

Have Faith in God

Mark 11:11-27

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he (that is Jesus) was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. And when evening came they went out of the city.

As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

I have a son who is 25 years old, one of my five boys, one daughter. We adopted this son, Joshua, from West Africa when he was 12 years old. When he arrived in our home, he didn't speak English, and he taught me something almost immediately as he learned to communicate with us. He had not seen his birth mom since he was very little. We adopted two boys, Joshua and Caleb, and shortly after Caleb was nursed the mother left and they never saw their birth mom again.

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So I wondered what Joshua remembered about his birth mom. Whenever I spoke to him of her, he would always speak in very affirming, very positive tones. He would talk about how beautiful she was. He was always honoring to his mother.

Then immediately he attached himself to his adopting mom, to Beth. Even to this day, he calls her every day, multiple times a day, honors her, and always takes her side. He even adopted her football team, the Dallas Cowboys. I hate the Cowboys. It's okay to hate the devil and the Cowboys. I'm just kidding. I'm just playing, guys. His heart is so tender, he realized what he had done, but his attachment was so deep and so fiercely loyal to his mom that he came to me one day and said, "Dad, listen, I understand. I can see that it upsets you that I root for the Cowboys. I really like the Cowboys, but if you tell me to change I will." Isn't that the sweetest thing? It's like, "I'm such a jerk. Oh, this poor kid."

He taught me about the gift a mother is, and about the privilege we have of honoring our mothers – the ones that give us life and then the ones that nurture life in us. Moms, we want to say to you today we love you, we honor you, we are grateful for you. I don't know that in our day we say that enough. I don't know that we say it loud enough, but we are grateful for you. Thank you. Can we just say thank you to our moms right now in this moment?

We have a gift for you. It's a book. It's a companion to the book that we gave you last year, so if you haven't read last year's yet, you've got two books now. It's an excellent book, it really is. I believe it will bless you. Just to explain: If you are a mom, if you are a pregnant, first-time mom, haven't given birth yet, this gift is for you. We are pro-life. I don't want you to be unclear. However, if you are a mom and you're not here, like you're not anywhere on these premises today, we love you, but we don't have a gift for you. Let me translate that. Please don't take gifts for all the mothers in your life, wherever they may be, and those that you even wish were here today. But we have a gift for the moms that are here. It's just a simple way of saying to you: We love you and we thank God for you.

I am not preaching today a Mother's Day sermon. By that I mean a "How to be a Mom" sermon. I'm not sure I would know much about that firsthand – even the value of motherhood, which is certainly a worthwhile endeavor. But, I'm going to preach a message that I believe will be a blessing to our moms that will have great application for our moms and for all of us. It's a message from God's word, the power of God's word.

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I'm about to get to my introduction so just stay with me for a minute. Often I have this experience when I'm preaching where after the sermon I get this *amazing* insight into the passage. It's a nightmare for a preacher to get clarity on the Monday afterwards, but it happens all the time. So I did what I typically do. I began to journal about that and pray. I said, "Lord, I want these insights beforehand. Why don't I have that kind of absolute clarity before I ever preach?"

Then the Spirit of God helped me to see something so beautiful. I'm going to put it in words because it's going to help you. It's like God said, "Brian, what you are experiencing after you preach is the power of my word. You've meditated on this passage, you've preached it, and it's producing fruit in your life throughout the week. And the good news for you is that where you sometimes lack the words that you want to communicate, my word is producing fruit in everybody all week long, even though you are an imperfect messenger." Amen, amen.

God's word is powerful. It produces fruit. And that is a helpful segue into the topic of this whole passage, which is indeed, in a word: **fruitfulness**. I want to talk to you about power, real power, power that works, directed power towards a specific goal that brings its fulfillment. You could call it the power of prayer. You could talk about God's power at work in your life.

