

“Deliverance From Evil”

Matthew 6:5-15

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

March 26, 2023

After eight weeks, we finally bring our sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer to an end this morning. It’s been a slow and deliberate descent as we have traveled from the heights of divine holiness to now the depths of human depravity, as we have looked at such theological subjects as the fatherhood of God, the place of heaven, divine holiness, the kingdom of God and the will of God, only to conclude our prayer with such material and mundane concerns as the need for bread and the perils of temptation. Of course, the most OBVIOUS question is why stop HERE and not with “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen”? Well that last line never appears in the Bible but was added years later by the Early Church. Because Jesus’s life concluded with the “the resurrection,” they wanted to end the prayer on a high note, with a word of blessing and praise instead of an appeal to God to keep us from falling into evil.

For us to pray “lead us not into temptation” is not to say that God is the CAUSE of the temptations we experience or that God purposely intends for us to be tempted by evil. Temptation is an inevitable and universal event- we ALL experience it EVERY DAY. Generally speaking, our temptations can be said to fall into three different categories. There are temptations to the FLESH, which produce such sins as lust and gluttony; there are temptations to the MIND, which lead us to pride and envy; and then there are temptations for the IDOLATROUS LOVE OF THINGS, which are the source of human greed. They tend to vary in intensity as we grow from one stage of our life into the next. For instance, while we are young, we find ourselves easily lured into sins of the FLESH. Then in middle age, we are more easily given to sins of the MIND such as pride and the lust for power. Finally, in old age, we exhibit a greater inclination towards AVARICE. Knowing that our lives are nearing an end, we compensate for our lack of ETERNAL security by piling up earthly goods and trying to increase our ECONOMIC AND MATERIAL security.

To experience temptation is not to imply WEAKNESS, however. They arise because we possess a double nature. Each of us is an admixture of both animal and spirit locked together in the same body. As animals, we possess a strong instinct for self-preservation and the impulse to satisfy our most basic needs like food, sex, power, and security. But we are also MUCH MORE than animals- we are SPIRITUAL beings TOO, guided by values and ideals that often conflict with the animal side of us. We suffer from what the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr described as the paradox of being created in the IMAGE of God but NOT BEING God. Thus, temptation is as natural to us as the air that we breathe, the result of being torn between two competing drives deep within us- one that looks upward towards heaven and another that looks down towards the earth.

The Bible states that even Christ HIMSELF was tempted in every way that we are. After all, how is it possible to affirm that he was perfectly human as well as divine if he never entered into the fullness of our experience, which includes our common susceptibility to

temptation. We know he experienced hunger and thirst and weariness at various times throughout his ministry. We also know he was often angered by the neglect and injustices he saw against the poor and the weak, especially by the ruling religious elite who were supposed to represent God before the people. However, regardless the temptations he endured, he remained steadfast, refusing to deviate from the calling he had received and dedicated himself to.

In his teachings, Jesus repeatedly warned his disciples of the dangers of temptation, of their moral and spiritual gravity. He told them in the hours shortly before his arrest to “watch and pray that you enter not into temptation.” This was because he understood temptation as MORE than just a simple attraction but THE OCCASION FOR SERIOUS CHOICES WHICH COULD HAVE ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES. Adam and Eve’s decision to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which they had been forewarned of, signified something far more serious than the urge to enjoy a fruit cocktail- it was the BETRAYAL OF DIVINE TRUST. Likewise, the constant surrender to our temptations represents to Jesus the very rejection of God. They become actions motivated by doubt and the desire to exalt oneself AT THE EXPENSE OF GOD. Temptation seizes us at the very moment we begin to trust in our OWN powers and reasonings rather than we do God’s, hence making oneself INTO GOD. Put another way, the more we believe in our ourselves and trust in our OWN powers, the more we doubt God and trust in HIS guidance for our lives which is why John the Baptist so forcefully declared to his disciples that he must decrease while Jesus had to INCREASE.

Now I’ve spent a good portion of my life pondering the question of “ethics,” that is, how to make responsible decisions while living in a world full of confusing options; it’s a subject I love and even have taught on the college level. What probably concerns me MOST is how our continual surrender to what is unhealthy and even DESTRUCTIVE can result in a loss of personal character to where we no longer care about such things as human relationships or personal integrity or lose all commitment to what is right and good and true. It is to grow so morally and spiritually withered that our soul eventually dies, a process that was best summed up for me in a quote by the great 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelist Dwight L. Moody, “Sow the act, and reap the habit; sow the habit, and reap the character; sow the character, and reap the eternity.”

