

## *“Mountains Thrown Into the Sea” Kind of Faith*

*Series: Jesus and His Gospel: Studies in Mark – Part 43*

*Mark 11:20-26*

Congregational Prayer:

Introduction: Take your Bible and turn with me to Mark 11, Mark chapter 11.

We inch ever closer this morning to the pinnacle of the life of Jesus – his death, burial, and resurrection. As we pick up the narrative in Mark 11 we will stop to focus on a relatively small event that happened on Tuesday morning of Christ’s Passion Week. In just 3 days all of these things will come to their culmination in His death upon the Cross. But on this very normal trip into the city of Jerusalem with his disciples they passed by the tree that Jesus had cursed on his way into Jerusalem on Monday morning. It was completely withered from the roots up, and Jesus uses the tree to teach some vital lessons to his disciples.

You will remember that Jesus cursed the tree because it was full of leaves and no fruit. We explained why that was true and why that was a problem last week as we looked at the first part of this passage in Mark 11. The tree was deceiving because it appeared to have life, but it was completely fruitless. This was a living parable then of what Jesus found in the Temple at Jerusalem. This place that was so central to the worship of the Jews was a place that looked to be so alive with worship of God, but in reality it was lifeless and dead and fruitless. The point of the fruitless fig tree and the purging of the Temple by our Lord was that God condemns fruitlessness.

But there is more to be learned from the fig tree than just the condemnation of fruitlessness. That is what we will discover this morning. Let’s start reading in Mark 11 and verse 20 and we will read down through verse 25.

In the vicinity of the fruitless fig tree that has now completely withered Jesus is going to give monumental lessons on faith. That is the point of Jesus’ words from verse 22 and following – have faith in God. Before we explore those verses though, let’s address the biggest concern with this text. So in last week’s text we saw that people often use Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree when it was out of season for ripe figs as a means to call Jesus a raving lunatic in need of some time off. They read into those verses that he used his power in an uncontrollable rage to get back at the fig tree for not producing figs. Well, hopefully we debunked that myth for you last week, but our text this morning also has a point of difficulty that people like to look at and use as a basis for their distrust in the Scriptures. The supposed problem is that in Matthew’s account in Matthew 21 we are told that Jesus curses the fig tree and it withers at once and the disciples are amazed because it withered at once. Mark, however, presents it to us as happening over a 24

hour period. Jesus curses the tree on Monday and Peter sees it and says something about it on Tuesday morning in Mark's account. So, obviously this proves that the Bible is inaccurate and is filled with lies and half-truths – okay – no – not at all! There are a few possibilities to explain this, but I don't want to get too bogged down here. But I know if I don't say anything some of you will be stuck here the whole sermon trying to figure this out. The simplest explanation is that Matthew is condensing the account for the sake of keeping with the theme in his narrative. We have already seen that the Gospel writers are not writing to give a straight line chronological account of the life of Jesus. They are writing to prove a point about Jesus and so they intersperse accounts sometimes out of their chronological order so as to make the point. This was a totally acceptable practice in this genre of biography in the First Century. So, Matthew condenses the account and tells us less detail, whereas Mark expands the account and that is where we learn that it happened over a 24 hour period. The other possible explanation is that in Matthew we could be told what happened right away in that maybe the tree did indeed wither in some way right before their very eyes and they were amazed by this. And then in Mark we learn that it didn't just wither immediately but it also withered completely – from the roots up – every part of the tree was now dead. So Matthew focuses on the immediate event and Mark focuses on the completed event. I tend to like that second explanation a little more, but both are possible. For a tree to completely wither overnight would certainly fit the idea of withering “at once” when it is looked at in comparison to how long it normally takes a tree in full bloom to wither. Anyways, the point is, this is a non-contradiction.

Mark's narrative, having come from the mouth and recollection of Peter, points us to the lessons Jesus desired to teach his disciples in the shadow of a withered fig tree. When Jesus cursed the fig tree he taught an important lesson about fruitless faith, and now after the full effect of his curse he is going to teach 3 important lessons about fruitful faith. The whole point of Jesus' teaching here is found in verse 22 – Have faith in God. That is the response Jesus desires out of all of his disciples as they gaze upon the withered tree. Mark doesn't explicitly tell us that the disciples were amazed, but we can read it into Peter's question. If the text had a tone of voice I assume it would be an amazed and shocked and somewhat delighted tone. “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered!” Matthew does tell us that the disciples were amazed by this.

