

Believing Prayer

Mark 11:12-26

Today as we continue our sermon series on faith we are going to consider Jesus' teaching on believing prayer in Mark 11. Please stand if you're able to hear God's word.

Read Mark 11:12-26.

Admittedly, this is a passage that leaves many people scratching their heads. At first reading, we wonder, "Why would Jesus curse an innocent fig tree?" Of course, it's possible to think the worst about Jesus (and Mark who wrote this gospel, probably based on Peter's remembrances). We could conclude, "This poor fig tree is standing there minding its own business, doing the best it can. Jesus becomes hungry and grumpy. Not understanding that it wasn't fig season, He was disappointed when He saw leaves but no figs. And so He used His superpowers to curse the helpless fig tree."

It makes me cringe to even lay out such a scandalous/blasphemous scenario because Scripture always proves itself to be wise and true even when we don't understand a specific passage. As always, we should assume the best about Jesus and about the Scriptures. Jesus wasn't grumpy because He was hungry; in the wilderness He was able to go 40 days without eating and still resist temptations more fierce than any of us have ever faced. Jesus didn't lack self-control; in all His interactions with both His friends and enemies, Jesus was very measured and very under control. And we can assume that Jesus knew that "it was not the season for figs."

So what is going on in his account?

12 On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry. 13 Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. 14 He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And His disciples were listening.

Verse 12 tells us that as Jesus approached Jerusalem He became hungry. In the distance He spotted a fig tree "in leaf." Apparently "fig leaves appear about the same time as the fruit or a little after" (Carson, *Matthew*, p. 444). Even though the figs wouldn't be fully ripe until a couple of months later, in June, the green figs were edible. If you saw a fig tree in leaf, it was reasonable to expect to find figs also. When Jesus examined the tree, He found **only** leaves and no figs (not even unripe figs). D.A. Carson comments:

"Its leaves advertised that it was bearing, but the advertisement was false. Jesus, unable to satisfy his hunger, saw the opportunity of teaching a memorable object lesson and cursed the tree, not because it was not bearing fruit, whether in season or out, but because it made a show of life that promised fruit yet was bearing none." (Carson, *Matthew*, p. 445)

This passage is a warning against hypocrisy - appearing to be one thing but actually being another. Jesus pronouncing judgment on the fig tree emphasizes how essential it is to address hypocrisy in our lives. As an aside, the gospels record only one other example of Jesus using His power to destroy something. When Jesus cast the legion of demons out of the two men at Gadara, He sent them into a herd of swine that ran down the hill and drowned themselves in the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:28-34). Though unusual, it isn't out of character for Jesus to destroy a fig tree.

Before explaining the significance of cursing the fig tree, Mark gives an account of Jesus cleansing the temple. This isn't an irrelevant rabbit trail; the temple was analogous to the fruitless fig tree. When Jesus approached the temple grounds, He came first to the outer court of the Gentiles. Jesus should have found the court of the Gentiles populated by Gentiles drawing near to the God of Israel. This would have been compatible with Israel's mission of being "a light to the nations." However, as with the fig tree, Jesus found something else: the noise and chaos of merchants and money-changers.

15 Then they came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple and began to drive out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves; 16 and He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple.

Jews traveling long distances to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover needed to buy animals for their sacrifices; and they needed their foreign currency exchanged into local currency for the temple tax. But these legitimate activities shouldn't have taken place in the court of the Gentiles (as described in verses 15-16). In an action analogous to cursing the fig tree, Jesus "cleans house" by overturning tables and driving merchants and money-changers out of the temple.

17 And He began to teach and say to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a robbers' den."

18 The chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching. 19 When evening came, they would go out of the city.

Jesus explained His forceful, unilateral actions by quoting from Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11: "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a robbers' den." The temple had the appearance of piety, but it failed to fulfill its mission. Jesus here addressed another case of false advertising.

Keep the cleansing of the temple in mind as we read verses 20-26. Jesus' teaching on believing prayer shows us how we can avoid the false advertising of the fig tree and the temple.

20 As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. 21 Being reminded, Peter said to Him, “Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered.”

