of our prayer is, "If you really love me God, do it my way." In this way we tempt God.