

## Exegesis of the Gospel of Matthew

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Matthew 6:13, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil"

Assessment of Patristic Exegesis

Patristic Commentators:

1. Cyril of Jerusalem (c.315 – 386 AD)
2. Gregory of Nyssa (c.335 – 395 AD)
3. John Chrysostom of Constantinople (c.349 – 407 AD)

For other resources, see Orthodox Prayer website [https://www.orthodoxprayer.org/Lords\\_Prayer.html](https://www.orthodoxprayer.org/Lords_Prayer.html)

*Cyril of Jerusalem, First Mystagogical Catechesis, c.350 AD*

From Springtime of the Liturgy by Lucien Deiss, C.S.Sp., pp 286-288

[St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lecture 23.](#)

"And lead us not into temptation, Lord." Is the Lord teaching us to ask that we never be tempted? But how could we then read elsewhere: "The man who has been tempted has not been tested" (Sir 34:10). And again: "Regard it as a supreme joy, my brethren, that you are subject to all kinds of temptations" (Jas 1:2). But, then, does "entering into temptation" mean "being submerged by temptation"? Temptation is in fact comparable to a torrent that is difficult to cross; those who are not submerged by temptations pass through them; they are excellent swimmers, and the temptations have no power to drag them down. But when those who do not have the same qualities enter the stream, they are swallowed up. Judas is an example: he entered into the temptation of avarice; he did not pass through it, but was swallowed up and perished body and soul. Peter entered into the temptation of denial; he entered but was not swallowed up; he swam nobly and was saved from the temptation.

Listen, too, to the choir of the saints who were saved and who offer thanks for having been delivered from the temptation:

"You put us to the test,  
you tried us with fire as they purify silver in a fire,  
you brought us into the net,  
you loaded us down with afflictions;  
you let men tread upon our heads,  
we passed through fire and water.  
Then you led us to the place of refreshment" (Ps 66:10-12).

You see with what assurance they speak, these men and women who passed through without being swallowed up. "You led us," they sing, "to the place of refreshment." To go to the place of refreshment means to be saved from temptation. (Cat 23,17)

"But deliver us from the Evil One." If the words "Lead us not into temptation" means never to be tempted, the Lord would not have added: "But deliver us from the Evil One." The Evil One is the devil, the adversary, and we ask to be delivered from him. At the end of the prayer you add: "Amen!" "Amen" means "Let it be so!" With this word you put your seal on the content of the prayer that God has taught us. (Cat 23, 18)

*Gregory of Nyssa, The Lord's Prayer, The Beatitudes, Homily on "Lead us not..."*

Translated by Fr. Theodore Stylianopoulos, page 6,

[https://www.orthodoxprayer.org/Articles\\_files/Lord's%20Prayer/5.%20Forgive%20Us.pdf](https://www.orthodoxprayer.org/Articles_files/Lord's%20Prayer/5.%20Forgive%20Us.pdf)

"What does the next petition mean? It is necessary, I think, not to leave this petition unexamined. Knowing about what we are praying, let us make our entreaty with the soul and not the body: "Lead us not into

temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One." Beloved, what is the meaning of these words? It seems to me that the Lord names the Evil One by many and various titles according to the variations of evil operations. He calls him by many names such as Devil, Beelzebul, Mammon, ruler of the world, murderer of man, Evil One, father of lies, and other similar names. Therefore "temptation" is perhaps a sort of name for one of his activities. My suggested meaning is confirmed by the structure of the petition. For, having said, "lead us not into temptation," He adds the clause "to be delivered from the Evil One," as if He means the same thing by both references. He who has not entered into temptation is wholly removed from the Evil One and he who has succumbed to temptation is necessarily under the influence of the Evil One. Therefore both temptation and the Evil One bear one and the same meaning. What then does this teaching of the prayer commend to us? To detach ourselves from the affairs of this world because "the whole world is in the power of the Evil One" (I Jn 5:19). Whoever therefore wants to be removed from the Evil One must necessarily withdraw himself from the world. For temptation has no handle on the soul except by way of enticing the more covetous through worldly preoccupation, as if through bait on the hook of evil. Let me make this meaning perhaps clearer by other examples. A sea storm is often dangerous, but never to those who live far from it. Fire is destructive, but only to the material it grasps. War is terrible, but only for those arrayed for battle. Whoever wants to escape the evil misfortunes of war prays not to be entangled in it. Whoever fears fire trusts not to be caught in it. He who shudders at the sight of the sea hopes not to have to make a voyage. So also, he who fears the assault of the Evil One prays not to come under his influence. As we have said, according to the Lord, the world is in the power of the Evil One. The causes of temptations arise from worldly preoccupations. Therefore he who prays to be delivered from the Evil One does well to entreat to be removed from temptations. For no one would swallow the hook, if he did not first covet to grasp the bait. But let us stand and say to God: "Lead us not into temptation," that is, into the evils of daily life, but deliver us from the Evil One" who possesses power over this world. May we then be delivered from the evil one by the grace of Christ, to whom belongs the power and the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever, and to the ages of ages. Amen."