I am amazed by their amazement. Here we are at the end of Jesus' ministry and for almost three years they have seen Jesus do all sorts of amazing things – healing the lame and the blind and the deaf, raising people from the dead, healing people from incurable diseases like leprosy and the woman's unending hemorrhaging of blood. And yet, here they stand amazed once again. Jesus' display of omnipotent power never got old to them – and it should never get old to us. Who can say to a tree – may no one ever eat fruit from you again and within 24 hours it is completely withered from the roots up. Jesus spoke and it happened. That is truly amazing!

And from this, Jesus desires for his disciples to learn to trust in Him. They are no longer to place their faith in religious exercise or experience or place – like all the people at the Temple the day

before. Rather, these disciples – and all disciples – are to put their faith in God. But Jesus doesn't just tell us to have faith, he explains what kind of faith we are supposed to have. This is a really important point to remember as we go through the text. Jesus is explaining the nature and the object of our faith. He is not primarily describing the inner workings of prayer. More on that in a minute. So, by looking at the example of Jesus as God's perfect Son, we, as sons and daughters of God, must have this kind of faith in God. Looking at the withered fig tree we should respond with faith – a faith that prays – a faith that prays in belief – and a faith that prays in belief and forgiveness. So, our outline this morning is going to build a progressive statement about faith – faith that prays, faith that prays in belief, and faith that prays in belief and forgiveness.

**I. Faith that Prays – vs. 23-25**

- a. We see the first point by looking at the passage as a whole. Jesus calls us to faith in verse 22 and then he tells us how we are to pray in verses 23-25. The assumption of our Lord is the connection of faith and prayer. Prayer is an expression of faith. Faith without prayer is not faith at all. So, if we say that we believe in God and we trust in God and we do not pray, we do not really believe in God or trust in Him. That is the overall point of verses 23-25. Faith prays because prayer is an expression of faith.
- b. As the disciples gaze at the withered fig tree in amazement the obvious lesson is that God is more powerful than they are. He can do things they cannot do because He is the Almighty God. Therefore, they must have faith in God, and this faith must be a faith that prays. Now prayer is possible without faith. So, it is possible to pray because we somehow believe that through prayer we earn the favor of God to shine upon our situation and therefore call him to act on our behalf. Or we can view prayer as some kind of religious expression that through the practice of it we secure the work of God on our behalf because we have put in our licks through prayer. But this is not how God works. He is not pleased with faithless attempts to earn his favor. Rather, as Hebrews 11:6 makes clear – it is impossible to please God in anything if we do not have faith. You could easily make the case that the whole theme of the book of Hebrews is the same theme of our passage this morning – Have faith in God. And the clearest expression of that is found in 11:6 which says:
  - i. And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. (Heb 11:6 ESV)
- c. To be rewarded by God you must seek God because you have believed that God exists. Not just that he is a being who is out there, but that he is the Ultimate Being from which you alone can be truly rewarded. And so you cannot please God without faith, and you cannot have faith without drawing near to God by believing that He exists and that he rewards those who seek Him.