Anybody could cut down a fruitless fig tree with an axe or a saw; but Jesus had withered the tree with a pronouncement, with His words! Significantly, Jesus doesn’t explain how His words could wither a fig tree; He answers by teaching about faith. By teaching about **the necessity of faith**, Jesus explains how they can avoid having the appearance of piety without its fruit.

22 And Jesus answered saying to them, “Have faith in God.

Jesus simply tells the disciples to “have faith in God.” A command such as this presupposes that they have at least some control over whether or not they are people of faith. Having faith isn’t like catching a cold; faith doesn’t randomly appear. Faith is invited into our lives by seeking God; faith is cultivated by hearing God’s Word and putting it into practice. Because they had seen the power of God in the withering of the fig tree, they were in a great place to “have faith in God.”

In verses 23 and 24 Jesus explains further why it is perfectly reasonable to have faith in God.

23 “Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him.

“This mountain” is probably a reference to the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. And “the sea” was probably the Dead Sea which could be seen from the Mount of Olives on a clear day.

Jesus didn’t say, “If you have faith in God, you too can curse fig trees.” He said that those who have faith can say to “this mountain” “be taken up and cast into the sea.” I think He is telling His disciples, “When you ‘have faith in God,’ don’t think in terms of fig trees; think in terms of mountains.” In the Old Testament, a mountain symbolized something daunting or immovable (see Zechariah 4:7). Using hyperbole, Jesus is saying that faith moves the hand of God to do things nobody else could possibly do.

Notice that Jesus expresses Himself negatively and then positively: this person “**does not doubt** in his heart” but “**believes** that what he says is going to happen. . .” Faith is confidence in the character of God as revealed in Scripture and confidence that God has all authority. And faith is most commonly expressed in prayer, asking God to act. That is what is being illustrated here (as will become clear in the next verse).

A few weeks ago we noted that doubt is not a virtue; Jesus’ disciples are supposed to move past doubt to a place of faith (see Matthew 14:31). In James 1 we’re told that when we ask for wisdom we should “ask in faith without any doubting” because the one who doubts is “double-minded.” Here in Mark 11 Jesus is commanding them to have a

type of faith that isn't double-minded; a type of faith that believes God will grant what has been asked.

24 "Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you.

Jesus wasn't giving His disciples a "blank check," telling them that they could ask God for any selfish desire. We should understand this teaching about believing prayer in light of the immediate context of fruitfulness and in light of Jesus' other teaching about prayer. The immediate context, Jesus is saying that we should pray big, bold, believing prayers related to fruitfulness. In the New Testament, fruitfulness includes personal fruit such as the "fruit of the Spirit" (qualities such as love, joy, peace, and patience). But fruitfulness primarily involves fruitfulness in witness and in extending the kingdom.

In John 14:12-14 Jesus taught this:

12 Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father. 13 Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.

Jesus promised answered prayer in a way that might make us uncomfortable - largely because we experience so many unanswered prayers. We pray for healing and deliverance that sometimes eludes us. We pray for people to come to Christ, and yet they don't seem to respond (sometimes for years). When we ask in Jesus' name for God to work and yet don't receive what we've asked for, we are tempted in one of two directions.

On the one hand, it's tempting qualify to death Jesus' teaching on prayer. We find ways to convince ourselves that Jesus wasn't really saying that we can "pray and ask, believing that we have received . . . and it will be granted." But that's what He teaches in several places.

On the other extreme, it's possible to "weaponize" Jesus' teachings, using airtight logic to claim that if you don't receive exactly what you've prayed for, you aren't praying in faith or you aren't persevering in prayer, or there's some disobedience in your life, etc. As we talked about a couple of weeks ago, a lack of faith and disobedience can hinder prayer (see 1 Peter 3:7 for example). But we should be very cautious about making such pronouncements - especially about other people. The book of Job and many of the psalms (especially laments) make clear that there's much more going on in both the seen and the unseen realms than we can understand (especially in real time).

I believe we need to learn to live with the tension between ***Jesus' teachings about answered prayer*** and ***our experience of unanswered prayer***. This is a tension to live with instead of a problem to solve. We should learn to pray bold, believing prayers; when/if they aren't answered as we've prayed, we don't give up. We go back to God's word for a better understanding of His will and keep praying.