This first became apparent to me years ago when, not long after John Paul II had been declared Pope, I happened to pick up a copy of one of his first magazine interviews. I was curious to learn more about this man- who he was, where he came from, and his views on some of the major issues of the day. He made a comment in that article that has never left me. The Pope was talking about the great spiritual hunger he sensed within many young people and said something to the effect:

*I’m not all that worried about the individual sins that so many of us in the church often get exercised about- such as whether they smoke some pot or drink too much or perhaps indulge in a little free love. What concerns me MOST is when the Spirit of God speaks to their hearts and tries to remind them what is good and true and beautiful and right and yet they constantly shut their ears to him. Over the course of a lifetime, we can so continue to shut our ears to the voice of truth and love—to the voice of GOD HIMSELF as he tirelessly calls us to himself—that we can no longer hear him, that it has reached the point where our heart is crusted over and our*

*conscience no longer has the force it once did. It is then that our soul has become DEAD and matters of right and wrong no longer have any meaning for us. THAT is what worries me most!*

Judas Iscariot was such a man. Throughout our Lord's ministry, he was unable to respond to the continuous offers of love and grace patiently extended by Jesus time and time again. His was the sad story of a man so given over to avarice and greed that it eventually destroyed him. He'd been provided many opportunities to turn from his ways. Jesus showed him the same degree of love and grace and forgiveness that he offered to his other disciples- but Judas rejected them all. Over time, his heart became increasingly hardened until his conscience could no longer respond to the voice of the Spirit. Honesty, integrity, and truth no longer held any meaning for him as any distinction between right and wrong was gone, and he was now incapable of experiencing love or sympathy or pity for anyone except himself.

I often think about those words. I think about them every time I hear about another mass killing- how the shooter was not born that way but over the course of years and by slow degrees he surrendered bits of his soul, he forfeited parts of his humanity until the capacity to love and empathize with others was lost COMPLETELY. I thought about it several years back when I heard about the tragedy at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fl. Those who knew the young man--Nikolas Cruz--described him as "lost" and "lonely" and a "violent" soul. His father died when he was young and he drew especially close to his mother which was by all accounts a loving relationship. Although raised a Catholic, the lessons of his faith never seemed to take root. As time went on, his behavior in school grew increasingly WORSE- characterized by foul language, insults, disobedience, and constant disruption. Easily angered, he eventually developed a fascination with guns and death to where he would torture and kill small animals. The police were called to his home twenty-three times over his conduct. When his mother died, he was taken in by another family who lived not far from his home, but he continually got into fights, punched holes in the walls, and even attacked the mother. That's when he took out his AK-15, walked over to the school, and began shooting. Minutes later, seventeen students and teachers were dead and another seventeen were left severely wounded.

Cruz's story is similar to many others who over the course of a lifetime gradually became increasingly deaf to the entreaties of God until they could no longer hear them, resulting in the death of their conscience. The heart can become SO calloused, SO jaded as to what it means to be human that it eventually becomes incapable of LOVING or ACCEPTING LOVE. Unable to register the slightest pity or sympathy for anyone other than themselves, it usually ends with their OWN destruction and an incalculable amount of damage done to everyone else around them.

Several weeks ago, Alex McMurdaugh was found guilty after a sensational trial in South Carolina which some have called "the trial of the century." He was a popular lawyer from a well-respected family of lawyers who over the past decades had developed an insatiable opioid addiction. To fund it, he embezzled millions of dollars from the family law firm, even stealing millions more from a settlement meant for the children of his former housekeeper who died in an alleged trip-and-fall accident on their property six years ago. When his lies and thefts were about to be uncovered, he devised a bizarre plan to kill his wife and younger son to gain sympathy and delay two separate efforts to get him to divulge his personal financial information.

Two years ago, his 52-year-old wife Maggie and 22-year-old son Paul were found shot to death on their exclusive island property. Alex claimed that at the time, he was asleep inside the house and outside earshot of the shootings. At first, it seemed like his alibi would hold up as condolences poured in and people wondered who might have targeted his family. But soon there was even more scrutiny of his finances which would lead to indictments on dozens of financial crimes and then to murder charges. At trial, prosecutors argued that he was so afraid his thefts would come to light that he was willing to kill two of the people closest to him to divert attention. His fate was sealed however when video on his phone placed him at the scene of the crime at the same time his wife and son were shot. This finalized the dramatic downfall of a man who had substantial wealth and powerful connections but who lived a secret life in which he stole millions of dollars from clients and colleagues and lied to many of those closest to him. Alex McMurdaugh will now spend the rest of his life in prison without the possibility of parole.

What these accounts of Judas Iscariot, Nikolas Cruz and Alex McMurdaugh all share in common is the story of the death of the soul. These men were not BORN monsters but grew up in homes just like ours, enjoying the same advantages and experiencing the same love and joy, laughter and tears we have. But pride and ambition, jealousy and hatred, avarice and greed took seed in their hearts, gnawing away at it until there was no heart left, until nothing remained for God to speak to- the WORST fate and the most HORRIBLE judgment anyone can possibly suffer. It serves as the very definition of HELL ITSELF- when one is no longer able to hear the voice of God, to no longer own a conscience, when all those qualities which make one human--faith, love, compassion, trust--have atrophied and eventually died away.

