

# Prayer, Testing and Punctuation

I'd like to start with a reading from 'Eats, Shoots and Leaves' by Lynne Truss. Bear with me if you've heard this before...

A panda walks into a cafe. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires two shots in the air. 'Why?' asks the confused waiter, as the panda makes towards the exit. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder. 'I'm a panda,' he says, at the door. 'Look it up.' The waiter turns to the relevant entry and, sure enough, finds an explanation. '**Panda**. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves.'

Punctuation is not a topic that generally comes up in sermons. Maybe it's because of being corrected at school. Hands up if you ever had lots of red pen and 'See Me' on your English homework? Punctuation may more important than you think. Here's one example.

The words Jesus said from the cross, to the thief who repented, are usually read like this:  
*Write on a piece of paper:*

*"I tell you the truth - today, you will be with Me in paradise."*

If the punctuation changes slightly, however, it sounds like this:

*"I tell you the truth today - you will be with Me in paradise."*

Can you see how the meaning changes? In the first version, Jesus says the thief will join Him in paradise immediately. In the second, Jesus promises paradise at some point, but maybe not immediately. As far as I'm aware, there wasn't any punctuation in the original Bible manuscripts- it was added later, along with the chapters and verses.

Here's another example, from the Lord's Prayer.

*Write on a piece of paper:*

*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

I always had a bit of a problem with that line. God is our Father. He doesn't lead us into temptation, does He? It's not the sort of thing He would do. So why is it in there?

Here's another way to punctuate it:

And lead us- not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Or maybe:

And lead us- not into temptation, but away from evil.

The original Greek word here, *peirasmos*, has been translated as 'temptation' but could also be translated as 'test'. We know that God tests us - *peirasmos* is used to describe the refining of gold - and there are any number of stories in the Bible about that.

Think of Joshua spending years serving Moses before he got to lead Israel, Joseph having to endure years of prison, Ruth proving her character by looking after her mother-in-law, Esther risking her life, or David hiding from King Saul, looking after refugees and writing Psalms. All of these heroes were tested, and so are we. If nothing else, we're tested through the annoyances of everyday life.

The final word in the phrase, *ponēros*, can be translated either as 'evil' or as 'the evil one'. These two phrases are clearly linked, and so it could well be a play on words. 'Lord, we know You test us, but please don't let the enemy fool us by turning the test into a temptation! Deliver us from the evil one.'

Life is busy these days. If you feel small and unimportant, it's easy to get disheartened and it's easy to miss the importance of the little things. Those little things, though, may well be the way you are proven by God and prepared for what's next in your life.

*Readings 1 and 2: Luke 16:10 and Zechariah 4:10a [see bottom of this page]*

*Use recent anecdotes of annoyances that you have dealt with, or:*

I heard a story of a Piccolo player in an orchestra who felt disheartened because her instrument was so small, and decided not to bother playing one day. But the conductor suddenly stopped the rehearsal and said, 'Where's my Piccolo?' He could hear when she was and wasn't playing, and how that clear, small sound fitted into the whole.

If we get road rage, annoyed with the computer, or have to work with someone annoying, it's a test - a chance to show how much we've learned about self-control or seeing the good in other people. If we don't pass first time, we'll probably have to do it again and again until we DO pass. We may find ourselves going over the same old ground for YEARS. I certainly have!

We need to remember that this is God's love for us. He's not trying to catch us out, He wants us to be the best we can be! Our lives are punctuated by tests because our loving Father God examines our hearts. If we prove ourselves in little responsibilities, we get bigger responsibilities and this is a good thing, because we've proven our worth.

*Reading 3: Matthew 6:34 [see bottom of this page]*

Can you see how the meaning changes? God loves us, smiles on us and helps us to do better. His grace is sufficient. I try and remember that when I get tested and when I recite the Lord's Prayer. I hope you will remember it too. Let's pray.

*Spontaneous prayer, followed by the Lord's Prayer*

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If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities.  
Luke 16:10 (NLT)

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Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin.  
Zechariah 4:10a (NLT)

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Jesus said, "Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes." Matthew 6:34 (MSG)

Recommended reading: 'Fifty-Seven Words That Change the World' by Darrell W Johnson  
(2005, Regent College Publishing)