

Mark 11:20-26

²⁰ Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. ²¹ And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away." ²² So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. ²³ For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. ²⁴ Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive *them*, and you will have *them*." ²⁵ "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. ²⁶ But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."

What do you expect from God this morning?

Really, what is it that you are expecting from God?

I think it is safe to say we all expect something from God.

Maybe we have a bad situation that we are expecting God to improve.

Maybe we have a good situation we are expecting God to protect.

Maybe we are hoping to attain some spiritually oriented goal and we expect God to enable our success.

Maybe we are hoping to fulfill some fleshly lust and we expect God to ignore that pursuit.

We all expect something from God.

This morning we are going to look at God's ability to perform the things we ask.

We will see what God responds to. We will see how to go about asking. And in the course of things we will see that not all asking is good asking.

Jesus had cursed the fig tree in our previous text. It is very likely He cursed it as a sign of what will happen to the nation of Israel. We also need to keep in mind what Christ said about how the temple, which should have been a house of prayer, had been violated. If we see this event in that context, we might understand why the topic Christ chooses to bring up is so important.

Mark 11:20-26

²⁰ Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. ²¹ And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away."

Odds are that the disciples had passed this same tree on their trip to Bethany the previous evening. But it was probably dark so they couldn't see the state of the tree. But in the **morning light** it was clearly visible.

So Peter, ever inquisitive, sees it and brings it to Jesus attention.

Now there is something to note here. Jesus had only said that **Mark 11:14** "**Let no one eat fruit from you ever again.**" He didn't say anything about withering the tree up from its roots instantly.

Now if you had been there. And if you saw the instant devastation of this tree, something that could not have happened naturally, and if you heard the prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem that Jesus had been recently making. What would you **conclude**? What **implications** would **hit you like a rock**? I believe these disciples would have gotten the point. When Christ condemns something, when He curses something, when He foretells its destruction, He is very very good at accomplishing what He predicts.

Notice that the tree's destruction was immediate and it was complete. The tree didn't just get sick and die of normal causes. No, the tree was struck dead in a way that no one would ever again be fooled by that tree. No one would ever again approach that tree with hopes of it fulfilling their hunger or meeting their need. No, the next people to approach it would do so to obtain fire wood. That kind of destruction is also what He will do to the city of Jerusalem in AD70. If you are a person who has been playing with a relationship with God, if you know that you should surrender to His Lordship and receive salvation from Him, if you know that you should get right with God, but you have been saying no, it is important that you look hard at what happens to this fig tree. Because this is the type of destruction that God will deliver to anyone who will not receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Don't ever fool yourself into thinking that Christ is just saying it but doesn't mean it.

Matthew 25:31-33

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. ³³ And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.

Matthew 25:41

⁴¹ Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels:

You see, not all promises in the Bible, not all promises of God are **for the good of all people**. God hates sin and He will punish it. And just like Christ delivered on His curse of the fig tree, He will deliver on the curse of all those who rebel against Him. So consider your steps very carefully.

Now, after Peter brought this utter destruction of the fig tree to Christ's attention, Christ uses this event, this topic, to discuss prayer.

The disciples saw Christ pronounce His curse on the tree. And they were then surprised at how swiftly and completely the curse was fulfilled.

What this revealed is that **their expectations** of what God would do in this situation were inadequate. They were ill informed. They didn't expect properly from God.

²² **So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. ²³ For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. ²⁴ Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive *them*, and you will have *them*.**

Now, is this the **only teaching passage about prayer** in the Bible? No. Is this passage true? Yes, without a doubt it is true.

So does this passage mean that the **only hindrance** to answered prayer is whether **we fully expect it** to happen and harbor no doubts?

Well, if this was the only passage about prayer in the Bible, we might believe that to be true.

In fact, there are a lot of preachers and teachers who act like this **is** the only teaching about prayer. You can tell who they are because they will talk a lot about **YOUR** will and a little about God's will. They will portray faith as a tool for getting what **YOU** want from God. They will put it into formulas that allow you to **tell God** what to do and He must do it. And if you don't get what you ask for, do you know who's fault it is? Of course. It is **your fault** because you haven't generated enough expectation of the thing you are asking for. They will say you didn't "believe and not doubt". Now, where does the focus end up in this kind of teaching? It is on **you**. You have not brainwashed yourself enough to believe that God truly is the **cosmic candy man** that only exists to give his bratty children anything that they can dream up.

