

Lead Us

Pray Like This – Week 4

By Pastor Mandy Barkhaus

“Just Google it.” A phrase you've probably said or at least heard. So, I started this new hobby. We're tumbling and polishing rocks now. Bill Ray, a member here, as many of you know, also enjoys this hobby. After seeing his collection of polished rocks, Tom and I were hooked. We purchased a tumbler or two and started rock hounding. That's the fancy name for going out to look for rocks. My family owns some land near Beatrice, and we head down there to search for treasures. The Blue River snakes through our farmland, and so we go there to look for rocks. The problem is, we don't exactly know what we're looking for yet. We're new to this hobby and don't have the same experience as Bill. We don't know much about rocks—like which ones are good for tumbling, which ones aren't, which will shine, and which won't. But we have Google, and we're finding out a lot.

The other day, I was trying to come up with a catchy way to start this sermon on temptation. Of course, I thought, "I'll just Google it." You probably know where this is going. I googled something like "funny temptation church story"—something along those lines. Surely, Google knew what I meant, right? I expected to find some lighthearted story, like a kid in Sunday school sneaking a couple of cookies, something innocent.

I did find plenty of funny stories and jokes, but when I got to one joke about a priest and a nun, I knew I had gone down the wrong path. Although the scene was set in a church, it was not church-appropriate.

This little Google search reminded me how temptations people face every day can lead us down some seriously dark paths. For example, I'm not a big fan of watching sports, but someone told me they were amazed by the number of sports betting ads during a football game. Imagine recovering gambling addicts trying to enjoy the game while being bombarded with ads for sports betting. And that's how temptation works—it bombards us.

We all have temptations. Maybe you worry too much, eat too much, or feel tempted to get ahead at the cost of others. Maybe it's greed, lust, or immorality. Temptation finds its way into our lives relentlessly.

As we study the Lord's Prayer, we've come to the part where we ask God to "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." The word "temptation" often carries a negative connotation, suggesting it always leads to sin. The actual definition of temptation is the desire to do something sinful or unwise. I can relate to the sinful part because, at times, I am tempted to do sinful things. But I really relate to the unwise part.

For example, last Sunday, while Tom and I were rock-hounding at the farm, we decided to venture further along the Blue River. We usually go to the closest spot, but we thought we'd explore further, hoping to find some cool rocks. We ended up at a place my dad calls "the high bank." Somehow, we made it down the steep bank and stood at the water's edge. On the other side of the river, we saw rocks. We've crossed the Blue River before at another spot, where the water only goes up to our knees. But here, the water was deeper. Still, we were tempted by the rocks on the other side. So, with our buckets, shovels, and strainers, fully clothed, we swam across the Blue River.

Unwise? Definitely. Sinful? Not really. But we learned some lessons.

In Greek, the word often translated as "temptation" can sometimes be better understood as "test" or "experiment." Temptation feels like a trap leading to sin, while a test can lead to growth. Tests are often dreaded—like when you're a student—but some tests, like a driver's license exam, lead to something good.

So, does God tempt us? Does God put us in situations to lure us into sin so He can punish us? I don't believe we serve that kind of God. But perhaps God allows tests to help us grow stronger. We often hear well-meaning statements like, "God is just testing you." This idea has some truth. James 1 tells us that trials and tests produce perseverance, which in turn leads to greater strength. In James 1:2-4, we read:

"My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy. After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking nothing."

I love this passage. All the trials and tests we go through help us become complete followers of Jesus. And I want that for my life, though I know I still have a ways to go.

But does God want us to struggle? Does God, like a teacher, place a test before us? Or does God allow tests to happen, like with the people of Israel, who were tested in the wilderness—not to make them fail, but to strengthen their faith and deepen their reliance on God? The more we rely on God, the less we fall into temptation. The less we rely on God, the more we will fall.

Temptation only works because a part of us wants something that's beyond our bounds. That desire can lead to sin, which is anything that's not aligned with God's goodness. Lying, greed, anger—these things harm others and go against God's will.

Self-control, one of the fruits of the Spirit, is essential in resisting temptation. When we pray, "lead us not into temptation," what are we asking for? We're not asking God to stop tempting us, because God doesn't tempt anyone. James 1:13 says, "No one who is tested should say, 'God is tempting me.' This is because God is not tempted by any form of evil, nor does he tempt anyone."

Instead, we are asking God to lead us, to give us the self-control to resist the tests and temptations that the world presents.

Last Sunday, Jake Parsley gave a wonderful message about forgiveness, saying that we should ask for forgiveness with confidence, knowing that God forgives us because of the power of the cross. He also said forgiveness comes with a responsibility: we must forgive others as God forgives us.

But right after asking for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer, we acknowledge the possibility of falling into sin again: "Lead us not into temptation." It's a cycle, and Jesus knows this. That's why grace is always available to us.

As we continue in this prayer, "deliver us from evil," we acknowledge that evil is real. Evil opposes God's will and works to pull us away from God's goodness. Two of the historic membership questions in the United Methodist Church ask us to renounce evil and resist it. We respond, "I do," accepting the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression.

While the Bible isn't clear on where evil comes from, it is clear that we need God's help to resist it. Temptation often comes from the world around us—the people we hang out with, the influences we follow, or the things we consume. Even loved ones, sometimes unknowingly, can lead us down paths we're not meant to walk.

Temptation also comes from within. We all have weak spots where we are vulnerable. Sometimes our biggest mistake is thinking we're strong enough on our own. That's why the Lord's Prayer starts with acknowledging God's greatness: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." It's a reminder that it's not about our strength, but about God's. When we're tempted, we need to surround ourselves with people who help us stay on the right path. Jesus tells us to rely on Scripture when faced with temptation. He modeled this when He was tempted in the wilderness, responding each time with, "It is written..." A strong foundation in Scripture is essential for resisting temptation.

So, what is your temptation? Is it your phone distracting you from quality time with loved ones? Junk food? Alcohol? Overspending?

And here's the more important question: Who knows about your temptation? If no one does, find someone this week—a friend, counselor, or support group—whom you can trust and talk to when you feel tempted. We must be honest with others about our temptations.

God doesn't tempt us, but temptation is a reality. Jesus teaches us to pray for wisdom and strength, to trust in God, and to lean on others. When we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," we trust that God is guiding us. We don't face temptation alone when we stay connected to God, our community, and God's forgiveness.

You are not alone. Would you pray with me?

Gracious God, forgive us for the times that we've strayed from your path. And lead us. Lead us toward your will for our life. Lead us away from the evil of the world. Help us to be honest with each other about the temptations that are in our life. Help us to find some person or group that will hold us accountable, that will guide us back to you and your will for our life. God, you have given us this freedom. You have given us the power to go down the path of righteousness, or to fall into the temptations of sin.

God, you know that this is a cycle. You know that this isn't something that we've we've we've asked for forgiveness, and then we've asked you to lead us, and we've said, lead us away from temptation, and then we're done with it. This is a journey that you have invited us to be on, and you're not leaving us.

You're with us. You're guiding us. You're walking with us. Help us to be open to what you are saying. Help us to be open to the spirit that's leading us. And leading others to your love and to your grace. And we say all of this in the name of Jesus, Amen.