

Principles for a Powerful Prayer Life

Text: Mark 11:11-26

Introduction:

1. Review: In this chapter we enter the final week of the Lord's life before He was crucified.
2. The events recorded in the section before us today cover a further two days in that final week of our Lord's earthly ministry.
3. Prayer is the central theme of these verses as our Lord uses the occasion of the cursing of the fig tree to teach His disciples more about effective prayer.
4. Challenge: Is your desire to have a powerful and effective prayer life?
5. We will note a number of principles for effective prayer in the text.

I. THE FIGURE FOR EFFECTIVE PRAYER (VS. 12-14)

Consider Christ's cursing of the fig tree which would become the illustration he would use to teach His disciples on prayer.

A. The Sight of the Tree (Vs. 12-14)

1. The Outward Presentation of the Tree (Vs. 13)
 - a. "having leaves" = from a distance the tree gave the appearance of fruitfulness on account of its foliage. Sometimes certain fig trees would bear fruit early in the season, the fruit appearing the same time as the leaves or even before the leaves (Hiebert).
 - b. "he came, if haply he might find any thing" = the word 'haply' means "perhaps, by chance." The humanity of Christ is in view here. Repeatedly in the Gospels we see both the Humanity and Deity of Christ displayed on the same occasion. In this example, Christ comes seeking fruit and finds none, that's His humanity but then He supernaturally curses the fig tree so that it dies, that's His Deity. Some other examples:
 - i. As man, Christ sleeps in the back of the boat, as God He stands and calms the stormy sea.
 - ii. As man, Christ weeps at the grave of Lazarus, as God He raises Lazarus from the dead.
 - iii. Hiebert: "Jesus did not use His supernatural knowledge or power to meet His own needs. He accepted the ordinary limitation of human nature and uses His supernatural knowledge only where and when it was needed to fulfill His mission."
2. The Inward Poverty of the Tree (Vs. 13b-14)
 - a. "he found nothing but leaves" = there was a complete absence of fruit.

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- b. Christ then takes the startling action of cursing the tree. This was the Lord's only judgment miracle we see in the Gospels, the only time He uses His power to destroy something during His earthly ministry.

B. The Significance of the Tree

1. The fig tree is a type and symbol of the nation of Israel (See Hos. 9:10; Nah. 3:12; Zech. 3:10). Christ's action of cursing the fig tree sits between two significant events – the Palm Sunday procession and His cleansing of the temple.
2. On Palm Sunday, the warm welcome displayed by the multitudes looked promising from the outside. But in reality, it was “nothing but leaves”. There was not genuine fruits of repentance toward God.
3. The temple was also a hive of activity. There was an outward show of religion and devotion to God but at heart, the majority would reject Christ and His gift of salvation.
4. Challenge: Does this describe you? Do you have an outward show of faith in God and yet in reality when Christ looks at you and sees beneath the surface, He knows you have never repented of your sin and received Christ as your Saviour?

C. The Schooling from the Tree (Vs. 21-22)

II. THE FREEDOM FOR EFFECTIVE PRAYER (VS. 15-19)

A. The Inspection of God's House (Vs. 11)

1. The previous evening, Christ had entered the temple and looked around with his searching, All-knowing gaze. Christ's eyes detected the sin and corruption that was there and determined to deal with it.
2. Note: This verse demonstrates that Christ's purging of the temple the next day was not the actions of a man who had lost his temper in an ungodly manner. Rather, his actions were premeditated. This was a display of righteous anger and chastisement.
3. Challenge: For us to be the house of prayer God wants us to be, we will need to allow Christ to conduct His Divine inspection and remove all that does not please Him in our lives and in our church.

B. The Purification of God's House (Vs. 15-16)

This is the second time Christ cleanses the temple. The first was at the beginning of His ministry (John 2:13-17).

1. The Trafficking in God's House (Vs. 15)
 - a. The background: There were four courts in Herod's Temple:
 - i. The Court of the Gentiles.
 - ii. The Court of the Women.
 - iii. The Court of Israelites (men only).
 - iv. The Court of the Priests (the temple proper).

