

**Series:** Real Religion  
**Title:** Powerful Praying  
**Text:** Mark 11:20-26  
**Date:** September 27, 2020

### **Verse 20**

In verse 20, Mark returns to the earlier incident related to the fig tree. We read, “Early in the morning, as they were passing by, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up” (Mark 11:20). The “morning” in view is Tuesday morning, the day after the events of 11:12-19. Jesus and the disciples were on one of their trips back and forth between Bethany (11:1) and Jerusalem. As they “were passing by” the tree the Lord had cursed the day before, they noticed that it was dead!

Jesus had performed a miracle! A nineteen foot fig tree could not have withered and died in so short of a period of time.<sup>1</sup> Not only that, but they tree was withered all the way up from the roots! The sight must have been quite remarkable. The tree was probably leaning, coming up from the ground with its roots exposed. The scene was reminiscent of prophetic judgment. In Hosea 9:16, withered roots and fruitlessness were used as symbols for apostasy, spiritual deadness, and the pending judgment of God.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note, however, that Jesus’ work was not just a raw display of power. Jesus did not pointlessly and haphazardly destroy the tree. He performed a sign and wonder to teach profound spiritual truth (Hebrews 2:4). His act was first a sign and wonder. As with other miracles in Mark’s gospel (Mark 4:35-41 and 6:45-52), it demonstrated His power over nature, proving that Jesus was God — the Creator (Colossians 1:16). Our Lord showed that He was the One Who can speak things into existence (Genesis 1:2). He was also the one who could speak words of judgment that resulted in annihilation (Revelation 19:15). As He did with the paralytic in Mark 2:11, Jesus only had to speak and things came to pass. Such power proved that He was God!

But as it was with all of His miracles, Jesus’ show of strength over the fig tree was packed with an important lesson. Our Lord intended to issue judgment on Israel. Her fruitless posture produced His wrath. He would move from primarily working amongst her. Special grace would now be extended to the Gentiles. As with the gift of tongues and Pentecost (Acts 2), and the destruction of the temple in 70 AD at the hands of Titus (Mark 13:2), the incident in our text was intended to teach truth about God’s temporary rejection of the nation Israel (Romans 11:25).

### **Verse 21**

Verse 21 says, “Then Peter remembered and said to him, ‘Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered’” (Mark 11:21). In the original language of the text, Mark uses a first aorist middle indicative verb. The tense and voice of the verb has a near air of

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<sup>1</sup> Schnabel, 275.

<sup>2</sup> Brooks, 182.

rebuke. It seems that Peter may have attempted to subtly blame Jesus for the withered tree.<sup>3</sup> Remember the way in which He attempted to correct our Lord back in Mark 8:32.

## Verses 22

In verses 22, Jesus commenced to use the fig tree to teach the important spiritual truth for which His object lesson was designed. He said, "Have faith in God" (Mark 11:22). Jesus's words reveal that the fig tree incident was intended to be more than a sign of judgment on Israel. It was also intended to teach His disciples some important truth about prayer and faith. Matthew highlights this reality in his telling of the same event in Matthew 21:21.

While much will be said about prayer in the verses that follow, notice a primary ingredient of powerful praying in verse 22. It is seen in Jesus' words "Have faith in God." Faith can be defined in the context of our current passage as "a general confidence in God's power, wisdom, and goodwill towards believers."<sup>4</sup> Many relegate faith to the realm of salvation alone. They assume it is the vehicle that brings redemption to men and women, and they overlook the fact that it has a place of importance in the ongoing Christian life.

Indeed, faith is the method by which we received the Lord's salvation. The Bible says, "For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift" (Ephesians 2:8). One is delivered from sin and death by believing and trusting in the Lord's means of deliverance — Jesus Christ. However, faith is not just something for the initial forays into Christianity alone. It is a virtue that is important to the entire Christian experience. One is saved by faith, but one is strengthened, sustained, and sanctified by faith as well.

The Bible says, "For we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). The entirety of our Christian walk is built upon trust, confidence, and reliance upon Christ. To be devoid of faith is to be devoid of a lifestyle that pleases God. Scripture says, "Now without faith it is impossible to please God, since the one who draws near to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). Such is especially true when it comes to prayer. All true communion and communication with God is grounded in the virtue of faith. One cannot truly pray exercising trust and reliance.