Now, this is a fantastic passage. To understand what's happening: It's the only miracle *ever* (that we know of) where Jesus destroys rather than renews. It's a really unique passage. To grab ahold of it, you need to see that this is what we call a Markan sandwich. In the gospel of Mark he is telling two stories. He begins one, inserts another, then finishes the first. It's a sandwich. He does that because he wants you to see that both stories communicate one idea, one theme, one teaching. There is a more powerful communication that takes place when you grab ahold of that.

Luke and John don't tell you about the cursing of the fig tree. It's only found in Matthew and Mark, and Matthew doesn't tell it to you like Mark does. Matthew just gives you the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple as two separate events. Mark weaves them together.

In fact, what's fascinating is that not only is it like a sandwich, but it's like a triple decker. This is really fascinating to me. Jesus enters Jerusalem. He is about to die. This is Easter week, Palm Sunday. There is this entry into Jerusalem. Then verse 11, which we didn't read, is this unusual verse. It's a crazy verse. Jesus and his disciples then go all the way into Jerusalem. They look around. It's late at night, and they do nothing then they leave. It's kind of like you go on vacation, you get to the Big Apple, or wherever you want to go, you get an Uber and go downtown, but everything is closed so

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you say, “Hmm, okay, we’ll come back tomorrow.” Why would you tell us that? But he actually mentions the temple in verse 11.

Then you read the passage through verse 25 (textually there is no verse 26 -- that’s a sermon for another day). Then verse 27: “And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking...” Where? “...in the temple.” This is what Mark does: temple, fig tree, temple, fig tree, temple. He is weaving it all together. If you want to just leave now, I’ll give you the sermon right now: **Jesus expects fruitfulness. The temple was unfruitful. The fig tree was unfruitful, and God will not have it.** There is more to the teaching, so stick around if you can, for about 90 more minutes.

There is a truth here that’s so powerful, because this passage in Mark is the only passage in the whole gospel of Mark where Jesus teaches on prayer. That’s really fascinating again, because Jesus teaches a lot on prayer, but this is Mark’s summary of Jesus’ entire preaching on prayer. The value of that is...you say, “Okay, if I can grab ahold of this section and see what Jesus wants me to get, it’s just going to pinpoint something in my life that I really need.”

This kind of unfolds and right in the midst of it you have this powerful teaching on prayer. **Jesus is telling you that you live by faith and you express that in prayer, and that’s how you experience my power. That’s how you are fruitful.**

The tremendous gift of this passage is that Jesus is actually talking about an alignment that must take place, where you align your life as a follower of Jesus to the purposes of God. The teaching on prayer itself is so powerful, so impacting, that it’s misused frequently because it’s taken right out of the context of this section.

If I had to point to one verse that summarizes Jesus’ teaching on prayer here, it’s verse 24.

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

I’m going to give you a triad. **I’m going to give it to you in three words: ask, believe, receive.** Go back to verse 24: “Therefore I tell you, whatever you **ask** in prayer, **believe** that you have **received** it...” Ask, believe receive.

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This, friends, is the application. This is how you do it once you get aligned. I'm going to come back to alignment in a second. But once you get yourself aligned to the purposes of God, or better, once God aligns you, this is the confidence you have: **Ask God. You receive from God in prayer. This is how you are fruitful.** Moms, this is how you are fruitful. Dads, this is how you are fruitful. Pastors, this is how you are fruitful. In every endeavor you ask, you believe, you go in faith. There is a powerful message here: **God wants his children to be fruitful.** We could go through scripture from point A to point Z. You see it over and over, promise after promise after promise after promise. **God wants you to be fruitful, to abundantly experience his fruitfulness.**

This third point, **receive**, is very helpful. This is what many of us do. We ask, we try to believe, and we hope to receive, and we wait for the evidence. I don't want to totally undermine that, because there is an element where when you understand this issue of alignment, you do understand, "Okay, God is sovereign and it is whatever God wants."

Here's what I would say for "receive." Here's what I think about "receive." I just anticipate, yeah, God is providing. God is answering. God has said yes. God wants me to be fruitful. So I'm going to confidently step into that space. I'm going to go in obedience to God's word. I'm going to step out and I'm going to trust God. I'm going to believe that I've received it."