- d. Jesus tells us in Mark 11 that this seeking after God – this drawing near in faith is expressed through prayer.
- e. Faithless prayer does not please God. So, when you pray before your meal or with your kids at night or by yourself in the morning or with a few other believers in a small group – why are you doing this? Are you praying because you see your great need and you are convinced of God's great goodness to reward those who seek Him? Or are you praying because you think that by your praying you will secure God's favor simply by praying? Faithless prayer does not please God.
- f. But neither does prayerless faith. If you have faith, according to Jesus, you will pray. Why then Christian is the gathering of the church for the simple purpose of praying together the least attended meeting of the church on any given week? It is interesting to note in our text that the verbs used in verses 23-25 are plural verbs. Jesus is not just calling the individual to prayer, but the believing community to prayer together. Most certainly we as individuals must pray as an expression of our faith in God, but we must also, by the very command of Jesus here, pray together. I have never had someone tell me this, but I have heard others report of this, that one of the reasons people avoid the church meeting for prayer is because they are afraid to pray in front of others. If this is you brother or sister who feel this way, I want to gently and yet clearly tell you this morning that you are missing the point. Prayer with God's people is not some sort of fashion show of eloquent speakers. We are not gathering so as to impress others with our grandiose speech and our biblical lingo and our thee's and thou's of exalted English. No, this is not what a prayer meeting is about. The meeting of God's people to prayer is primarily an expression of corporate faith. By praying together we are saying to God that we as a local church are seeking after God because we believe that He exists and that he rewards those who seek Him.
- g. Therefore, if we are not seeking God together through the avenue of prayer, does it not bring into question our corporate faith? If we as a body of Christ are largely not gathering to pray together does it not say that we as a body don't really believe that God exists and we don't really have faith that He rewards those who seek Him? From Hebrews 11:6 then we can draw the conclusion that we are not pleasing God because we are not exercising one of the most fundamental expressions of true faith. Is this really what we want as a church? To not please God because we won't gather to pray?
- h. I want to tread carefully here because with an issue like this I know how easy it would be for me to put you on a guilt trip and make you feel obligated to come to the prayer gathering of the church. My goal is not to get a certain number of people to attend our Wednesday night prayer meeting. My goal is simply to call you to true faith, just like Jesus does in the text. If that leaves you aware of your lack of this expression of your faith in God and it calls you to the response of

wanting to pray with God's people – then I think we can attribute that work to the Spirit of God and not to an over-zealous pastor riding a hobby horse.

- i. I am not saying that the only place you can pray with God's people is at our Wednesday night prayer gathering. I think that is a wonderful place to pray and we are always trying to improve that time so as to focus our attention on the very reason we gather – to pray. But what I am saying is that if we as a church body say we believe in God and we believe that he rewards those who seek Him and we desire for Him to be pleased with us – then we must be a church who prays together – and our 5-7 minute prayer before the sermon every Sunday morning is simply not enough. Do you as a member of the body exercise the corporate faith of the body by praying with others? How can you do this more? How can we as a church be more of a church with true faith that is seen in our zealous pursuit and practice of corporate prayer? Jesus calls you to have faith in God and that faith in God is a faith that prays.

## II. Faith that Prays In Belief – vs. 23-24

- a. This faith that prays is a faith that prays in belief. Verses 23 and 24 describe the kind of faith we are to have in God in light of the withered fig tree. So Jesus says, that if you say to this mountain – be taken up and thrown into the sea and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Then he makes a statement of consequence or conclusion in verse 24. Since verse 23 is true therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. The kind of faith in God that you and I are to have as followers of Christ is a faith that prays in belief. That is the point of Jesus' words here. He is not intent on teaching about the finer points of prayer, nor is he focused on the details of answered prayer. Rather, he in the wake of a miraculously withered fig tree is intent on pointing them to the kind of faith they should have in God. It should be a faith that believes God is able to do anything – like move a mountain into a sea.
- b. *Indiscriminate Belief*
  - i. The condition for God answering this prayer of the faith-filled in verse 23 is that he does not doubt. This word for doubting in the original has the idea of discriminating between – or discerning. So, we are to have a faith that does not discriminate against God. True faith does not look at something that the Christian cannot do and determine that God is not able to do it either therefore there is no hope of it ever being acted upon and so the Christian fails to pray – or prays with unbelief in his heart. This unbelief, or this doubt is fostered by us looking at our problem and then looking at God and determining, or discerning, or discriminating against God by saying that he is not able to do anything about it either. Now, you might think – well, I would never think that about God! I would never determine him unable to do something. How about that thing you have

been praying about for decades? Is God still able to bring the action you desire there?