*John Chrysostom, Homily 19 on Matthew: Our Lord's Prayer*

Translated by Rev. Sir George Prevost, Bt., 1851.

Revised American edition by Rev. Matthew B. Riddle, 1888

[St. John Chrysostom, Homily XIX of Matthew \(6:1\), section 10](#) on "Lead us not into temptation"

"And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from the evil one: for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen." [Matt. 6:13] Here He teaches us plainly our own vileness, and quells our pride, instructing us to deprecate all conflicts, instead of rushing upon them. For so both our victory will be more glorious, and the devil's overthrow more to be derided. I mean, that as when we are dragged forth, we must stand nobly; so when we are not summoned, we should be quiet, and wait for the time of conflict; that we may show both freedom from vainglory, and nobleness of spirit. And He here calls the devil "the wicked one," commanding us to wage against him a war that knows no truce, and implying that he is not such by nature. For wickedness is not of those things that are from nature, but of them that are added by our own choice. And he is so called pre-eminently, by reason of the excess of his wickedness, and because he, in no respect injured by us, wages against us implacable war. Wherefore neither said He, "deliver us from the wicked ones," but, "from the wicked one;" instructing us in no case to entertain displeasure against our neighbors, for what wrongs soever we may suffer at their hands, but to transfer our enmity from these to him, as being himself the cause of all our wrongs. Having then made us anxious as before conflict, by putting us in mind of the enemy, and having cut away from us all our remissness; He again encourages and raises our spirits, by bringing to our remembrance the King under whom we are arrayed, and signifying Him to be more powerful than all. "For Thine," saith He, "is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory."

**Key Question:**

Does God really lead us into temptation? Or is this a rhetorical device contrasting with deliverance from evil?

**Patristic Commentators:**

Cyril of Jerusalem takes the verb "lead" and introduces a further distinction. While Cyril quotes Psalm 66 as an example of how God does lead His people into times of testing, Cyril also distinguishes between "entering into

temptation” and “being submerged by temptation.” Using the analogy of the river torrent, he says that two different people will experience the river differently based on their strength at swimming. The one who is excellent will “enter into temptation” and emerge on the other side. The one who is not will be “swallowed up.” I find it significant that Cyril also quotes from James 1:2, probably signaling that he has considered James 1:13 - 18, too.

Cyril also says that “the Evil One” is the one from whom we are to pray to God for deliverance. He seems content to identify the adversary. He does not explain his view of how “the Evil One” tempts us, or otherwise interacts with us.

Gregory of Nyssa answers the question by appealing to “the structure of the petition.” That is, he regards the temptation and the Evil One as having “one and the same meaning.” He uses the example of a storm at sea, being cast into a fire, and war. He says that if we want to be safe, we stay away from those phenomena, and the same goes for temptation / the Evil One.

John Chrysostom seems to either believe that God might in fact lead us into temptation, or avoids the issue. He makes temptation functionally identical with “the Wicked One.” But Chrysostom is concerned to address the matter as an issue of motivation. “Instead of rushing upon them,” we are not to rush headlong into spiritual battles with the things that tempt us, or, alternatively “the Wicked One.” Chrysostom is the most interested - of the three - to explore the etymological and theological significance of “the Wicked One” as a title and a being.

Of the three patristic commentators, I find Cyril of Jerusalem to be the most comprehensive, and pastorally insightful. His consideration of other biblical data points are helpful. He considers the exilic experience of Israel via Psalm 66. While I am cautious to generalize Israel’s exile into the Christian individual or corporate experience of disobedience per se, it is true that Adamic humanity exists in a state of “exile” from the garden of Eden, even while we participate in the life of Christ by the Spirit. So, Cyril’s citation of Psalm 66 has some significance for us as Christians because Adamic “exile” is universal. Also, Cyril’s consideration of James 1 is vitally important. James uses the same term, testing/temptation (πειρασμόν); but James differentiates God’s agency (“God does not lead us into temptation”) in contrast with our “desires” (epithymias) which do entice us, in James 1:13 - 14. According to James, whether we experience a situation as a positive “testing” or a negative “temptation” per the English words, depends on the spiritual strength / relationship with God which we bring to it.

