

PRAY IN FAITH
January 24, 2010

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Mark 11:20-26

"THE CALL TO FOLLOW CHRIST" SERIES
#4, PRAY IN FAITH
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INTRODUCTION

The vision that God has given us here at North Center is to glorify Him by making disciples who know Christ, grow in him and show their love for him.

We're starting this New Year with a discipleship emphasis on the theme "The Call to Follow Christ." All those who are called to know Christ are also called to follow Him, to be His disciple. Along with the sermon series on Sunday mornings we're using a workbook through the week that's based on a diagram called "The Disciple's Cross."

At the center of the Cross is Christ, emphasizing that being a Christian means having a real, life transforming relationship with Christ. Following Christ, being His disciple, means abiding in Christ, living a Christ-centered life. Our relationship with Christ is not just one part of our lives - it's the central reality of our lives. Our relationship with Christ connects to and directs everything about our lives.

The arms of the Cross are means God employs to enable us to live this kind of a life. Each week we're examining a different arm of the cross. Last week we looked at the "Word," referring, of course, to the Word of God, the Bible. We can't grow spiritually without the discipline of Living in the Word, spending time in not just on Sundays but every day, reading, studying, and meditating in it and living by it.

This week we move on to another arm in the Disciple's Cross - prayer. Praying in faith is an essential discipline for the lives of those who are seeking to follow Christ. Jesus emphasizes this in the focal verse/memory verse for this week - Mark 11:24.

Cf., Mark 11:24

Now let's read this verse in its immediate context.

vv. 20-26

A little background is important to understanding what's going on here. What we're looking at takes place during Holy Week, between Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem and His death and resurrection. Jesus' arrival at Jerusalem took place on what we call Palm Sunday. Then on Monday Jesus went to the Temple and drove out the moneychangers and livestock merchants.

Today's text takes place on Tuesday of that week, and in these verses Jesus gives us 4 critical truths about praying in faith or believing prayer.

I. BELIEVING PRAYER COMES FROM A GENUINE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. (VV. 20-22)

A. A CONTINUATION OF AN INCIDENT THE PREVIOUS DAY

1. This account of the fig tree is actually a continuation of an incident that took place on the previous day in verses 12-14. Jesus and His disciples were staying in Bethany, about 2 or 3 miles outside Jerusalem, and were on the way into Jerusalem.

Cf., vv. 12-14

Many critics reject this story as being unworthy of Jesus. And, admittedly, it does appear that Jesus is acting like a petulant, spoiled brat, throwing a temper tantrum because some poor tree doesn't have fruit when He wants it. To be honest, the story does seem to be out-of-character for Jesus; it doesn't seem to fit Jesus as we see Him in the rest of the New Testament.

B. SO WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

How are we to understand this strange account? Is Jesus like the college basketball coach who was shaving one morning when his wife called him from the other room to tell him that Sports Illustrated was on the phone asking for him. With visions of an interview and the national recognition that it would bring, he hurried through the rest of his shaving, managing to nick himself three or four times. His face bearing the minor wounds of this episode, he rushed to the phone, tripping over the dog and banging his shin against a chair. At last, he had the receiver in hand and asked, "This is Sports Illustrated?" The voice came back, "Yes it is, and we want to offer you a special subscription price..."

Like the coach Jesus is disappointed here, but His disappointment is not in the fig tree.

1. To understand Jesus' disappointment we need to review what's happened so far this week. On Sunday (Palm Sunday) Jesus had entered Jerusalem greeted by palm-waving, Hosanna-shouting crowds. After entering the city He went to the Temple, a magnificent architectural wonder built by Herod the Great, and observed its hubbub of merchandising and religious ritual. The Temple was a beehive of activity but little of it involved a genuine worship of God. In fact, as we come to verses 12-14 it's Monday and Jesus is on the way back into Jerusalem to cleanse the Temple of the moneychangers and animal merchants.

As He walks towards Jerusalem, Jesus remarks to the disciples about how hungry He is, and as He mentions this He notices a fig tree that is loaded with luxuriant leaves and thinks how nice it would be to have some figs, but it's late March and fig season isn't until late August, another 5 months.

Jesus knows this, of course, but He decides that the fig tree that's barren of figs is actually even more useful to Him in a different way - as a visual parable. You see, the fig tree was often used in the OT as a symbol of Israel, and this tree with lots of big, beautiful leaves but no fruit would be a perfect example of what Jesus had observed at the Temple the day before, of people whose lives were full of religious activities but barren of any real love for God, of people who worshipped God with their lips but whose hearts were far from Him.

So Jesus takes the disciples over to the tree and in front of them curses the tree that has no figs. Jesus then proceeds on to Jerusalem, cleanses the Temple of those who loved making money more than worshipping God, and then returns to Bethany for the night.