Really, does that look like any kind of **thinking about God** that would give God glory? I don't think so.

So let's look deeper at what Jesus says.

Notice where He starts. He says, "**Have faith in God**".

Do you see the focus already? It is on God. It is not on faith. Jesus does not say, I want to talk about the tool that will get you everything you want. Let's talk about this amazing thing called faith. No. He brings God into our primary focus. Our faith is the vehicle by which we bring attention upon God. **Faith trusts the character of God to the place where it believes what God says and obeys what God commands.** Faith is not a tool to twist God's arm to get what We want.

Faith is a gift given to us for us to determine what God wants and to set ourselves about doing His business. Faith will avail us of the power we need to do such things. But the power is never the power of faith. It is the **power of God** that we **access by faith.**

So we are to have faith in God. How does scripture teach us to use that faith? Let's start with the most fundamental teaching passages on prayer. We can know this because Jesus was teaching His disciples how to pray. So we can rest assured it is a teaching passage.

Matthew 6:9-10

⁹ **In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as *it is* in heaven.**

We see immediately that all proper prayer first orients itself with who God is. Proper praying begins with the understanding that **prayer is about God's will**. It starts with the **desires of the Creator**, not the creation.

When we pray on Tuesday nights, and everyone is invited to these meetings at 7pm at our house, we always begin with praise. We always start with an orientation of God and His glory. It puts things in perspective. We are not so easily prone to ask amiss when we start with that platform.

As Jesus is talking about prayer in our text, we have to keep in mind the lessons Jesus **has already taught** about prayer. Jesus would have expected the disciples to keep what He is teaching **in our text this morning** in the context of what He **has already taught them**. They would not get the wide eyed concepts the false teachers of our day are teaching. They would not be asking God for a new Porsche and a new wife and a new jet. No. They would understand that **faith is about God**.

So when Christ says, Have faith in God, they would have understood that the most important focus of that sentence is the word **God**.

Let's move on.

²³ **For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. ²⁴ Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive *them*, and you will have *them*.**

I find it impossible to focus on the real positive teachings about prayer in this passage until I have eliminated the false concepts. Because the false concepts are very dangerous.

Suppose you are living your day to day life and suddenly come upon something that is very negative. Maybe it is a situation where you or someone you love is suffering. And you want it to stop. So far so good.

Now you get it in your mind that you can apply this teaching of Christ's to this situation. So you do. You pray. And the suffering doesn't stop. So you figure your faith must not be good enough. So you give yourself a talking to. And you give yourself a pep talk about how much you can trust God to get rid of this thing. And it doesn't happen. So you go through the routine again. Nothing. So

eventually you come to the conclusion- I am a failure as a Christian. My faith is worthless. And because of that, it is my fault that I am suffering.

I hope we can all see where **the failure was** in this application of what Jesus said. The prayer we prayed was a very good expression of **our will**. But it was a failure in expressing **God's will**.

How do we know? How do we know that we can't apply what Jesus said to everything that we want? Well, what does other scripture say?

James 4:3

³ **You ask and do not receive,**

Yes, that is exactly what we are talking about in our illustration. What can possibly cause that to happen? Is it only our lack of faith that causes that to happen?

because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Wooh, not receiving isn't only due to lack of faith. Sometimes the problem in our prayers is what we ask for. It isn't that we are asking **the wrong way**. The problem is we are asking for **the wrong thing**. We may be very accurately asking for something that pleases **us**. But are we asking for that thing that is **pleasing to God**, the thing that God has in mind for us to make us what He intends for us to be.

This verse in James shows us immediately that we can't just drum up anything we can think of and apply Christ's words to it. There are things that God **has promised** to do. There are things that **He has not**. And we must approach both things differently.

Let's read on

1 John 5:14-15

¹⁴ **Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.** ¹⁵ **And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.**

Did you catch the four important words? "**According to His Will**". Remember that this was written by John the apostle. He was a student of what Christ taught about prayer. He knew how to properly interpret and apply God's word.