Back in the late 70's, I watched a television interview with Bishop Festo Kivengere, the Anglican bishop of Uganda who had been a personal witness to the brutality and horrors that took place in that country under the bloody tyrant Idi Amin. He had just written a book *I Love Idi Amin* and was on a book tour to promote it. When asked how a man who was responsible for the deaths of countless thousands of his own people could be loved by ANYONE much less a religious prelate, his answer was, "I have no hatred for Idi Amin, nothing but compassion and love. You see, people say that one day he will be judged by God but I say that he has ALREADY been judged. That man's conscience is now dead and he can no longer hear the voice of God's Spirit calling out to him, imploring him to cease his evil deeds and instead embrace the way of mercy, justice, and love, the way of Jesus Christ himself. When one can no longer hear that voice—the voice of GOD speaking to his heart and spirit--he already IS judged and becomes a person to be most pitied. It is the WORST judgment anyone can ever suffer."

On the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of America's worst tragedies, Netflix has now come out with a three-part documentary entitled "Waco: American Apocalypse" which claims to shed new light on the 1993 Texas shootout. If you recall, David Koresh was the leader of a doomsday cult--the Branch Davidians--whose members believed he was the messiah. In addition to bearing messianic pretensions, Koresh was a pedophile, a polygamist, a domestic abuser, and an armed insurrectionist. Rather than leading them to the Promised Land, in a standoff with the FBI, he set fire to their compound which resulted in the loss of his life and the lives of dozens of his disciples, including many young children. Now it would be easy to dismiss the man as "pure evil," but it's never quite that simple. You see, there's always some bad in the very best of us

and EQUALLY SOME GOOD EVEN IN THE VERY WORST OF US. Yet, we are inclined to make people like him out as altogether different from ourselves and regard him as no more than an animal, a monster, as someone "LESS than human." We're tempted to lump him in with ANY NUMBER of sociopaths whom we would put in that SAME category and that includes people like Timothy McVeigh who bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City that ended the lives of 160 children; Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the two 18-year-olds responsible for the Columbine school massacre; and Adam Lanza, the disturbed young man who shot and killed twenty children and six adults in the Sandy Hook Elementary School only a decade ago.

We can take this a step FURTHER and throw in Charles Manson, Jim Jones, John Wayne Gacy, and Jeffrey Dahmer- names gone down in infamy for the heinousness of their crimes. (At one time, John Gacy lived and worked only a couple of blocks from where I lived in Waterloo, Iowa.) Some had severe mental disturbances, some felt alienated from their peers and rejected by society at large, while still others were motivated by an extremist ideology. Still the reality remains that those whom we'd like to consign as pure evil--as persons altogether different from ourselves--were NOT BORN that way but ones who over time and for whatever reasons had their consciences dulled and lost whatever sense of empathy they might have had for others. In the years since Columbine, Sue Klebold--Dylan's mother--has become a national spokesperson trying to help people understand that individuals like her son were NOT born monsters but retained an inherent humanity that cannot be erased, that he like many of the others were no different than either YOU or ME and that these were sons and grandsons, brothers and cousins, husbands and EVEN FATHERS who once LOVED OTHERS and were LOVED IN RETURN. Hence, the old adage "There but for the grace of God goes I" becomes ESPECIALLY apt for us.

The bottom line is this- if such a moral and spiritual fall could happen to persons such as THESE, it could just as well happen to ANY OF US, MYSELF INCLUDED! THIS is why it is imperative we stay close to Christ, WHY we have to pray every day, "Lord, lead us not into temptation but DELIVER us from evil!"- because EACH ONE OF US is constantly EXPOSED TO and SUSCEPTIBLE TO evil's influence! The biographies of the men we have looked at this morning serve as a real warning as to the dangers of allowing sin, no matter how petty, to go undealt with. Years of pride and jealousy and petty thievery had built such a thick crust around their heart that it eventually smothered their conscience AS WELL.

The GOOD NEWS, however, is that God is STRONGER than the adversary and his love is GREATER than any evil. Christ's power can sustain us through ANY temptation! He promises to deliver us from the destructive grip of each temptation for the risen, living Lord stands with us in every testing. Through his Word and by his Spirit, we are constantly reminded how despite our own treachery, regardless of the selfishness and pride, the lust and the ambitions, the jealousies and the hatreds that we secretly harbor, his love and forgiveness can break through them all. He can prevent them from taking root in our lives and ultimately devouring us. He gives us the power to humbly confess our sin and express new dependence upon him. He shows us that though we may often be faithless towards HIM, he will always keep faith with US. But we need to act decisively, we need to repent quickly, we need to remain close to Christ lest we TOO "sow the act, and reap the habit; sow the habit, and reap the character; sow the character, and reap the eternity." Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, as we continue to walk through this ever-perilous world, help us to stay close to you so that whenever temptations DO arise, we may opt to perform THY will rather than our OWN and, in this way, imitate our Lord in his OWN hour of grave temptation. In Christ's name we pray, amen.*