

"Effective Prayer" - Mark 11:20-26

Last week, we looked at the cursing of the fig tree. That happened on the day after Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem. We saw that it was a picture of fruitless worship, executed in the guise of fruitless religion. It was a parable pointing to the eventual judgment of Jewish Temple worship, worship that had become hypocritical. It was hopelessly corrupt. It wasn't nearly so much about exalting God as it was about enriching and exalting the power of the religious leaders.

When Jesus cursed that fruitless fig tree, it immediately died. We know that from Matthew.

*And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again."
Immediately the fig tree withered away. (Matthew 21:19)*

The tree died the very moment Jesus cursed it, but the disciples didn't actually know it until the next day. Let's back up just a bit and start with verse 19 this morning.

When evening had come, He went out of the city. Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away." (Mark 11:19-21)

When Jesus cursed the fig tree, it died immediately. When Jesus condemned the Temple worship, it too was finished, but most folks wouldn't notice for a while. About 40 years, in fact, when Titus led the Roman armies onto the Temple mount and made sure that no one stone would stand upon another. The Temple worship, which involved the ritual sacrifice of bulls and goats for the forgiveness of sins, was a type, a shadow, an image that pointed to the real sacrifice that would be offered by Jesus Christ alone. Once Jesus died on the cross, the Temple sacrificial system was rendered completely obsolete.

For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins. (Hebrews 10:4)

When Jesus died on the cross, He paid the penalty for our sins once and for all. No additional sacrifice necessary!

So, after Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, Temple worship was dead, completely fruitless, just like the fig tree. As the disciples saw that fig tree the next morning, they were surprised and impressed. Again, from Matthew we read:

And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither away so soon?" (Matthew 21:20)

I can tell you how the fig tree withered so quickly: Jesus is God. He is omnipotent. Anything He says goes. This was nothing less than a demonstration of Divine power.

But Jesus didn't use this as an opportunity to teach about the hypocrisy of Temple worship. Instead, He used this opportunity to teach an important lesson about prayer. Effective prayer, that is. Let's read that lesson right now.

So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. 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. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them. "And whenever you stand praying, if you have

anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.” (Mark 11:22-26)

The very first lesson, here, is found in verse 22, and it is the most critical lesson of all. Have faith in God. Effective prayer is powered by faith in God.

You might say, “Well, that’s obvious, pastor! You’re not even going to pray if you don’t believe in God.” But we need to really emphasize this, because there are many, many false teachers, many wolves who have disguised themselves as sheep, who will teach you to place your faith in ... faith. And they use this passage as their proof text. “After all,” they say, “doesn’t Jesus say we can chuck a mountain into the sea if we believe and don’t doubt? So, if you just have enough faith, you can do anything you want to do. You can have anything you want. You can cure any disease. You can bend people to your own will. You can become insanely rich and have houses and lands, fancy cars, mega-yachts, private airplanes. You can make God do whatever you want.”

These folks, these “Word of Faith” preachers, are turning scripture inside out! Their condemnation is sure! Prayer is never about getting what you want. Prayer is about getting what God wants, which is always far better.

Jesus teaches about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount.

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him! (Matthew 7:7-11)

Notice that Jesus promises you good things. If you ask, God will give you good things. But if you ask for a serpent, He won’t give you that. That wouldn’t be a good gift! That would be a gift that does you harm and it would violate another promise of Scripture:

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)

The thing about human beings, even humans who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, is that we generally don’t know what’s good for us. And so, we ask for the wrong stuff. We ask for stuff that we think would gratify our flesh and I hope you know what James says about that:

You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. (James 4:3)

Prayer is not about getting God to do what you want. He is not your genie in a bottle. He is immutable – unchanging. He will not bend to your will. Prayer is about conforming your will to His perfect will.

Believe in God. Believe that His way is the best way. Believe that however you pray, He will give you only good gifts.

And then, pray with confidence. Jesus teaches:

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.
(Mark 11:23)*

Now, Jesus is using hyperbole here. He is using a figure of speech to make a point. He is not advocating some sort of supernatural excavation project. He is not saying we have the power to move mountains around at will. But He is saying that we can be absolutely confident in the power of prayer, because we can have confidence in God. God is omnipotent. There is nothing He cannot do. So, if we pray according to His will, we can have the utmost confidence that our prayer will be answered.

Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. (1 John 5:14-15)

If we pray in accordance with God's will, He hears us. And if He hears us, we know our prayers will be granted. But what if we pray in opposition to His will? What if we ask for the wrong stuff? The Lord has us covered!

Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. (Romans 8:26)

Now, that should give you confidence!

Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them. (Mark 11:24)

Pray with faith in God. Pray with confidence. Believe that God will answer your prayers in the best way. He has promised you only good gifts!

You also need to pray with humility.

"And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. (Mark 11:25)

You need to always remember who you are. You are a sinner, forgiven by the grace and mercy of Almighty God. You do not stand before Christ's throne of grace by your own merit. You don't deserve salvation. You are a sinner, but God loves you anyway.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

Jesus went to the cross to suffer and die so you would not have to spend an eternity suffering in Hell.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

You have eternal life if you have accepted the gift of salvation. You accept that gift by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Confess Him as the Lord of your life; let Him lead you. Believe that He was raised from the dead so you can have a living relationship with Him. If you do those two things, the promise of scripture is that you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

But don't get all arrogant about your status with God because you still sin, and sin interferes with your fellowship with Christ. You need forgiveness. And, in gratitude for the forgiveness God so freely gives to you, you also need to forgive others. Listen, if you harbor any sort of grudge against another person, it will interfere with your prayers. So,

Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:31-32)

Now, verse 26 is not found in the oldest Greek manuscripts of Mark. It is very likely that somewhere along the line, a scribe inserted it while copying the manuscript. But, it is also very likely ... certain, actually, that Jesus did, in fact speak these words. If not on this occasion, then on another:

But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:15)

So, this verse is absolutely true and we should pay attention to it, even if Mark didn't originally write it here.

But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses." (Mark 11:26)

Failure to forgive, failure to maintain an attitude of forgiveness will mess up your relationship with Jesus and it will mess up your prayers. So, forgive, as you also have been forgiven. Remember that you are nothing but a sinner saved by grace. and offer your prayers with the utmost humility.

Finally, we need to pray in submission. Jesus didn't explicitly say this here, but I think it is implied and it is clearly taught throughout the Bible. We need to remember that He is God and we are not!

Consider the model prayer, what we often call the Lord's prayer. Look at how it starts:

Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:9-10)

Effective prayer is God-centered. It is about Him, first and foremost. Yes, we are invited to pour out our hearts before our Creator-King. We are invited to come boldly before the throne of grace. (Hebrews 4:16) You should always be completely honest with God. (As if you could slip something by Him.) Are you suffering? Let Him know how you feel. Is your faith faltering? Tell Him about it. Is there something you would really like to have? Ask for it. But at the end of every prayer, submit yourself to His perfect will. "Nevertheless, Lord, not my will, but Thine." It is exactly the way Jesus prayed in the garden while he sweat great drops of blood.

"O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." (Matthew 26:39)

It really all comes back to Jesus' very first point: Have faith in God. If you believe that God is omniscient, capable of doing anything, if you believe that He alone is wise, if you believe that He is working all things together for the good of those He has called, if you believe that He is with you always, even to the end of the age, why wouldn't you want His will to be done?

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)

And I say again, "Amen!"