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- b. The temple bazaar was being conducted in the court of the Gentiles, thus making it virtually impossible for people of other nations to seek the God of Israel.
 - c. The house of God had been turned into a place of religious racketeering, a place of commerce, a place to exploit the worshippers financially.
 - d. “them that sold and bought” = both buyers and sellers
 - e. ‘moneychangers’ = “every male Jew twenty years or over was required to pay yearly a half shekel toward the cost of the religious services in the temple (See Ex. 30:11-16). The moneychangers were in the temple court to change the Greek and Roman coins of the pilgrims into the Jewish coinage which alone could be used for the payment. But a fee, sometimes as high as 10 or 12 percent, was charged for making the exchange.” (Hiebert)
 - f. “them that sold doves” = doves were the prescribed offering for the poor who could not afford an animal (Lev. 12:6; 14:22; 15:14, 29; cf. Lk. 2:22-24).
2. The Traffic in God’s House (Vs. 16)
 - a. Not only was the temple being used as a place to make money, it was being used as a thoroughfare/shortcut from one part of the city to the other (e.g. between the city and the Mount of Olives).
 - b. The picture is that of turning that which is sacred into that which is commonplace and profane.
 - c. In summary, there was so much clutter, noise and din in the house of God that it could not longer be a place of prayer.
 3. Challenge: If we are going to be a house of prayer as a church, it will mean we will need to let Christ clean house! If we are going to be effective in the place of prayer in our personal lives, we will need to do some house cleaning in our bodies which are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

C. The Admonition concerning God’s House (Vs. 17-19)

1. “it is written” = a quotation from Isaiah 56:7
2. “of all nations” = reveals that God’s heart even under the whole dispensation was for all people.
3. “ye have made it a den of thieves” = a graphic picture drawn from the bands of thieves that would hide out in caves along the roads in Judea and rob unsuspecting travellers. Christ’s words allude to Jeremiah 7:11.
4. The murderous desires of the religious leaders were stirred white hot when Christ put his hand on their corrupt trade (Vs. 18).

III. THE FAITH FOR EFFECTIVE PRAYER (VS. 20-24)

A. The Picture of Faith and Prayer (Vs. 20-23)

1. “Have faith in God” = Christ’s response to Peter’s surprise at the fig tree’s withering away. Christ is going to emphasize the necessity of faith for effectual prayer.
 - a. The reason we lack faith in prayer is because we are so often ignorant of the Power and Ability of the One to whom we are praying. When God and all He is and all He is able to do is sharply in focus, our hearts will be filled with faith in the place of prayer. Heb. 11:6 “But without faith *it is* impossible to please *him*: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and *that* he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”
 - b. Hendriksen: “Faith is...the soul’s window through which God’s love comes pouring in; the open hand whereby man reaches out to God, the Giver; the coupling that links man’s train to God’s engine; the trunk of salvation’s tree, whose root is grace, and whose fruit is good works. Faith was...the means of Abraham’s justification; the magnet that drew Moses away from the pleasures of Egypt; the force that overthrew Jericho’s wall; the secret that enabled Ruth to make her stirring confession; the weapon that killed Goliath and destroyed Sennacherib’s host; the deciding factor in Carmel’s contest; the shield that protected Job in the midst of his trials; the muzzle that closed the mouths of Daniel’s lions and the remedy that cured the centurions servant and many others.”
2. “whosoever shall say unto this mountain” = Christ uses an illustration he has used before to impress on His disciples hearts the possibilities faith opens up through prayer. Christ’s language is figurative. The mountain represents something big, something impossible. This is how the figure is used the first time when Christ healed the demon possessed boy (Compare Mark 9:14-29; Matt. 17:20-21). It means that impossible situations in the Christian life and ministry can be miraculously overcome when we exercise faith!