- ii. This word for not doubting is the word used to describe Abraham's faith in Romans 4. Remember Romans 4? Paul is describing to us the fact that saving faith is and always has been the same – taking God at His Word and living according to it. Abraham had been promised by God through a covenant that he would give him a descendant that would grow into a mighty people. As Abraham approached 100 years old and his wife approached 90 years old – they certainly had signs clearly and logically pointing away from God keeping his promise. And yet, they persevered in faith. They took God at His Word and they believed Him. So, Romans 4:20 says:
  1. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, (Rom 4:20 ESV)
- iii. Though Abraham had plenty of evidence to doubt God's word and disbelieve the promise, based on God's character to do the impossible, Abraham continued to believe God – and it was counted to him as righteousness.
- iv. This is at the heart of the Gospel. The Bible tells us that we are sinners in need of a Savior. And yet, we think in our natural minds that we have evidence to the opposite. The Gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that Jesus is the Son of God – perfect God and perfect man – and that because of this he could become the sacrificial Lamb who gave his sinless life in the place of ours. The Gospel tells us that we must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved and that this belief contains repentance from sin and faith in Christ's finished work. And yet, we as natural men find all kinds of supposed evidence that flies in the face of God's ability to save mankind from sin. We find all kinds of reasons to believe in something other than God and His Gospel to save us. Humans discriminate against God and determine Him to be untruthful and therefore unworthy of saving faith. Saving faith is indiscriminate in the sense that even in the face of what seems impossible to us, we believe what God has said is true. It is this same kind of belief that must permeate prayer. True faith expresses itself in prayer that has an indiscriminate belief in God's ability to answer. It is the kind of conviction described in Jeremiah 32 that undergirds our faith-filled praying.
  1. <sup>17</sup> 'Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you. <sup>18</sup> You show steadfast love to thousands, but you repay the guilt of fathers to their children after them, O great

and mighty God, whose name is the LORD of hosts, <sup>19</sup> great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the children of man, rewarding each one according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds. (Jer 32:17-19 ESV)

- v. This kind of a view of God is a propellant to faith. If this is true about God, then why would we not pray when faced with mountains in our lives that need to be moved? Why would we not cast our cares upon Him, knowing that He cares for us? True faith exalts the character of God as it is compelled by this indiscriminate belief that God can do anything.
- c. Now, it is at this point that many people in so called Christianity lose their way. They read these words by Jesus and they assume that Jesus is giving an undeniable promise of answered prayer. So, we just have to believe that we have already received it when we pray and the text says that it will be done for us. So, if I believe that I will receive \$1 million dollars in my bank account and I pray and ask God to do it for me, then it is as good as done right – it will be there! Isn't that what Jesus is here promising? The thing that will keep us out of trouble here is to remember Jesus' main point. He is calling us to indiscriminate faith. He is calling us to believe in God because God is able. He is using the hyperbolic metaphor of "tell this mountain to get up and be cast into the sea and if you ask without doubt in your heart it will come to pass." Obviously he didn't mean for them to literally do that. He was using this metaphor to point to the impossible. God is the God of the impossible – therefore believe that when you pray. Pray as though that is true – that God can do whatever God wants to do. Jesus is laying down one of the conditions of prayer and giving the promise of answered prayer when this condition is met. He doesn't go from there into all of the other conditions of prayer that must be met in order for God to answer our prayer in the affirmative. He doesn't do that because that isn't his point. His point is to call us to pray filled with belief in God. But we know from other Scriptures that there are other conditions of prayer that gets answered positively.
  - i. James tells us in 4:3:
    - 1. <sup>3</sup>You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. (James 4:3 ESV)
    - 2. So, in order to receive what we are asking for from God we must not only believe in our hearts that God is able, but we must evaluate our motives. Why do I want God to give me the thing I am asking for? Is it so that I can spend it on my passions? In other words – is my request all about me and what I want? Is it absent of God's desire? Right motives are a condition of answered prayer.
  - ii. John gives us another condition. In 1 John 5:14-15 he says:
    - 1. <sup>14</sup> And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. <sup>15</sup> And if we know

that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him. (1 John 5:14-15 ESV)

