

NOT INTO TEMPTATION

Matthew 6:13

In his book, "The Screwtape Letters," C. S. Lewis wrote, "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight." Some people blame their sins on the devil. Last year, a man in Brooklyn, New York, murdered two children. He later said, "The devil made me do it." Some in our culture do not believe in the devil, but they do believe in the Slender Man. Last year, two girls led a friend into the woods where they stabbed her nineteen times. In a separate incident two weeks later, a girl attacked her mother with a knife. The two cases had this in common: the girls said that the Slender Man made them do it. The Slender Man is a fictional character, and yet some believe he is both real, and evil. Many people scoff at the idea of a personal devil. The phrase, "The devil made me do it" has become something of a joke. One sees it displayed humorously on t-shirts. If someone eats too much ice cream, he says, "The devil made me do it." Some do not believe in a personal devil, and neither do they believe in sin. Today, people are more likely to say, "A chemical imbalance made me do it," than to say, "The devil made me do it." They give pseudo-scientific explanations for what we Christians call sin. Fifteen years ago, for example, an obstetrician in Manhattan was so proud of a Caesarean section he performed, that he carved his initials into the woman's abdomen. At his trial, his lawyer argued that his actions "were caused by medical incapacity/cerebral dysfunction and not the result of any negligent, willful or intentional conduct." Truly some give the devil too much credence, while others give him none at all.

We Christians believe in both the devil and sin. In the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus has taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." After the fifth petition, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," it is natural that we ask God keep us from sinning again. The Christian fights the good fight on three fronts: the flesh, the world, and the devil. As Saint Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "And you *hath he quickened*, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others." (Ephesians 2:1-3)

The unbeliever is in bondage to sin. His will is captive to sin, and he can do nothing but sin. He is sin's slave. (Romans 6:20) However, it is not as though the unbeliever would like to do good, but is constrained by his chains. He is not merely weak, he is depraved. He loves sin, and he hates righteousness. He hates God Himself (Romans 1:30) His very nature is sinful through and through, and he is subject to the wrath of God (Ephesians 2:3) Saint Paul wrote to the Romans, "Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God." (Romans 8:7, 8) The unbeliever is dead in trespasses and sins, and he cannot raise himself from his state of spiritual death. (Ephesians 2:1, 5) As Saint Augustine said, for the unbeliever it is impossible not to sin.

We who believe in Christ have been delivered from this bondage. Christ has died and been raised to new life, and we have been joined to Him by water baptism. So, we have died with Him, and been raised with Him. We have been set free from the bondage of sin, and we are free to walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:4) It is possible for us not to sin. However, although God is gradually transforming us, our redemption will not be complete until we see the Lord Jesus. Until then, it is possible for us to sin. In fact, however good we are by God's grace, we still fall short, and are daily in need of God's forgiveness. (Romans 3:23)

The Christian, although free from the bondage of sin, still strives against the flesh. Because we are not perfected, we can be enticed by the world and what it has to offer. God created the world good, but evil angels and evil men have corrupted it. Nothing God made is in itself sinful, but anything God has made can be used sinfully. (Romans 14:20) Moreover, we can love the world too much. God loves the world. He loves it so much that he gave His only-begotten Son a sacrifice for men's sins. We also must love mankind, even our enemies, and do good to them. However, we must not love the world more than we love God. Neither may we love the world insofar as it opposes God. Saint John wrote, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world — the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life — is not of the Father, but is of the world." (1 John 2:15, 16) The world and its pleasures can draw a man away from the living God. In the parable of the sower, Jesus said that some "are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of *this* life." (Luke 8:14) People covet and fight over the things of world. Saint James warns, "Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God." (James 4:4) Like Jesus Himself, we must be willing, not only to live for God, but to die for Him. Like Moses, we must love Jesus, and not the pleasures of sin. (Hebrews 11:24-26) The world, insofar as it opposes God, has its own way of thinking and doing. We must not be conformed to the world in its ways. (Romans 12:2)

We have to contend, not only with the flesh, and the world, but also with a mighty adversary who would have us sin. That is, the devil himself. The Scriptures call him 'the evil one,' and he is hell-bent on bringing men to destruction. (Matthew 13: 19, 38; John 17:15; 1 John 2:23, 24; 3:12) The Scriptures call him 'the tempter,' because he incites men to do wrong. He uses the pleasures of the world to exploit a man's corruption, and to lead him to sin. Judas was covetous and greedy, and Satan put it into his heart to betray Jesus for money. (John 13:2) Ananias also was covetous and greedy, and he he lied to the apostles about the money he gave to the church. Saint Peter said to him, "Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back *part* of the price of the land?" (Acts 5:3) When Saint Paul grew concerned that the Thessalonians might fall away because of persecution, he wrote to them, "For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labour be in vain." (1 Thessalonians 3:5) The devil was a murderer from the start, Jesus said, and desires the destruction of mankind. (John 8:44) There is an old metaphor for supernatural influence on the human will, and many pious Christians, including Martin Luther and John Calvin, have used it. In his *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther wrote, "So man's will is like a beast standing between two riders. If God rides, it wills and goes where God wills: as the Psalm says, 'I am become as a beast before thee, and I am ever with thee' (Psalm 73:22-3). If Satan rides, it wills and goes where Satan wills." (Johnston translation, page 103-104)

