

“Deliver us from Evil”
Matthew 6:13
November 6, 2016

This fall we have been studying the Lord’s Prayer, slowing down and looking at each petition in depth. Today we are at the petition “Deliver us from evil.” In preaching classes in seminaries, they teach would-be preachers to develop an introduction to sermons that will catch people attention, and to make a case that what’s coming is relevant to daily life. But today, when we are remembering those in the past year who have died; and in this time when we turn on the news and can’t escape hearing about new or ongoing tragedy, we don’t need an introduction that makes the case that evil exists or that we need to be delivered from it. We know it. And Jesus knew that we needed it, and in the Lord’s Prayer, he assures us of God’s help and ability to deliver us. Let’s pray and ask God to be our teacher.

Have you ever had the experience of frantically looking for something – your glasses, your keys, your phone – to finally discover that the glasses are on your head, the keys in your pocket, or the phone on the kitchen counter? We have a tendency not to notice what is right in front of us. I think the same thing is true for evil, especially because one of evil’s tactics is to be subtle. Not always, but many times. So first thing we are going to do is to talk about what evil is and how to recognize it.

Some translations of the Bible say “deliver us from evil.” Other translations say “deliver us from the Evil One.” Scholars agree that the original Greek language can be translated either way, and actually add a third possibility: “deliver us from the evil thing or person.”

It’s unclear which phrase Jesus intended. Or, it’s possible that Jesus intended all three. In his commentary on the Lord’s Prayer, John Calvin made a great point: In a nutshell, he said that it’s not worth debating the translation because we need to be delivered from the Evil one, and the evil of sin that is present in the world and ourselves. We are going to follow Calvin’s lead and look at the three layers of evil.

The first layer of evil is the Evil One, also called Satan or the Devil in Scripture. The idea that Satan exists has fallen on hard times in some Christian circles. The arguments against believing that Satan exists include that humans cause enough evil on their own. We’ll get to that too. But Scripture, which is our guide, teaches us that Satan is real. Satan was in the

Garden of Eden. He tempted Jesus in the wilderness. He is described in various places as the enemy of God and God's people. It's important for us to recognize Satan's existence, not so that we can cover in fear, but so that we can as 1 Peter 5:8 says, be alert and sober, recognizing the devil's schemes and resisting him by trusting in God.

The devil's main scheme can be seen in what his name means. Diabolos is the main New Testament word for the devil. It means to split. The devil's main objective is the split us off from God. Here's how Martin Luther worded it: "[The Devil's] main objective is to lead us to ignore and utterly cast away both God's Word and works, to tear from us faith, hope and love, and to bring us into unbelief, false confidence, and obstinacy; or else to drive us into despair, atheism, blasphemy, and innumerable other shocking sins."

The devil's main objective is to split us from God, to pull us away from the two greatest commandments to love God and love our neighbors.

If we want to know if something is from the Evil One, or the evil of sin, we ask the questions: Is this splitting us from God? Is it pulling us, or me, away from loving God and loving others?

Is anyone here a fan of superhero tales like Superman and Batman, or epic stories of good versus evil like the Fellowship of the Rings or Harry Potter? One of the convenient parts of such stories is that the villain is easily identified: Lex Luther, the Joker, Sauron, Lord Voldemort. Not so with our adversary. The Far side cartoon depicts the Devil with horns and a tail, but Scripture does not describe him as such. Scripture says that Satan masquerades as angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). Sometimes, evil is horribly evident – like cancer and other illnesses that ravage our bodies and minds; acts of terror, war, slavery and abuse that shock and horrify us; and systemic ills like racism and sexism that plague us.

But often, The Evil one is subtle and works through ordinary things don't look evil. Take the example of Adam and Eve in the Garden. God told Adam and Eve that they could eat from any tree in the Garden except the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Satan, taking the form of a serpent, asks them, "Did God *really* say that you weren't allowed to eat from *any* tree in the Garden?" Do you notice how Satan crafts that question, twisting God's word from you may not eat from this tree to "Did God really say you weren't

allowed to eat from *any* tree?" Right from the start, Satan's tactic has been to subtly twist God's word, enticing us to doubt God's love and goodness. The way we recognize Evil is not checking for horns and a tail, but asking, "Is it splitting me or us, from loving God and loving others? Is it splitting God's good creation?"

