

Sunday March 27, 2022
Lesson 4: Faith to Move Mountains
Scripture: Mark 11: 12-14, 20-25

Context:

In today's lesson, we continue in the book of Mark and discovering what it means to make one's mark in the world. One of the ways we discern how to make a mark with our faith in the world is through the practice of spiritual disciplines. Today we examine how to develop a mature understanding of prayer.

The scripture today comes from part of a larger narrative of Jesus coming into the city of Jerusalem for the Passover. The focus on the fig tree is layered with other events for Jesus to make a point. When reading this passage, it might be best to read all verses twelve to twenty-five to understand everything taking place.

When Jesus initially curses the fig tree, it is just the beginning of a larger lesson he will teach. After cursing the fig tree, Jesus goes on to cleanse the Temple of those who are selling things as he flips tables and shoves out money lenders. He goes on to teach about the importance of the Temple being cleansed and then returns to the fig tree. At the fig tree, he turns its barrenness into a lesson on faith and prayer. The entire unit appears immediately after the triumphal entry and introduces the theme of conflict to govern all of Jesus' time in Jerusalem, setting the tone for chapters eleven through thirteen.¹ Jesus uses the fig tree and the conflict in the Temple to establish the foreshadowing of his rejection, death, and resurrection.

While other gospels contain these incidents between the fig tree and the Temple cleansing, Mark presents its own interpretation by tying these two events together. Some scholars believe there is symbolism in the text as the fig tree is a symbol for Israel, embodied in the Temple and its leaders.² Jesus has words to say for both including what constitutes fruit and what is not fruitful or beneficial. A note when reading this text though is to beware of anti-Semitism and attacking Judaism, decrying old Israel as completely fruitless and devoid of meaning.³ This text is meant more to help Christians understand their own call and fruitfulness.

The disciples help to further the teaching as they return by the fig tree in the morning and notice the fig tree has withered completely overnight. When Peter announces its fate, Jesus goes on to talk about what he expects out of his disciples. Regardless of what others do, he expects them to believe, to pray, and to forgive.⁴ These saying would have also been important to the early church as they sought to understand how they were to relate between themselves as well as those outside their doors.

Jesus urges them to have faith in God and to be a people of prayer. They are to forgive and to pray for their enemies, and those they love. They are to think about the power of prayer

¹ Williamson Jr., Lamar. "Mark." *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 206.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 208.

⁴ Ibid., 209.

and what they ask for from God. Jesus wants them to understand the importance of faith and prayer helping them navigate life.

Application

The spiritual discipline of prayer is one of the most ancient and yet still most misunderstood of spiritual disciplines. As found in the Old Testament, the patriarchs and matriarchs went to God in prayer and felt God at work in their lives answering in typical and atypical ways. The psalms are a collection of prayers as people cried out to God in thanksgiving, confession, supplication, and adoration. They also recorded God's activity during those offerings and where they saw and felt God at work in their lives.

Throughout the gospels and the other books of the New Testament, we see how prayer continues to play an important role for those who follow Jesus. We see the same themes pop up from the Old Testament and yet with additions. There are things such as faith and prayers to be lifted up as well as Jesus adding things like forgiveness and praying for one's enemies. Prayer becomes a form of living for those who belong to the Christian faith, as it is for those of other faiths as well.

Unfortunately, one of the things to happen with the scripture passage today is prayer being coerced as a tool for viewing faith as a talisman or something to achieve. Some interpretations have led people to view faith as enabling prayer to do certain things people desire whether it is moving mountains or something extraordinary to defy nature. Often, I have seen this passage use sadly to reinforce unto others of if they pray hard enough, someone they love will not die of cancer or a disease within them. This often leads to denial and then a great struggle to return to the faith as prayer has become some conduit to achieve something which never could have been granted.

None of this is to say we cannot pray for big things or even the hard things. Throughout scripture the focus is to pray without ceasing lifting the cares of one's heart before God repeatedly. In all seasons and for all sorts of things, we can lift our voices unto God and place our faith in God's response and hearing what we request of offer up.

Yet to believe prayer is payment misses the point of how the discipline draws us closer to God. God does not use prayer as a reward points system for faith or as way to either punish or chastise believers. Instead, prayer offers us an opportunity to draw closer to God and trust in the faithful one who never abandons or forsakes us. We offer our entire selves before God, our known desires and the unknown ones trusting God listens and draws us close unto God.

Returning to the analogy Jesus gives us with the fig tree, we see a tie to how prayer is a form of fruitfulness. As we pray, different things happen to us. The Holy Spirit moves and works on us sometimes as we lift to God various things on our hearts and minds.

I will never forget praying to God about a difficult situation and processing different feelings towards an individual. During this prayer time as I struggled with forgiveness and discernment, different perspectives of the situation began to flood into my head. It didn't solve everything and yet in the spiritual discipline of prayer, I felt God responding to me in ways I hadn't felt before and began to understand the power of the counsel to go to God in prayer. As made clear in the passage today, Jesus invites us not to just pray for an "A" on the next test or for someone's cold to go away. God wants us to come before with our prayers for those who are hard to love, to forgive, and those we would rather have on a different type of list than a prayer list. Jesus asks of us to have faith and trust he will show us the way.

How has your understanding of prayer changed over time? What are your favorite ways

to pray? Who do you pray for in your devotion time? Have you ever felt God changing your heart when you prayed? What situation or people is God inviting you to pray for this week?

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