Now, this is a passage that is frequently abused. It's mistaught. If you understand the context, Jesus is cursing (cursing!) those who take his power, take his word, take the things of his Spirit and use them for an agenda other than his agenda. So if you want to go down to the Cadillac dealership and do a Jericho march around the most expensive car and claim it seven times and blow trumpets and start saying, "I believe it! I receive it!" think of the fig tree, okay?

If you understand the implications of what I just said, that, friends, is a most terrifying thought, because I know that I take the things of God and try to use them for selfish purposes. I know that God gives me gifts that sometimes I want to use in my sin to exalt myself. Do you ever do that?

This whole idea is that when I get into God's flow, when God aligns me and I understand that God wants me to produce fruit in his kingdom, then it is expressed in ask, believe, receive.

Now I'm going to unpack this with some principles.

Principle #1: It's always the season of fruitfulness.

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This is a very troubling miracle, where Jesus curses the fig tree. For starters, we are told that it's not the season for fruit. This is what it looks like. It looks like Jesus is coming in in the morning. We are told he is hungry. The tree is full of leaves. He goes over and there is no fruit. We are told it's not the season. He curses it and it dies.

This is not a good look, right? This is not anything we know about Jesus. It's so troubling that for 2000 years people have tried to explain it away. People have tried to give some kind of explanation. Maybe some of these explanations are true, but they've tried to say things like, "Well, you know, the fig tree has a bloom and that bloom is edible. Just before the Passover, those blooms would have been coming out and Jesus wanted to eat those blooms. If you were a native, those were really tasty and you would really enjoy those, and there were no blooms."

That's reading a lot into the text, but we're trying to find some explanation. I think we kind of miss the point, because Mark bottom lines it. He is drawing a parallel between this fig tree and the temple at Passover. He is saying of the temple: "There are a lot of green leaves, there is a lot of religious activity, but there is no fruit, and I am cursing it."

That is a frightening, frightening judgment. But God is saying to you, "When you come to ask, believe, receive, and when a message is communicated to you in this negative way, you will have faith when you get in the positive." When you say, "God, I am praying for you to save souls, I'm saying use me." I'm praying, "Lord, take my heart, take my life, use me for your purposes." You can expect God to answer, because God has said he will judge the opposite. Let me just say this before I move on. I'm stretching it to say this, but it's always the season for fruitfulness. **Even when God is pruning you, he is moving you toward fruitfulness.**

My son David taught me this yesterday. He said, "**Listen, the farmer never prunes what he's going to pull up and throw away.**" If God is pruning you, good news! You belong to God. He is pruning you for greater fruitfulness. You are always moving toward fruitfulness.

Fruitfulness only comes through intimacy. Spoiler alert. Here is the message I want you to take away from this passage. **You and I are the fruitless fig tree.** That's who we are. We are barren. We are capable of a flurry of activity, but we are powerless to produce fruit. And Jesus is on his way to the cross to free you from that condition. He is on his way to the cross to take your curse on himself. **He is the recipient of the curse for you, so that you will be set free to intimacy with God by faith**

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in Jesus Christ, to be forever and abundantly fruitful. That's good news. So, pruning is happening, but you are always moving toward fruitfulness. Let's go to Principle #2.

Principle #2: Grace is the power.

Are you afraid, Mom, that God won't move in your life because of mistakes you've made? God's not answering prayer for your children because you didn't get it right? Are you blaming yourself? Can I say something to you? No, no, no. It's the wrong question. It's by grace and not according to your works. I'm not saying that your activity didn't matter as a mom, but one of the things Beth and I said early to our kids is: "We will scar you. We will mess you up. We are imperfect parents. There are going to be times when we are too harsh. There are going to be times when we are too permissive." That's doesn't excuse it, but if I make the hope of my parenting my parenting, God help my children.

Grace is the power for answered prayer.