The Evil One is subtle and often uses the ordinary to pull us away from God. Which brings us to the second layer of evil that we need to recognize. Evil can work through the structures of our lives: the narratives and ingrained habits and attitudes of our culture, which we often take for granted because we've always been in them and they seem normal. I think this is what Paul means in Ephesians 6 when he says that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the powers of this dark world. Some of the world's powers - false narratives, ingrained habits and attitudes that have the power to split us from God and pull us from loving others - include the belief that we need look out for ourselves; the belief that life is about our self-fulfillment; the idea that spirituality is about our contentment; the achieve-achieve-achieve, measure-measure-measure, do-do-do habit that is applauded.

I don't know what all the false narratives and powers are. None of us does completely, which is why we pray for deliverance. When we pray "deliver us from evil," one of things we are praying for is for God to help us recognize these false narratives and habits for what they are. It may sound harsh to call all the false narratives and habits evil, but remember that evil is what splits us and pulls us from loving God and others. Let me share a personal example with you about how the powers of our world can be incredibly ordinary and how it can work slowly and subtly.

Last month was stewardship month, the season we ask people to make commitments about what they will tithe in the coming year. Tithing has been a regular discipline and I regularly get up here and share with you all that giving is an act of worship.

Despite that, this year when I looked at our pledge card, I had a difficult time writing something down. I heard a whisper in my head: "Life is different now with small children. You need that money for their future. It's okay if you step back." I struggled, hearing the whispers of doubt and justification. What I was listening to was the false narrative of our culture that you need to take care of you and yours because no one else will. God's narrative though, is that we

put His Kingdom first and he'll take care of what we need when the time comes. The history of my life is of God providing and caring for me in unexpected ways so I had no reason to doubt, and yet I heard the whispers of evil enticing me to turn away from trusting God.

Now, don't hear me wrong: tithing isn't necessarily a litmus test for everyone about evil and trusting God. But for me last month, it was. My point in sharing is this: evil is often subtle, slow, and works through the false narratives of our culture.

Of course, it wasn't only the false narrative of our culture that enticed me to pull back from living generously. It was also the stuff in my own heart, which leads us to the third layer of evil we need to be delivered from. We need to be delivered from the sin within our own hearts.

In one of Jesus' confrontations with the religious leaders of his day they criticized him because his disciples did not ritually wash their hands before eating.

Listen to part of Jesus' response: *"Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them.*

For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them."

Jesus diagnoses our heart condition: the evil of sin lives in our hearts. Scripture tells us the evil of sin lives in every human heart (Romans 3:23). If you are like me, that is proved regularly. All I need to do is think of the things I have said or thought, or the tone in which I have said things, and I know there is sin in my heart. When we pray "Deliver us from evil" we are also asking God to help us identify and offer to Him the evil in our hearts so that the Spirit may transform us.

We need to be delivered from the Evil one, from the evil in our world, and the evil in our own hearts. It is a battle too big for us to wage on our own, individually or together. Which is why we ask God to be our deliverer, for God is the only one who is able to save us. Let's look at three gifts that God has given us in the struggle against evil.

The first gift is the most vital: it's the gift of the long-view of God's true narrative, or story. When we look at God's true story, from creation to the end, we are assured that in Jesus Christ, we have been and will be delivered from evil.

In the beginning, God created the world good – there the was no sin in our hearts that led to evil, no evil in the world that damaged or destroyed, no death, and no reason to fear the Evil One. God gave Adam and Eve everything in the Garden to eat from, except he asked them not to eat from one specific tree. It makes sense why God asked this of them – for to truly love, we need the option to say no.

You probably know the story: after listening to the lies of the Serpent, Adam and Eve themselves made the choice to eat from the tree. Afterwards, God shares with them the result of their action. In sum, the result is a broken world in which evil exists: damaging creation, life, and our relationships. But even at this point, right after the fall, Scripture tells us that God had a plan to deliver us from evil and restore all creation.