B. The Promise concerning Faith in Prayer (Vs. 23b-24)

1. The condition of the promise (Vs. 23b)
 - a. The heart must be free of doubt - “and shall not doubt in his heart”. The word ‘doubt’ “pictures the mind in dispute with itself; the doubter wavers between his conflicting thoughts, now thinking that the petition will be granted, now yielding to the thought that it will not be granted.” (Hiebert)
 - b. This is so often our problem. We are praying prayers from our lips and at the same time, our hearts are filled with doubts and fears the prayer won’t be answered. The phrase we often

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connect to the end of our prayers “if it be thy will” is right and proper if it is for the sake of reverence for the supreme authority of God but beware it is not coming from a spirit of doubt. When the answer to a prayer is no, let us remember that the problem was with the request, not the power and ability of God to so mighty and miraculous things.

- c. Don't stop praying with faith because you are still learning the ways of God in prayer and a prayer appears to you to be unanswered or not being fulfilled as you expected.
 - d. Note: We also need to remember that while this promise is broad in its scope, it needs to be understood in light of the rest of the Bible's teaching on prayer. This verse is not a blank cheque for us to fulfill all our worldly and sinful lusts, desires and aspirations! This verse has nothing to do with the prosperity teaching that is often based upon such verses. Christ is speaking in the realm of spiritual matters, not the carnal and self-seeking! It is possible for us to ask amiss according to our lusts (James 4:3) or ask for something outside of God's will (1 John 5:14) **But if the prayer has the Word of God as its foundation, the Holy Spirit as its guide and the glory of God as its aim, we can expect with complete confidence that the request will be granted in God's timing and in His own way.**
2. The claiming of the promise (Vs. 24)
- a. 'therefore' = Christ summarizes the principle on the basis of what He has just said.
 - b. “What things soever ye desire, when you pray” = Christ is exhorting us that **all** our requests are to be made with faith. God wants us to have a prayer life that is filled with faith.
 - c. “believe that ye receive them” = the word 'receive' is in the present tense. Faith not only brings its request to God but also lays its hand upon the answer. In one hand we bring our request, with the other hand we reach out in anticipation to receive the answer from the hand of God.
 - d. Scroggie: “To faith God's promise is as good as His performance, and so the believing soul enjoys the answer before it arrives.”

IV. THE FORGIVENESS FOR EFFECTIVE PRAYER (VS. 25-26)

Christ attaches another condition to the fulfillment of His promise. Successful praying requires forgiving as well as believing!

A. When We are to Forgive (Vs. 25a)

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1. A readiness to forgive is another essential requirement of effective prayer. Not only must our hearts be free of doubt, they must also be free of bitterness and unforgiveness to others.
2. “when ye stand praying” = we are to exercise forgiveness of heart and spirit in the very act of praying.
3. “if ye have ought against any” = the word ‘ought’ means anything, any part, the smallest, a jot or tittle. The word ‘any’ means everyone is included, family, friends and foes. Challenge: Do you have ought against someone? Even a just cause for offense? Unless you exercise a spirit of forgiveness towards that individual, your prayers will be sapped of their power and effectiveness.
4. Challenge: Sadly, many Christians practice the complete opposite to what Christ commanded – they show a readiness to hold on to offences and hurts and a slowness or unwillingness to forgive. Years later, they are still licking their wounds and won’t move on for God’s glory. Worse still, many become bitter and terribly damage their own lives and defile the lives of others.
5. Col. 3:13 *“Forbearing one another, and **forgiving** one another, if any man have a **quarrel** against any: **even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.**”*
6. Eph 4:31-32 *“Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, **forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.**”*

B. Why We are to Forgive (Vs. 25b-26)

1. We need God’s forgiveness every day as His children for our mistakes, sins and failings. Think about how many times you have to say sorry to the Lord on a daily basis. Imagine if those prayers for forgiveness went unanswered by the Lord! What a terrible state we would get into as believers.
2. The warning is clear. If we come before God requesting His forgiveness and yet in our own hearts are harbouring unforgiveness, essentially Christ says, you forgive first, then I’ll forgive you!

Conclusion:

1. **Sinner**, will you receive Christ today as your Saviour from sin?
2. **Saint**, what blockages are in your life that are hindering you from effective prayer? Is it clutter and noise? Is it a lack of faith? Is it unforgiveness?