This is a very important truth. It protects us from the trap of those false applications we mentioned earlier. It is important that we don't hold God or ourselves to false tests. The results of those false tests are usually devastating.

The first thing we need before we begin applying the "We ask and God will surely answer" type of praying is, do we know what we are asking for is God's will? And I mean "know". This promise is too important to flippantly approach it.

There are really only two ways of knowing if something is God's will.

The first is that which we pray for is **revealed in God's word**. Anything that God promises we can pray for with absolute confidence.

Now right off the bat we notice that this limits the kind of things we pray for, expecting absolutely that we will receive the answer we ask for.

Some things we can pray for are the things that Paul prayed for when he wrote his letters to the churches.

Here is an example:

Ephesians 1:15-23

¹⁵ Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶ do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, ¹⁸ the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what *is* the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power ²⁰ which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated *Him* at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, ²¹ far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. ²² And He put all *things* under His feet, and gave Him *to be* head over all *things* to the church, ²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

We can pray for these things for all believers. And we know that it is God's will to accomplish these things in every believer.

There are many other promises given to us in scripture. We can pray those promises to existence with absolute certainty. Praying according to those things, we can be sure, is praying according to God's will.

Now, how else can we know something is God's will? This one I am a bit more nervous in proclaiming. Sometimes God reveals His will experientially. He provides Divine Guidance. This is not something that has happened often to me. But it did happen in the book of Acts and also in some of Paul's experiences. So we can't write it off just because it doesn't fit into the box we want to put it in. Corey Ten Boom had these things happen to her all the time. And I have read of many people who were convinced that God had revealed to them that **a person they knew would come to Christ**. So they prayed in that regard, in faith believing, until it came true.

I am often asked, how do we pray for the sick? How do we pray for the unsaved? It is my conviction that if God has revealed to us what He has in mind to do in that specific case, we pray the prayer of faith until God does what He has promised. We pray that prayer boldly and faithfully, expecting the outcome.

If God has not revealed to us what He has in mind, then we ask like a child would ask for the thing we desire. We lay before God our cares and anxieties and trust Him to do for us what is best, even when that isn't what we ask for.

Can you see the two different kinds of prayers?

Let's look at another passage that strengthen this view of praying for God's will.

John 14:12-14

¹² **"Most assuredly, 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 My Father.**

¹³ **And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.** ¹⁴ **If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.**

Notice what Christ says here. Whatever you ask in My Name. We have said this often and we will keep saying it because it is that important. Things asked in Christ's name are really things asked in His Stead. In other words, if He were here in our skin, they are things **He** would ask for. They are things that accomplish the Will of God. And they are things that, upon God completing God receives glory for Himself by Glorifying His Son.

So what we ask for, if we are to be sure to receive it, must be asked in Christ's name. It must be something **we know for sure that He wants.**

Here is another passage.

James 5:16-18

¹⁶ **Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.**

¹⁷ **Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months.**

¹⁸ **And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.**

Look at the example used here of a man who prayed and had His prayer answered. We should apply this passage with consideration of the illustration. The illustration gives clarity as to how we do what is asked of us.

Elijah was just like us in many ways. But look what Elijah prayed for. Did Elijah come up with this plan about the famine and then the rains? No. It was God's revealed plan. The thing that Elijah did was prayed expectantly **according to God's revealed will.** And we saw that He prayed, fully believing what God said would happen. And of course it did. Because God cannot lie. He cannot make a promise that He will not keep.

Do you want to be known as someone who powerfully prays? Well then be a person who **powerfully gets behind what God has promised to do.** You will find your prayers being powerfully answered.

Now that we have looked at the correct way to interpret what Jesus said and how to avoid the misuses and wrong applications, let's look at the power of what He says.

²² So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. ²³ For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. ²⁴ Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive *them*, and you will have *them*.

Do you see the power in what Jesus is saying here? And we know with the rest of the scriptural record that it applies to us as well.

Jesus refers to "this mountain". While this could apply to either the mount of olives or the mount that Jerusalem stood on, neither of those is the important point. The point is that if something needs done to accomplish the will of God, it is never too big for God to accomplish. And if we know it is God's will to do so, we need not doubt His ability or willingness to accomplish it. We don't need to doubt it. In fact, we **must not** doubt it.

