

April 3, 2019

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Hope Lutheran Church

Sermon Series: "Lord, I'm Tempted"

"An Invitation to Pray"

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The focus of our message this evening is that Gospel text from Luke we heard just a few moments ago, particularly verses 39 and 40. The text reads:

³⁹And Jesus came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰And when he came to the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not fall into temptation."

The last supper has ended. In less than 24 hours, Jesus will be killed by crucifixion. This is a time of suffering for Jesus. And the garden of gethsemane, on the mount of olives, is the place where Jesus' suffering begins. He begins to take on the sins of the whole world in the garden after eating the last supper with his disciples. And tonight we turn our focus towards those who were there with him in the garden, his disciples. In the reading, the focus on the suffering of Jesus is so front and center that it's tough to remember that there were other players involved. But eleven of Jesus' disciples have come with him to the garden. And before heading deeper into the garden to pray, Jesus turns to his disciples and speaks a sharp command. Pray, that you will not fall into temptation!

Pray, that you will not fall into temptation. Why would Jesus say this, of all things, to his disciples on this night?

I don't know about you, but this is a passage that sparks my curiosity. And I want to know more. What temptation does Jesus mean?

Does he mean the temptation to reject him as Lord that the disciples would surely face after watching him being mocked and killed on Good Friday? Does he mean the temptation to deny him in the face of certain danger? Or was Jesus aware that the devil was at work in this hour, and his disciples were vulnerable to temptation.

Or is there nothing deeper to it than a harsh rebuke to the disciples from Jesus for sleeping when they should have been praying? That's what happened after all. Jesus told them to pray and they fell asleep! Now, can you imagine if pastors started all of their sermons that way? Pray, that you will not fall into the temptation...of sleeping! I'm kidding, of course, but the temptation is real. The temptation to put your physical comfort before your spiritual well-being. It was there for the disciples, and it's still there for us.

Now, I don't say any of this to throw a guilt trip your way. If you fall asleep during my sermon, I promise that Jesus still loves you and so do I. But I do it to illustrate a simple point. Temptation is a spiritual attack, and the disciples were vulnerable to attack on that night in the garden. What temptation? Well, does it matter? There's an infinite number to choose from, and perhaps that's why Luke isn't any more specific than he is. It might be tempting to try to hand pick a few of our favorite temptations from our own lives, but the simple fact is that we're Christians. We have a target on our back, and day in and day out. We're in a constant battle against temptation. We're under relentless attack from Satan, the world, and ourselves. It's war. It's a battle as old as time itself, and it happens inside of all of us each and every day. The battle between good and evil. The battle between doing right and doing wrong. Each and every day, we're standing on the battle ground. It's the same battle ground on which the disciples of Jesus stood that night in the garden. It's the same battle ground that every Christian has stood upon. It's war.

So does it make sense now why Jesus might tell his disciples to pray? Do you understand what's at stake here? The battle, won or lost. Victory or defeat for God's people. Pray that you will not fall into temptation.

I have a story that I'd like to share that might help put this into perspective for you. Last week, my wife Sam had a wonderful opportunity to attend the women's retreat here at Hope. According to her, it was a great time of much needed spiritual renewal and fulfillment. Now, for me, what that meant was some much needed father-son time with my eleven-month old son. And Friday night was spent male bonding over some of my favorite movies put to screen starring none other than Sylvester Stallone as Rocky Balboa.

Now just as a show of hands, how many of you saw "Creed II?" That's the most recent of the Rocky movies, for those who haven't seen it. It follows young Adonis Creed, the son of Apollo Creed from the first few Rocky movies. Adonis is challenged to a fight by a vicious Russian boxer named Victor Drago. And he takes the fight against the advice of Rocky, and so, Rocky doesn't train him. Rocky isn't in his corner for the fight, and Adonis loses badly.

Now of course, because this is a Rocky movie, Adonis realizes the error of his ways, asks for Rocky's forgiveness, and chooses to train under Rocky once more. Rocky trains Adonis hard, and Adonis steps into the ring with Victor once more. This time, with Rocky in his corner guiding him through the fight, Adonis is victorious. He wins the battle.

Now, let's take a step back to Jesus' words. Pray that you will not fall into temptation. What if we heard those words, not as a command, but as an invitation? Confirmation students, I know that all of you understand the difference between a command and an invitation. I hate to sound like one of your parents, but seriously. What's the difference between me saying "You have to write a sermon summary for this message" and "I

invite you to write a sermon summary for this message." That's the difference between a command and an invitation, but the invitation of Jesus to pray is a lot more inviting than my invitation to write a sermon summary. Jesus' words are a simple invitation to admit that we need God in our corner. Not a command. An invitation. Do you see the difference? The invitation is for our benefit.

You see, stepping into the battle with temptation alone, without any help, without anyone in our corner, is a battle that we're sure to lose. Just as Adonis didn't stand a chance without Rocky in his corner, without God's help, we have zero shot of winning against temptation. We'll never be victorious.

And yet, God does offer his help. More than that, he wants to help us in the face of temptation. And he gives us prayer. To help us. Prayer is a gift, a precious gift from God that Jesus invites us to take full advantage of. Prayer gives us full and complete access to God's help through every temptation. Pray that you will not fall into temptation. Let's speak those words together one more time. Pray that you will not fall into temptation. Will God help us in times of temptation if we ask for it? Is God there, in our corner, guiding us, directing us, strengthening us, nourishing us in times of temptation? You bet He is. So is it any wonder that Jesus invited his disciples to pray for help on that night in the garden? Is it any wonder that he invites us to pray for help as well?

In this invitation from Jesus is a beautiful promise that our prayers do not fall on deaf ears. Even Jesus, in times of struggle and temptation, even there in the garden as he began to take on humanity's sin, cried out in prayer to his father for help. And even though he had to face the horror of the cross, God still helped him. The Gospel text tells us that angels came and strengthened him, and God gave him strength every step of the way. He needed his Father's help. And put simply, we all need God's help. The struggle against sin is real, and it's hard. The stakes can seem so

high, and our own selves, so weak. And yet, our God is strong. Our God has parted seas, toppled kings and nations, freed his people from bondage and oppression, worked through the weakest and the lowliest to his glory, and raised his own son from the dead. Don't you think he can handle our temptation as well?

Let's speak the words of Jesus once more. Jesus is inviting us, all of us, to take full advantage of the help that God promises us. Together, we say Pray that you will not fall into temptation. Amen. Let this be our continual prayer through trial and temptation. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.