In its most fundamental and basic form, prayer is an exercise of faith. John said, "This is the confidence we have before him: If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears whatever we ask, we know that we have what we have asked of him" (1 John 5:14-15). One cannot pray well without trusting God well. A lack of faith is always at the heart of a lack of prayer. If you want to grow in your intercessions and supplications, aim to grow your trust in God. Call out to Him, as a father did earlier in Mark's gospel, and say, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

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<sup>3</sup> Robertson, 361.

<sup>4</sup> Ryle, 187.

Commit yourself to regular Bible reading and study, since, “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ” (Romans 10:17). Strengthening your faith is a guaranteed means of strengthening your prayer life!

### **Verse 23**

In verse 23, Jesus elaborated on the power of faith in prayer, saying, “Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him” (Mark 11:23). In speaking of a “mountain,” Jesus was likely making reference to the Mount of Olives. Because of the location of the events in our text, that particular mountain was likely in view as Jesus gave His teaching.<sup>5</sup> It was an important icon in Hebrew prophecy, given its association with end time events (Zechariah 14:4).

One should not mistake Jesus’ mountain motif as being a promise for literal mountain-moving power. Some have foolishly boasted of having the ability to perform great feats on the basis of our Lord’s words. It is important to note that Jesus words were intended to be figurative. Though the exact meaning is unknown, it seems that He used a popular proverbial expression from the first century to emphasize the potent effect of faith filled prayer. As in our day, a mountain was probably a colloquial metaphor for the experience of a difficulty.<sup>6</sup> It seems that Paul used the same figure of speech in 1 Corinthians 13:2.<sup>7</sup> We may not be able to move literal mountains with our prayers, but we can move figurative mountains.

Some struggle with interpreting our current passage because Jesus’ teaching seems to vacillate between two subjects. The question is often asked, “Which is Jesus talking about in our passage — prayer or faith?” The answer is “both!” Jesus starts with the subject of faith, but He moves into a discussion regarding prayer, demonstrating that true faith will lead one to prayer, and that true prayer is an act of faith.

When they eyes of faith are firmly fixed on Jesus, prayer can be otherworldly in its result. If one “believes that what he says will happen,” Jesus says, “it will be done for him.” Please note that the act of believing should not be regarded as some sort of wildcard to get what one wants in prayer. Many modern believers have an approach to prayer that resembles the shenanigans of the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:26-29. They boast of belief and feign fervent faith all in an attempt to achieve some desired end from prayer.

The type of faith that empowers prayer is a humble trust in the Word, will, and ways of God. It involves confidence in God’s character and truth. In the eyes of the Lord, true prayer and true faith are inextricably linked together (Luke 18:8). When prayers are aligned with such faith, we will inevitably prayer in accordance with God’s will. Consequently, our prayers will be power. They will be answered, because the Lord has

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<sup>5</sup> Schnabel, 275.

<sup>6</sup> Brooks, 183.

<sup>7</sup> Ryle, 189.

promised to answer any prayer that is in alignment with His will — “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” (John 14:13). John 15:7 gives a similar promise: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you.”

According to Jesus, such faith requires that one “does not doubt in his heart.” Many believers struggle with such a warning. How can one know if he or she is guilty of doubt? Some stay in a state of constant worry, fretting over whether or not they have sufficient faith. An examination of the Greek word translated “doubt” may help. Underlying English translations is a compound word that strictly meant “two judgments.” It portrayed the idea of divided thinking.<sup>8</sup> Such is the nature of the type of doubt that prevents our prayers from being powerful. It occurs when we become double-minded, when we attempt to have hearts that are set on both the world and the Lord. Remember James’ admonition regarding double-mindedness and prayer. If we want to have prayer that is effective in its working, we must strive to have a heart that is set fully on the Lord. We should aim to weed out and remove all that distracts us from God’s will. Divided loyalties will destroy our prayer lives.

#### **Verse 24**

Mark 11:24 says, “Therefore I tell you, everything you pray and ask for—believe that you have received, it and it will be yours.” The inclusion of the word “ask” in Jesus’ teaching on prayer is telling. In one sense, prayer is an act of asking. While it may involve giving of praise, expressions of gratitude, and confession of sin, prayer is fundamentally a posture of request. Jesus revealed this to be true in the Sermon on the Mount. When He taught His disciples to pray, He said, “Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7).