2. So, we must not only pray with belief, but also with right motives, and John tells us we must also pray according to God's will. Our requests must be in line with what God wants. He never grants prayer that is against His will – let me say that again – he never grants prayer that is against His will. This makes unanswered prayer much more palatable. God did not say no because he doesn't like me or because he wasn't feeling nice that day – no he doesn't answer prayer because it is against his will. Either it is against his will completely and so he will never grant it, or it is against his will in the moment, and maybe at some time later he will grant it when it conforms to his will.
3. *Illustration:* House in PA – unanswered prayer for several years – started to pray more for what I was confident was God's will – the change of my own heart through the process so that I didn't waste the waiting.
  - iii. So, are the Name and Claim it preachers right here? That we should just tell God what we want and believe it in our hearts and God is obligated to do what we say? Is that Jesus point? Is he saying that God is big enough and mighty enough to do for you whatever you want him to do? Or is Jesus saying so much more than that? Isn't Jesus saying believe in God because he can do exceeding abundantly above and beyond all that you could even hope to ask or think? Have faith in God. Have a faith in God that prays in belief.

### III. Faith that Prays In Belief and Forgiveness – vs. 25

- a. Verse 25 calls us to have a faith in God that prays in forgiveness. So Jesus says – whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. If you are using the King James verse 26 is also included which simply says that if we don't forgive others then we will not be forgiven by the Father. Most likely this was not in the original text of Mark's manuscript, but was probably added later so that it lined up better with Matthew's verses about prayer in chapter 6.
- b. Here is another condition given for answered prayer. We must pray in belief and we must pray in forgiveness. There is so much to say here about forgiveness, but that is not the point of the passage. Forgiveness gets abused in Christian minds and practice to the point where it has become self-focused. In other words, we hear all the time that we need to forgive others so that we feel better about ourselves and others. Forgiveness has become a feel better pill for the soul. But that isn't what it is, but we will get to that from some other text that actually talks about forgiveness more than this. Jesus is simply saying – if you will not give

to others what has been freely granted to you by God the Father, then you will not receive anything else. Forgiveness should flow freely from the heart of the one who has been forgiven. There is this parable that Jesus uses to teach this very truth. He tells the story of a man who owed such a huge debt that it would never be paid back in his lifetime. So the king calls him to account for the debt and is going to imprison him, but the man pleads with the king for mercy and another chance and the man was set free from his debt. He then leaves there and goes and finds a man who owes him a much lesser amount and demands him to pay and when he can't he throws him into jail. This is the epitome of fruitless faith. You see a faith in God that knows forgiveness through the blood of Christ is a faith that will freely grant forgiveness to all who ask. If you refuse to forgive you are like this wicked servant and Jesus says your requests will not be granted to you.

- c. I think the point Jesus is making is that if you have received the forgiveness of God you cannot help but be a person who forgives others. If you are truly aware of the great debt that has been removed through Christ then you will be quick to forgive the debt others have incurred against you. Forgiveness is essentially an agreement between you and another person that you are not going to bring up their sin to use it against them ever again. Forgiveness means that you will not bring it up to yourself, to others, to that person, or even to God. So, when we are unforgiving we are essentially demanding our right for vengeance against someone who has hurt us. We are holding onto the hurt so that we can get back at them with the same or worse hurt than what they have caused us.
- d. Do you see how selfish and self-exalting unforgiveness is? Do you see how a lack of forgiveness is a slap in the face of the God who forgives freely through the costly death of His Son Jesus? Is it any wonder then that God does not freely grant us more when we are not truly receiving forgiveness by giving it to others? Is it no wonder that when we are being so self-concerned that we refuse to forgive someone that God refuses to grant us more? Wouldn't his positive answer to our requests only feed our self-centeredness when we are in that condition? Is it not the most loving thing for our Lord to withhold from us the requests we make when we are living in a state of unforgiveness?

**Conclusion:** As we close this morning we must see that the fruitless fig tree and the fruitless Temple point us to not be fruitless. We must have faith in God. There is a true faith that accomplishes much for God. It is a faith that prays and a faith that prays in belief and forgiveness. Do you have faith in God? Where do you need to work to exercise that faith in God more fervently? Does our church have faith in God? Would someone from the outside look at us and say – wow – that church really believes that God exists and that he rewards those who seek Him because they are constantly seeking God in prayer? Let's pray.