In God's description of the consequences of the fall, God includes the Satan says this to him: *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*" Scholars believe that this is the first hint of the gospel in Scripture. The offspring that will crush Satan's head is Jesus. Even from the beginning, right after sin entered the world and unleashed evil, God already had a plan to conquer Evil.

And not just the Evil one, but the evil of sin. God sent His Son Jesus, who was God in the flesh, to live the life that we were not and are not capable of living ourselves.

Jesus was without the evil of sin and he lived life in our place, showing us how to love God and others. Jesus was tempted by the Evil One in our place, and said "no" to Satan, instead fully trusting God. He said no to Satan and yes to God, for us and in our place. Jesus died in our place, the death that we deserved for our sin and evil. Jesus rose in our place, so that the evil of death would be defeated for all those who place their trust in Him.

Through Jesus, the power of the Evil one, the powers of this dark world, and the evil in our hearts have been defeated. Though the defeat is sure, it isn't yet fully complete. Jesus promised to return one day, and bring God's Kingdom to fulfillment. In the book of Revelation, we read of the future in which Jesus finally and triumphantly trounces evil and we live with God face-to-face forever.

Until that day comes, we live in what's called the "already/not yet", when we know who has won – our God – but the battle still goes on. In the already/not yet, when we see and experience evil, we need to keep our eyes focused on the long-view of God's Story.

Keeping our eyes focused on the long-view is a little like running a race – when you get almost done and are considering quitting, knowing the finish line is just around the corner helps you keep going. Or, an example close to home for me: surviving sleepless nights with a baby and toddler is easier to do with kindness when you know that one day your kids will sleep in until noon.

Knowing, trusting, and being shaped by God's story gives us hope and strength as we live in a world where evil, sin, and death still exist.

The long-view of God's Story is the primary gift of deliverance that God has given us. There are many gifts that God has given that are of great help in our struggle with evil while we live in the already/not yet. I want to mention two briefly: The first is prayer and the second is community.

Prayer: we pray, as in the Lord's prayer, for deliverance. We pray for God to give us the eyes to see evil. We pray for the Spirit to give us the strength to resist anything that splits us or others from God. We pray for the grace to open our lives to God's transforming work. We pray for perseverance as we fix our eyes on the long-view of the God's Story. We pray for each other.

We also pray about our daily and mundane anxieties. Earlier in the message, I mentioned the verse about the evil one from 1 Peter (5:8) Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.⁹ Resist him, standing firm in the faith.....The verse directly before this says: "Cast all your anxiety on God because He cares for you."

I don't think it's a mistake that the command to pray about our anxieties and the command about being alert and resisting the Evil one are side by side. It is often through our anxieties that evil gains a foothold in our lives, tempting us to doubt God's goodness and love. Sharing our daily life with the Lord in prayer is a major way that God helps us in the struggle against Evil. For as we cultivate our relationship with the Lord through prayer, the Spirit will help us become more certain of God's power and love.

Finally, God gives us the gift of community in our struggle against evil. God gives us spiritual friends who can speak God's truth and love to us when we are hearing the whispers of the enemy. That's what happened for me when I was hearing the whispering lies about tithing. I was with a friend who was asking the question "Is God calling me to give more?" God used my friend's question to break through the whispers of doubt that I had been hearing.

God also calls us together as a larger body to encourage and support one another. We gather together each week in worship to be shaped by God's story: remembering that in Jesus Christ, God has already and will deliver us from evil, and to Himself, no matter what may come. In the face of all evils, God gives us community, God gives us prayer, and God gives us the long-view of His Story of triumph.

I'm glad that in God's providence, the petition on God's deliverance from evil came today, on All-Saints Sunday. One this Sunday each year, we take the time to remember those from our congregation, and our family and friends, who have died in the past year.

In my personal experience, and my experience walking with others, death is one of the Evil One's primary ways to shake our confidence in God's deliverance, God's power, and God's love. When one of our beloveds dies, it's normal and okay for us to wrestle with God and to ask God questions.

In our grief and trouble, God wants us to hear again and again that death was not His original plan, nor is it the end. Out of great love, and with the utmost power, Jesus lived, died and rose from the dead, defeating death and delivering us from evil and from death, and delivering us to Himself. May we find our hope, even in the face of death, in Jesus.