James tells us more about this:

James 1:6-8

⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

When we know that something is God's will, it is big deal to not trust God to accomplish it.

There is much room for us to not understand if something is God's will or not. We must learn to determine that. That takes time. We need to learn how to study. But when we know what **is His will**, there is no room for doubting God's power and ability to carry out His will.

Luke 17:5-6

⁵ And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith." ⁶ So the Lord said, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

This is interesting. Those who say that the problem is how pure and perfect our faith is have to do some work to overcome this passage. It is basically saying the problem is not the amount of faith. It is not even the purity of faith. The question is merely "does faith exist?". Because if there is any of it, there is enough. The reason is because the power does not exist in the faith but in the object of the faith.

An illustration comes to mind here. I hope it is adequate. At work we use the internet to get to a server where our main computer program resides. Now we only have so much bandwidth to get to our server. Imagine that as a pipe that our data travels through. It is a small pipe. But through that pipe we send instructions for that server to do very big tasks. Now our machines at our offices do not have the capacity to do those tasks. And our bandwidth isn't great enough to pass that computing power down to the pcs we work on. But none of that matters. As long as our commands reach the server, that server has everything that is necessary to do everything that is needed.

Faith is kinda' like that bandwidth. As long as it is big enough for the message to get through to the server, it is as big as it needs to be. As long as our trust in God is enough to pass to Him what we need to say, it is big enough to get the job done. Because the power does not rely upon the size of our faith, but in the size of our God.

Let's look at another verse. And this one deals with those things that we might not know for sure that God wants to do, but those things that we ask simply because we trust God. If you are asking for something you need to make it as a Christian, you can be sure that God will be gracious to you.

Luke 11:9-13

⁹ "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ¹¹ If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if *he asks* for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? ¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will *your* heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

That is the kind of God we serve.

Now let's look at the last two verses.

²⁵ "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. ²⁶ But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."

This verse is odd. Jesus is talking about the power of prayer. And then He throws this in. It is clearly no mistake. Something is supposed to be learned here. I think it is something like this.

No one is going to be powerful in the **kingdom of God** calling upon the **resources of God** if he or she does not love **the people of God**.

You and I are in a fellowship of the Grace of God. None of us got in the door because we deserve it. We all know what we truly deserve. There is nothing in

the kingdom of God that allows us to gain power and prestige like in the world. We see political candidates who may have no moral fiber but we value them if we think they can get a certain job done. We are willing to convey power to them in the hopes that they will accomplish tasks that will serve our best interests. We will trade some integrity for effectiveness.

But the kingdom of God is completely different than that. The only person who is **going to have God's power** is going to have to be a person who **shares God's heart**. He is going to need to see himself as being an undeserving person who has been given grace anyway. And he is going to have to see all his brothers and sisters as those who are undeserving but are given grace anyway. He is going to have to be someone who **forgives because he has been forgiven**. He will never be in a **better state** than any of his brothers or sisters. And as such he will never see himself as **being better** than any other Christian, no matter what power of God His faith accesses.

You see, what **we are** is always more important to God than **what we do**. God really doesn't need anything done for Him. If He really wants it done He could do it Himself. But He does want to receive glory through the willing obedience and service of His children. And all of us as children must understand we are here by grace.

Is there anyone you are not willing to forgive? Are there any brothers or sisters who have sinned against you that you will not approach to try to issue forgiveness? Do you really think anyone has done something more harmful or grievous than you have done against God? If you think that, you really don't understand your sins against God.

Our Lord has given us a lot to chew on this morning, and all as a result of a deeply dead fig tree.

How do we need to adjust our expectations of God this morning? Are we praying accurately and powerfully? Do we even know what God's will is for those we pray for? If you want to be encouraged, pull out an old prayer list and look at how many of the things you prayed for have been answered. That is a good sign. And how well do we forgive? Are there any brothers or sisters that we hold deep resentments toward, people we want to be angry with and will not forgive? One thing is for sure, if we harbor hatred toward them our prayers will not be answered.