It's all through the teaching. It's all through the passage, but just think about this. You can have power in your life totally disproportionate to your ability and power. You can speak to a mountain and throw it into the sea. What business do you have with some random fig tree? Jesus is pushing you into this realization that by his grace, because of his work on the cross, you have authority and power that is his. Think of the immensity of this promise in verse 24: "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." Ask, believe, receive.

But here's the real indicator in the passage. It's in verse 25. He says, "Listen, when you stand in prayer, do what? Forgive, and you'll be forgiven." That's the key to help you understand that forgiveness, restoration of relationship is a gift that comes by faith in Jesus Christ because of what Jesus does for you, because he pays the curse of your sin.

Brother, sister, if you have not trusted in Jesus Christ, trust in him today for the forgiveness of your sin. It's all by grace. It's a gift.

Principle #3: Unforgiveness is the grace blocker.

If you understand principle #2, that it's all by grace, then #3 should really get our attention.

Unforgiveness blocks the grace of God in your life. Jesus tells us: "...whenever you stand

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praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” Jesus is saying: “I’m going to the cross. I’m going to pay for your sin. You’ll be freely forgiven, and that must flow through you. You must allow me to transform you into a gracious, forgiving person. And when you hold on and are unforgiving, you will block that flow in your life.”

There is something very specific about the language here. Jesus says, “...whenever you stand praying, forgive...” This is how that experience has worked out in my life. So many times I’m in the place of prayer; I get up in the morning, I go into that private place. I’m there, and the Spirit of God just comes and says, “You know, this conflict you’re having with this person? You know this offense you have? You’re blind to your own pride. You’re blind to your harshness. You’re blind right now in this moment. You are acting so self-righteous, Brian. You’re acting like you’ve never needed grace, you’ve never needed a little space. Let me just remind you how patient I’ve been with you. Let me remind you how many times I’ve forgiven you, over and over and over and over again. Let me remind you about your failed marriage and how my grace rescued you from your own pride and your own selfishness. Let me remind you how you learned in that time that it was by my grace and not your ability. Would you like to try that again?”

Oh God, forgive me for the way I’ve acted toward this person that I can’t stand right now. Forgive me that I can’t stand him. I used to tell Beth, “Every time I go to prayer God takes your side. You can’t be that right!” Unforgiveness is the grace blocker.

Friends, that’s a loaded, loaded point. I wish I could spend a while here. Some of you have been abused. You’ve been hurt deeply. I’m not condoning that for a second. But I’m trying to halt the destruction in your life so that that bitterness doesn’t eat away your soul. There is hope for you in the grace of Jesus Christ. He will heal you. He will transform you. You are not forever a victim.

#4 – on our way to 40!

Principle #4: Prayer is how you move mountains.

Verse 24 makes it clear that when Jesus promises you’ll move mountains, it’s not just this name it/ claim it. He says, “Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be

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done for him.” That mobilization is then unpacked in the following verse where he tells you in prayer you ask, you believe, you receive. You do not become God, where you go around just striking things.

You are living a life of communion with God, of intimacy, and fruitfulness flows out of that. You are asking, believing, and receiving, but the effect of that is mountain-moving.

Mother, you have tremendous power in the lives of your children. If you can see the big picture of how aligning yourself with God and his purposes and acknowledging how tempting it is for you to have your own agenda here, but to say, “Lord, I want to trust that your agenda is better than mine and I’m submitting my heart to be transformed,” you will know great, great power in prayer for your children.

I’ve got to move quickly. I am literally going to #7.

Principle #5: Walk by faith.

Do you see Peter? He’s such a knucklehead sometimes, right? He comes the next day and he’s all giddy: “Look! The fig tree is dead! Can you believe it?” He’s like, “Rabbi, look!” Like Jesus is surprised. Then Jesus pivots and these are his first words: “Have faith in God.” It’s so powerful. Trust in God.

My greatest challenge in preaching this message is when I tell you there is tremendous power in prayer, but you have to get aligned to God’s purposes, there is a temptation to say, “Oh, I knew there was a catch. I knew it.” Do you understand that God wants better for you than you want for you? God’s agenda for you is better than your agenda for you? Walk by faith.

