

Deliver Us from Evil

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- [0 : 0 0] Several years ago, I had just finished presiding at a wedding. When one of the guests came up to me, he was welling up with emotion. He said, what was that piece you read out?
- It was one of the most powerful things I've ever heard. Now, it took me a few moments to think about what he was talking about, because though it had been a nice enough service, most weddings generally are quite moving.
- Although it had been a nice enough service, it didn't strike me that there had been anything out of the ordinary about the contents of the service. As we talked, it became apparent that the wow moment that he was referring to was actually the Bible reading.
- It was 1 Corinthians chapter 13, where Paul talks about the power of love. Now, that conversation served as a bit of a wake-up call for me, because I suddenly realised the danger of becoming over-familiarised.
- You know, I'd heard that passage from Corinthians more times than I'd had hot dinners, and to put it bluntly, I'd just gotten used to it. But listening to the reaction of someone hearing it for the first time really challenged me, made me see that we should never, ever allow our familiarity with the truth of the gospel to dull our senses to its power.
- [1 : 2 6] Now, when it comes to praying the Lord's Prayer, we've got to be careful. The problem is that we know it so well, because we've said it so many times. The danger is that we can too easily be saying it, but not actually praying it, because we end up, albeit unintentionally, reciting it as a matter of ritual without actually paying attention to what's going on.
- Now, as we think about the closing words of the Lord's Prayer, we need to be especially mindful of this, because human nature, being what it is, we're probably more likely to be engaged when we start praying it than we are by the time we get to the end of it.
- We need to be awake and stay awake to the power of those words. Deliver us from evil, for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever.
- So what are we praying when we actually pray those words? Now, I think the answer lies in today's Bible reading from Ephesians 6, where Paul writes that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil.
- See, the Bible talks about struggle because life is about struggle. Now, that's not being negative. It's just being real. The Bible recognises that reality and helps us to see it with spiritual eyes.
- [2 : 5 3] Life's struggles have a spiritual dimension, just as life's blessings have a spiritual dimension. And in Ephesians 6, Paul unpacks what that means. Paul explains that we need to be ready to stand up against the devil.
- Now, I know there will be some listening to this right now who will find all of that very primitive and who will say, look, come on, it's 2020. Is it really feasible to talk about Satan and demonic powers in any literal sense?

I mean, are you really telling me that you believe in a personal devil with horns and wielding a pitchfork? Well, we might see some of that in cartoons, but it's not quite how the Bible depicts reality.

But just because we don't find any horns and pitchforks in the Bible, don't think for one moment that demonic powers can just be written off as something that has no part in Christian belief today.

You see, what the Bible presents us with is a worldview which refuses to see things merely in material terms. We're not just flesh and blood, but we're spiritual beings.

[4 : 02] And life is more than just what we see and touch. In fact, the deepest realities are precisely those things that we can't see and touch. Everything has a spiritual dimension.

And just as God is behind all that is good and true and life-giving, so there are spiritual powers of darkness behind that which is evil and destructive.

I can't see what's to be gained by denying that reality. To say there's simply no such thing as the demonic is to downplay the spiritual weight of evil and suffering.

The call to authentic Christian discipleship is the challenge to see things differently and more profoundly than the limitations of a materialist mindset.

To follow Jesus means that we refuse to take things at face value and that we dare to ask what spiritual realities lie behind whatever we are presented with. When Paul writes in Ephesians 5, Wake up, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, You know, it's a clarion call to live a fuller life with a bigger vision of things, one that's energised by a sense of God's Holy Spirit, which therefore has the spiritual confidence to confront the power of evil wherever it lurks.

[5 : 24] So when we pray those words, deliver us from evil, we need to be aware of what is going on and what we're doing. We're not simply verbalising religious poetry or trotting out some piece of liturgical mantra.

We're engaging the powers. We're doing something that is vitally spiritual. That great Swiss theologian of the 20th century, Professor Karl Barth, regarded by many as one of the most brilliant thinkers in the history of the church, wrote this.

In Christian prayer, we find ourselves at the very seat of government, at the very heart of the mystery and purpose of all occurrence.

You see, in praying, deliver us from evil. We're not merely refuting that which is bad, but we're engaging in battle by being empowered by that which is good.

I think that's why in the Protestant tradition, the Lord's Prayer ends the way it does, when it says, Deliver us from evil, for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

[6 : 33] Now, not all translations of Matthew chapter 6 include that last bit. And there's a bit of uncertainty around this, because while some of the ancient manuscripts include those words, not all of the earliest ones do.

Now, we won't go into all of that now, but one very strong reason in favour of including those words at the end of the Lord's Prayer is that they round it off by coming back to where it started.

You see, it begins with our Father in heaven. So when we end with, For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever, we begin and we end with God as the central focus.

Now, that's really important. It's important because as real as the spiritual powers of darkness may be, God is infinitely greater. And it is in His power that we engage.

When we make God the central focus of our lives, when we fall on our knees before Him and allow Him to be Lord over us, everything falls into perspective.

- [7 : 37] We're delivered from evil. We're set free. We're empowered. Everything falls into perspective. Now, I want to finish this series on prayer with precisely that challenge.
- In his book called *The Vision and the Vow*, Pete Grigg tells of how a distinguished art critic was studying a painting by the Italian Renaissance master, Filippino Lippi.
- I don't know if I've pronounced that correctly. But he stood in London's National Gallery, gazing at the 15th century depiction of Mary holding the infant Jesus on her lap with Saints Dominic and Jerome kneeling nearby.
- But the painting troubled the critic. There could be no doubting Lippi's skill in his use of colour and composition, but the proportions of the picture all seemed slightly wrong.
- The hills in the background seemed exaggerated, as if they might topple out of the frame at any minute and fall onto the gallery's polished floor. The two kneeling saints looked awkward and uncomfortable.
- [8 : 43] Now, the art critic, and his name was Robert Cumming, was not the first to criticise Lippi's work for its poor perspective. But he may be the last to do so, because at that moment he had a revelation.
- It suddenly occurred to him that the problem might actually be his. The painting he was analysing with clinical objectivity was not just another piece of religious art hanging in a gallery alongside other comparative works.
- It had never been intended to come anywhere near a gallery. Lippi's painting had been commissioned to hang in a place of prayer. So self-consciously, this art critic dropped to his knees in the public gallery before that painting.
- He suddenly saw what generations of critics had missed. From this new vantage point, Robert Cumming found himself gazing up at a perfectly proportioned piece.
- The foreground had moved naturally to the background, while the saints seemed settled, their awkwardness, like the painting itself, having turned to grace.
- [9 : 54] Mary now looked intently and kindly directly at him as he knelt at her feet between the saints, Dominic and Jerome. It was not the perspective of the painting that had been wrong all these years.
- It was the perspective of the people looking at it. Robert Cumming, on bended knee, found a beauty that Robert Cumming, the art critic, could not.
- The painting only came alive to those on their knees in prayer. The right perspective is the position and the posture of prayer.
- And that, well, that's where we need to be.