2. The next morning (Tuesday morning) Jesus and the disciples walk back to Jerusalem along the same road and pass by the same fig tree that just the day before had been blanketed with bright green leaves; only now it is completely dead, all its green leaves are a shriveled brown.

3. Peter, obviously surprised, remarks about what has happened to the tree that Jesus cursed. To which Jesus replies: "Have faith in God" (v. 23).

Cf., v. 23

This strange reply is actually the whole point of the fig tree object lesson. Faith in God is precisely what was missing in Israel - they had lots of religious show but no genuine love for God or trust in Him. Israel was like the fig tree, full of the leaves of religious rituals but lacking in the fruit of love for God and faith in Him.

Don't trust in religious activities, Jesus says, trust in God. A genuine relationship with God is an absolute prerequisite for the believing prayer that Jesus is about to call His disciples to practice.

II. BELIEVING PRAYER IS ACCORDING TO GOD'S WILL. (VV. 23-24)

A. NOT "NAME-IT-AND-CLAIM IT" PRAYER

Some have tried to equate the believing prayer that Jesus speaks about here with name-it-and-claim-it prayer, that all you have to do is pray for something and believe that God is going to give it to you and it will be yours. Whatever you want, God is obligated to give it to you - a Mercedes, a Range Rover, a new house, a victory over New Orleans.

That, of course, is not what Jesus is saying.

B. LOOK AT VERSE 23B (V. 23B)

Look again at what Jesus says in verse 23b.

v. 23b

The believing prayer that Jesus is talking about here is prayer that believes "what he says will happen." I think that the "he" in this part of the verse is referring to God. Prayer isn't about believing that what we say (or claim) will happen but believing what God says will happen. Believing prayer believes that God will perform what He decrees. Believing prayer doesn't doubt God's Word but has faith that God will keep His Word - always and completely.

C. LOOK AT WHAT JESUS SAYS IN JOHN 15 (JOHN 15:7)

Jesus identifies 2 conditions to believing prayer.

1. "If you remain in me"

The first condition to believing prayer is to "remain in" Christ. Remaining or abiding in Christ is the circle at the center of the Disciple's Cross. It's making Christ the center of our lives - the One whom we desire to please and honor above all else.

2. "And my words remain in you"

The second condition to believing prayer is for Christ's words to remain in us - for us to live in God's Word, hearing it, reading it, meditating on it so that it renews our minds, transforms our hearts, determines our priorities, shapes our values and directs our behavior.

3. Jesus says that when we fulfill these 2 conditions that we can ask what we will and it will be done. Fulfilling

these conditions means that our wills have been submitted to His, that our desires have been conformed to His, that we want only what He wills. That's how Jesus prayed.

-- cf., Mark 14:36

III. BELIEVING PRAYER IS LINKED TO FORGIVENESS. (V. 25)

Jesus also goes on to make a link between believing prayer and forgiveness.

v. 25

Believing prayer, prayer that prevails with God and moves the hand of God, is inseparably linked to forgiveness in two ways.

A. BELIEVING PRAYER IS LINKED TO OUR BEING FORGIVEN.

We have the right to come before God in prayer only because we have received the forgiveness of our sins through Christ's sacrificial, atoning death for us.

B. AND BELIEVING PRAYER IS LINKED TO OUR BEING FORGIVING..

The forgiven are to forgive. Refusal to forgive is usually an indication of pride. A primary reason we refuse to forgive others is our pride, and James 4:6 declares:

James 4:6 God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

Pride is a roadblock to God's grace in answered prayer. Pride closes the door to the mighty moving of God in our lives.

IV. BELIEVING PRAYER MOVES MOUNTAINS. (V. 23)

Jesus uses the image of moving a mountain to illustrate the magnitude of God's power - God can do anything He desires to do. If He desired, God could, of course, move a literal mountain, but God is more interested in moving other kinds of mountains - mountains of opposition that would block the fulfillment of His plans and purposes in our lives.

Remember what Jesus prayed: "Everything is possible" with God. Things that are impossible with us are possible with Him. It doesn't matter how big the mountain is that you're facing, God can move it. It doesn't matter how impossible your circumstances appear to be, God can make a way.

He's the God who parted the Red Sea. All things are possible with Him.

He's the God who provided manna in the wilderness, every day, for 40 years. All things are possible with Him.

He's the God who brought down the mighty walls of Jericho. All things are possible with Him.

He's the God who delivered Daniel from the lion's den. All things are possible with Him.

He's the God who protected Daniel's friends in the fiery furnace. All things are possible with Him.

He's the God who rolled back the stone from the tomb and triumphed over death and hell. All things are possible with Him.

As A.W. Tozer said, "Anything God has ever done, he can do now. Anything God has ever done anywhere, he can do here. Anything God has ever done for anyone, he can do for you."

And it's believing prayer - prayer that is based on a genuine relationship with Him and is according to His will and is rooted in His forgiveness - that unleashes the mighty power of Him who can move heaven and earth to accomplish whatever He desires for us.