

The last portion of the Lord's Prayer that we consider in this series is the petition "do not bring us to the time of trial," which is sometimes translated "into temptation." While I think we all share that sentiment—who wants to go to a time of trial?—the puzzle here is why anybody would think that God would take us there. Why would *God* lead us to a place where we're likely to do badly? It seems directly contrary to God's mission statement.

One way to think about it is just that it's a plea to be spared temptation, and maybe that's all it is. But both formulations—"do not bring us" and "lead us not" imply some participation from God in our encounters with temptation, so let's think about it that way. St. Thomas of Aquinas said that evil must disguise itself as good, and Richard Rohr, following that line of thought, writes, "The devil's secret is camouflage. The devil's job is to look very moral! It has to look like we are defending some great purpose or cause, like "making the world safe for democracy" or "keeping the bad people off the streets." Then you can do many evils without any guilt, without any shame or self-doubt, but actually with a sense of high-minded virtue." Maybe "do not bring us to the time of trial" is a reference especially to the temptation to do self-interested things in the name of doing virtuous things, to do hateful things in the name of love. It might be pointing out that we are often blind to the harmful dimensions of what we really want to do.

When I was very young, I saw the movie, "The Battle of Algiers." It's about a former French Resistance fighter who is sent to 1950s Algeria, a French colony, to squelch the uprisings of the local people. The leader of the Algerian Front de Liberation Nationale directs terror strategies against the colonial French

occupation. Each side resorts to increasing brutality. I don't remember a lot that's specific about that film, but I remember a conversation afterwards with my companion. He asked me if I thought the terrorist bombings that killed innocent civilians was justified if it was the only way for Algeria to achieve liberation, and I reluctantly said Yes. I said Yes because I sympathized with the desire for liberation, and I thought independence would lead to less suffering in the long run; the good would outweigh the bad. But I was troubled by my answer then, and I would not make that answer now. Still, you can see how someone who intends good, as I did, could convince herself or himself to justify terrorism in such a situation. It was a *temptation*, the temptation to do terrible things in the service of a great goal.

When we pray, "do not bring us to the time of trial," it functions to remind us as religious people that we have mixed motives and take confused actions. It's our very identification as idealists that can get us into trouble—someone who wasn't as interested in changing the world as I was when I watched that movie wouldn't be drawn to sympathize with such drastic actions. Doing the wrong things for the right reasons is sort of an occupational hazard for people of faith—and maybe that's why this is in the prayer, because we most of all need to remember to be honest, humble, self-aware. In a way, it's like saying to God, "At least don't let us make things worse."

This is very hard to preach about, because it's inherently a dialogical topic. To consider mixed motives or good and bad effects really requires conversation, a back and forth. It really doesn't lend itself to monologue. So I won't try to take it any farther, except to note that this is also something Jesus experienced. Standing up for his vision of God in Jerusalem during Passover under Roman occupation:

good idea or bad idea? Leaving his friends and going to the cross to die so the next move would be God's: good idea or bad idea? It is some comfort to know that the one who taught this prayer had this same struggle and uncertainty. And it's a comfort to know that he thought we could turn it over to God for redemption.

Let us pray:

God, we know you wouldn't lead us into temptation, but we can't always tell if it's you or our own complicated selves. Give us the gift of discernment, and help us not become paralyzed with indecision or self-doubt as we seek to live your kingdom in this world. Sanctify our efforts so that with us or despite us, love prevails. Amen.