Given the formidable dangers of the flesh, the world, and the devil, it is most necessary to pray to God, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." In order not to be led into temptation, we must first understand it. The Scriptures are crystal clear: God is holy, and He tempts no one. Saint James wrote, "Let no man say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth He any man." (James 1:13, 14) God abhors sin, and He wishes for no one to commit sin. He forbids anyone to sin, and He punishes anyone who does. He entices no one to sin. Saint James explains the nature of sin: "But every man is tempted when he is drawn away by his own lust and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin; and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death." (James 1:14, 15) It is not necessary for the devil to tempt a person to sin; a person's own sinful nature is sufficient for that. As Saint Bernard said, "Everyone is Satan to himself." God does not tempt us to sin, but He does allow Satan to tempt us. Satan desires that men sin, and offend the holy God, and go to their doom.

Although God does not tempt men to sin, He does put them to the test. He tries their faith, testing its genuineness. At Satan's request, God tried the faith of Job. Satan, the accuser, brought the charge that Job

served God only because God had blessed him. Take away the blessing, Satan said, and Job would curse God. So, God allowed Satan to destroy Job's family, and his estate. Yet, Job refused to curse God. God tried the faith of Abraham. He commanded Abraham to offer his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. Abraham loved his son, and believed that God's promises would be fulfilled through him. Even so, he trusted God. As he raised the knife to slay Isaac on the altar, God called to him and said, "Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him; for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me." (Genesis 22:12) Abraham's faith was proved to be genuine. Satan had made request of God to test the faith of the apostles. By the time of the Last Supper, he had already claimed Judas. After the Last Supper, Jesus told Saint Peter that Satan wished to ruin all the disciples. "Simon, Simon," He said, "behold, Satan hath desired *to have* you, that he may sift *you* as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." (Luke 22:31, 32) Peter would fall, and deny Christ three times, just as Christ predicted. However, because Jesus had prayed for Saint Peter, he would repent and return. His fall would not be final.

As always, the Lord Jesus is our perfect example. The Spirit led Him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. God's purpose was to prove Jesus' faith. It was necessary for Jesus to be tempted, so that He might prove Himself sinless, and so be the worthy sacrifice for men's sins. Three times the devil tempted Him, and three times Jesus resisted, replying with the Word of God. In one of the temptations, the devil told Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, and God would send angels to protect Him from harm. Jesus answered the devil, "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." Jesus understood that God tests our faithfulness; we do not test His. Finally, the devil left Him. (Matthew 4:1-12; Luke 4:1-13) It was not long after this that Jesus taught the people to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

At the end of his days, before His arrest, Jesus went into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. He was not afraid to die, but He did not wish to be made sin, nor to suffer the wrath of God. He asked His Father that, if it were possible, the cup of woe would pass from Him. Yet, He always deferred to the will of His Father. He told Peter, James, and John who were with Him, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak." (Matthew 26:41) We must be vigilant in avoiding temptation, and we must resist temptation if we cannot avoid it.

When we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," we ask God to keep us from the assault of Satan. We ask Him to restrain Satan, and not allow him to try to destroy us by enticing us to sin. We ask for divine protection against Satan's devices. When we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," we ask God not to place us in circumstances in which we will be tempted to sin. We ask God to keep us away from harmful influences, so that we may remain pure and sinless. Nevertheless, we may find ourselves in positions of temptation. When we pray, "Deliver us from evil," we ask God to rescue us from the snare of the devil. (2 Timothy 2:26) When we pray, "Deliver us from evil," we ask God to strengthen us to resist temptation. God has promised that He will not allow us to be tempted in an extraordinary way, and He will never allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to bear; He will always make it possible for us to resist, and to escape. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Although we shrink back from being tempted by the devil, we welcome God to try our faith. We pray as King David prayed: "Examine me, O LORD, and prove me; try my reins and my heart. For thy lovingkindness *is* before mine eyes: and I have walked in thy truth." (Psalm 26:2) When Abraham offered his son Isaac on the altar, his faith was perfected. Saint Peter wrote to Christians who were suffering persecution for their faith, and he comforted them by telling them that they were kept from falling away by the power of God. Moreover, he said that their trials proved their faith. "Ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:6, 7)

We pray with David, “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if *there be any* wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” (Psalm 139:23, 24) We also pray, as the Lord Jesus has taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present *you* faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Saviour, *be* glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. *Amen.*