Many never experience power in pray because they never get around to asking for things. They issue forth flowery words, they say all types of great things about God, they make keen spiritual observations, but they never simply ask of God. John R. Rice has observed “And so it is that people often ‘pray.’ They ‘pray’ and ‘pray,’ but do not get anything; indeed, they do not expect to get anything...though they call it praying, really it is not prayer that does not come with a definite petition, asking something from God... that is what prayer is. Prayer is asking something definitely from God.”<sup>9</sup> If you want to see a result from your times of communion with the Lord, make sure you makes specific requests as Philippians 4:6-7 encourages you to do.

#### **Verse 25**

In verse 25, Jesus added an important caveat concerning powerful praying. He said, “And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, so that

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<sup>8</sup> Robertson, 362.

<sup>9</sup> Rice. John R. *Prayer: Asking and Receiving*. (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1942), 44-45.

your Father in heaven will also forgive you your wrongdoing.” Reference is made to the act of “standing” in prayer because it was a customary prayer posture for many first century Jews (Matthew 6:5). One even sees the same tradition in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 1:26).<sup>10</sup> In speaking of the act of standing, Jesus did not mean to enforce a certain bodily stance for prayer. His emphasis in our verse is on the condition of one’s heart in prayer, not the positioning of one’s physical body.

According to Jesus, prayer will fail if one is unwilling to forgive others. His words should not be regarded as some sort of heavenly tit-for-tat payback towards those who hold a grudge. The Lord did not intend to enact a punitive measure; instead, He simply meant to convey an important spiritual reality. Enmity towards others blinds one’s spiritual perception. It is hard for one to focus on God if one is focused on hurt towards others. If we want to engage in meaningful interaction with the Lord, we must clear our minds of bitterness.

Scripture is strong in this matter. It continually presents a lack of forgiveness as a reason for failed prayer. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared, “For if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. But if you don’t forgive others, your Father will not forgive your offenses” (Matthew 6:14-15). We all are aware of how a distressing situation can distract our attention from quality time with our family, or meaningful engagement with our work. A similar phenomenon exists in the spiritual world. If we hold a grudge, our soul will be stifled from seeking the Lord. It is for this reason that Peter, in one of his letters, encouraged husbands to get their hearts right with their wives before they set their hearts on the Lord in prayer. He said, “Husbands, in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with a weaker partner, showing them honor as coheirs of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered” (1 Peter 3:7).

If we want to experience the life-changing power of prayer, we must deal with the grudges and complaints we hold in our hearts towards one another. Interpersonal negativity will ruin worship, stall prayers, and kill a church. We can’t expect the Lord to less our prayers if we carry a mental checklist of all of the wrongs committed against us, if we label certain people by their past failures and refuse to forgive them. Jesus was a model for us in regard to the role of forgiveness of prayer. When He was crucified, He called out to God in prayer. On one occasion, He expressed forgiveness towards those who hung Him on the cross. He prayed, “Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

If we want our prayers to move the heart and hand of God, we must forgive. The Greek word in Mark 11:25 is *aphiēmi*. It carries the idea of one letting another go from his or her power. It conjures ideas of an escape, of a person being freed.<sup>11</sup> What a beautiful picture of forgiveness! When we forgive another, we choose to release them.

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<sup>10</sup> Schnabel, 276.

<sup>11</sup> Zodhiates, 298.

If you want to forgive, you must aim, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to let an offense go. You can't hold on to it. You must release it.

If you have struggled with the bondage of bitterness, you know that it is not easy to forgive. In fact, many have found it downright impossible! Is there any help for those who suffer under the strain of resentment? Fortunately there is. Help is found, ironically, in prayer! When Jesus taught us concerning how we are to pray on a regular basis, He instructed us to pray concerning those who hurt us. Do you remember the Lord's Prayer? It says we are to customarily pray, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). A lack of forgiveness can disable our prayers, but prayer can enable forgiveness. If you want to have powerful prayers, you must forgive. If you want to forgive, you must pray. If you are being ruined by resentment, commit yourself to prayer. In time you will find the capacity to let it go. When you do, you will gain the capacity to pray prayers that move proverbial mountains. Forgiveness will bolster your sense of spiritual freedom and it will enhance your fellowship with God.

### **Verse 26**

Verse 26 does not appear in older manuscripts. It appears to be an addition made by scribes at a later date. Its removal from newer translations does not change the overall meaning of Jesus' teaching on prayer, nor does it impact any major biblical doctrine. One should not be disturbed by such variances within the biblical records. Jesus' promise to preserve His Word has been fulfilled (Matthew 24:35). The Bible has more manuscript support than any other book of antiquity.