However, Cyril uses Greek, and we use English. So he seems untroubled by the conviction of James that we should never say that God leads us into temptation [πειράζομαι] (Jas.1:13). This only begs the question when we consider Matthew 6:13 in tandem with James 1:13. Would God lead us into testing/temptation [πειράζομαι] if we did not ask Him not to do so?

### **Greek-English Lexicons:**

Both Thayer and Danker-Bauer remark that the verb form πειράζω can have a range of meanings which seems to be context dependent. It can mean “to try, to attempt.” It can take on a meaning with additional seriousness: “to make a trial of, to test one’s quality or character.” In this latter sense, such a situation can be good (Jn.6:6; 2 Cor.13:5; Rev.2:2) or bad (Mt.16:1; 19:3; 22:18, 35), or apparently neutral (Gal.6:1; Rev.2:10). Making matters even more confusing, both God and the devil test/tempt. God does in Gen.22:1; Ex.20:20; Dt.8:2; 1 Cor.10:13; Heb.2:18; 4:15; Rev.3:10. The devil does in Mt.4:1, 3 and parallels; 1 Cor.7:5; 1 Th.3:5.

### **Concordance to Find Other Biblical Usage:**

#### *Old Testament*

There are various ‘testing’ passages, and from God:

- God tested Abraham (Gen.22:1)... ‘Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.’ (Gen.22:12)
- Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction.’ (Ex.16:4)
- And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. (Dt.8:2)

- And even in the matter of the envoys of the rulers of Babylon, who sent to him to inquire of the wonder that had happened in the land, God left him alone only to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart. (2 Chr.32:21)
- Job is the greatest example of ‘testing.’

#### *Matthew*

Jesus’ wilderness testing/temptation experience surely has a bearing, since it is within Matthew, and proximate to the Sermon on the Mount. “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested/tempted [πειρασθῆναι] by the devil” (Mt.4:1). While this does not exactly solve all the theological and pastoral questions, it does seem to supply an example which Gregory of Nyssa’s exegesis does not cover. At times, it would seem, God does in fact lead us πειρασθῆναι. And in those situations, we do interact with the devil, in principle, and in some way. If it happened to Jesus, why would it not happen to us, even if in a minor key? Indeed, Gregory’s claim that “the structure of the petition” determines its meaning remains elusive. To my eyes, the structure of the poetic parallelism in the Lord’s prayer admits of more than one meaning.

Matthew 4:1 – 11 also suggests that John Chrysostom’s admonition to avoid rushing eagerly into situations of testing/temptation - while being wise counsel if dealing with an overscrupulous Christian - will come up against certain limits, as well. Jesus deliberately faced the wilderness, as part of his commitment to recapitulate the story of Israel, whatever awaited him there. Should we never do so? No doubt there are Christians who tend towards laziness or greed who could use a good πειρασμόν!

#### *James*

Second, the additional insights provided by James 1:13 – 18, which is closer biblically - theologically to followers of Christ than Psalm 66, clarify Matthew 6:13. James says that God does not test/tempt. He gives good gifts, and supplies His people with “the word of truth,” the new birth by which we become “first fruits” (Jas.1:18) by receiving “the word implanted” (Jas.1:21). Simply put, God calls us to grow, and gives us only good things in order that we grow. The situation we find ourselves in may interact with our “lusts” (Jas.1:14). But such “lusts” are not from God.

#### **Matthew 6:9 in the Context of the Entire Canon of Scripture**

“Lusts” are the “evil” and are from “the Evil One.” “Lusts” are the forces within us which make any situation into one of a temptation. “Lusts” are what we must pray for deliverance from, with God’s help. Other “effects” of “the Evil One” such as accusation and feelings of guilt may eventually be relevant, but if James 1:13 – 18 and Matthew 6:13 are brought into close connection, the reason “evil” or “the Evil One” is mentioned is surely to lay stress on “lusts” which make situations into situations of temptation.

This fits the overall context of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus is speaking to us about our heart transformation. Any movement away from Jesus’ teaching and further “into” our heart-level resistance to Jesus becomes a “lust,” and a situation of “temptation.”

Perhaps the emphasis can be seen if we also considered the situation of Jewish Christians. Jesus surely understood the radical depth of his teaching compared to the Decalogue, starting with Matthew 5:17. Jewish Christians might have been tempted to return to the “behavior” level commandments of the Sinai covenant, because of the “lusts” in us that resist the “heart” level commandments of Jesus and his kingdom. With that in view, Jesus therefore means us to pray, “Do not lead us into the temptation to turn back from these commandments, but deliver us from the lusts of the Evil One.”