You may be familiar with the statement made by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3. When they were about to be thrown into the fiery furnace for refusing to bow down to the towering golden image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up, they said this (Daniel 3:17–18):

17 If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18 But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

These three young men seemed perfectly convinced that God not only **could** but **would** deliver them out of the king’s hand. But they also acknowledged, “but even if he does not. . . we will never worship other gods.” That’s the type of faith we need in this world.

Verses 25 and 26 round out Jesus’ teaching on believing prayer, reminding us of the centrality of forgiveness in the life of the disciple.

25 “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. 26 “But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.”

A Christ-follower is a person who has come to God empty-handed, with no claims of righteousness, and has received forgiveness on the basis of what Jesus has done. Forgiveness is an unmistakable hallmark of Jesus’ followers.

The cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple reflected the fact that Jesus isn’t interested in a show or in external righteousness. To the contrary, Jesus is building a kingdom that will bear fruit for eternity. What is our response?

Through believing prayer we avoid hypocrisy, and we produce the fruit Jesus desires.

Today’s passage is a warning against hypocrisy: We can have the appearance of godliness without experiencing the power of God; we can look like a healthy, biblical church and yet not be trusting God to accomplish the things that really matter. We can be like the fig tree that Jesus cursed, having only the **appearance** of fruitfulness. We can be like the court of the Gentiles in Jesus’ day, busy and cluttered with all sorts of activity while ignoring our mission of being “the light of the world.”

Today’s passage is also a challenge to be people of faith, the type of faith that fuels believing prayer. I’d like to suggest very briefly a couple of applications to help us cultivate believing prayer - the type of prayer Jesus described where we pray believing that we have received what we’ve asked.

The Lord's Prayer. Jesus explicitly instructed His disciples, "Pray in this way. . ." and then taught a specific prayer. Many people have found great benefit in using the Lord's Prayer as a template for prayer each day. I'd encourage you to learn to pray bold, believing prayers for each category listed in the Lord's prayer.

9 "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. 10 'Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. 11 'Give us this day our daily bread.

Verse 9 tells us to begin with adoration, rehearsing the things that set apart the name of God, our Father, from every other name. Praise and adoration prepare us to pray prayers of faith. We've seen in the gospels this summer that people had great faith only after they understood the identity and authority of Jesus. Rehearse how God is the creator and sustainer of the universe, that Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth, etc.

Verse 10 tells us to pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Where do you want to see God's reign extended here on earth? In your own life, where do you need God to reign? Who are the 3 or 4 people you would LOVE to see come to Jesus and experience the life He gives? In what ways do you need to live out the will of God? What are the mountains that need to be moved in your life and in your world?

Paul wrote that we should be "zealous for good works" (Titus 3). But sometimes we become so preoccupied knowing and doing the will of God that we never get around to praying for the will of God. We end up with a "form of godliness" without the power. The power of God flows from believing prayer.

12 'And forgive us our debts/sins, as we also have forgiven our debtors [those who sin against us]. 13 'And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.'

In verses 12 and 13 Jesus tells us to pray about forgiveness, temptation, and deliverance from evil (including spiritual warfare). In these areas of our lives, we need the power of God that flows from believing prayer.

I'd like to invite you to pray through the Lord's prayer daily during the month of August. View this coming month as a workshop in believing prayer. In this way we avoid having only a "form of godliness" without its power; in this way we bear the fruit that Jesus desires.

Corporate Prayer. A year ago pastors from various churches in Manhattan banded together to form the MHK Prayer Movement. We've decided to hold a series of city-wide prayer gatherings over the next year. The first one will be held here at Faith on Tuesday, August 29th. It looks like ten to twelve churches will be participating. You'll be hearing more about this prayer gathering in coming weeks.

The goal isn't merely to hold prayer gatherings. We want to see God "move mountains" in our community. Jesus says that happens through believing prayer. We will be praying for two basic things: 1) the church revived, and 2) the city redeemed. We want to see God do a powerful work in the church and through the church. We're going to invite you join with believers from across the city in believing prayer.