Principle #6: This is a difficult one. God will turn over your selfish tables.

Jesus goes into the temple and the tables of the money changers are there, and he flips them over. John tells us he has a whip. That’s rather effective, right? He whips them into shape. In a wave of judgment and righteous indignation, he is just done with the whole fruitless activity, all the business of the temple.

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That's a frightening thing. When you look at the Church in America, all the business we're involved in, all the marketing, all the selling, all the activity, all the green leaves that are out there, all the promotion -- Jesus, in a moment of righteous fury turns it all over. He's not impressed.

It's difficult for us to get into that world. There was a specific way the temple gifts, the temple tax had to be given. They were changing that out. It was probably a legitimate help, and there were sacrifices being offered. But Jesus is saying the whole thing has become corrupt. All of this activity is not moving you towards fruitfulness. It's moving you towards your own selfish purposes. It's bringing death, not life, and it's sobering, to say the least. It's a caution to you and me. When you start building your own kingdom, when we are raising our kids and it's too much about us, when pastoring is too much about me, when you traffic in religion, using God for your own selfish promotion, God will turn it all on end.

We've got one more point. I've got to give you more good news. The good news is: Jesus is on his way to the cross. He's days away. He's days away from setting you free from all of that. It's glorious good news.

Here's the 7th point:

Principle #7: You are a house of prayer for all nations.

This is what Jesus declares in the temple. He quotes from Isaiah 56. He says, "Listen, you are a house of prayer," and he combines it with a quote from Jeremiah: "You've turned my house into a den of robbers." "It's a picture of how you are involved in all kinds of activity that displeases me. You are gathering up." Imagine a bunch of crooks coming back to their cave. He says, "You are gathering up. It's all about you and your illicit gain. You think that this is worship. No, you are to be house of prayer for all nations."

Now, Riverside, I want to commend you. In some ways we look like all nations right here. We are the gathering place. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit and we are learning to be a house of prayer for all nations, where people are loved as made in the image of God, even though we are very different, very diverse, very multicultural. And prayer, communion with God, asking God to bless and save the nations is an activity that we are increasingly giving ourselves to.

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It helps me to understand Jesus' condemnation of the physical temple in his day with understanding that "temple" is used two or three other ways. This is where I want to close. The religious leaders come to Jesus and they start demanding a sign, so he gives them a sign. Do you remember what the sign is? He says, "Destroy this temple and in three days God will raise it up." It's a riddle. What they don't understand is that he is saying to them: "I will be destroyed and the Father will raise me up. And that crucifixion and resurrection – that's the sign you are going to get. You will either believe that or you won't." But the way he communicates it is he communicates: "I am the temple. I am the place where you meet God. And I am the fulfillment of the temple you think about. I am the fulfillment of everything that temple represented."

Fast forward in the book of Mark. Jesus is on the cross. Do you know what they say to him? Mark 15: 29-30: "And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" Those are some of the most cutting words in all of the Bible. **Jesus does not save himself so that he can save you. Jesus did not destroy the temple; he was destroyed as the temple to save you.**

And you know what? In the old temple, God's presence was manifested there, but you couldn't get near to him. No one could go into the Holy of Holies except the high priest once a year. And there was this massive curtain that separated everyone from the manifestation of the presence of God. So you know what happens in Mark right after they come by and ridicule him and they say, "Oh, you were going to raise the temple up?" He dies. Then we read Mark 15:38: "And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." **As Jesus was torn, the temple curtain was torn and the way to God was opened for you. That's powerful.**

This is what Jesus is saying to you: "I am the new temple of God. I am the place where you meet God. I am not cleansing the temple, I am closing it down. You meet God in me. You think that by killing me, by crucifying me, that what I've predicted will fail, but actually by crucifying me, you are fulfilling what I prophesied. Through my death your sin will be removed. You will be cleansed. You never really got all that close to God in the physical temple. His presence was represented by an ark of the covenant that was hidden by a huge curtain and secluded in the Holy of Holies, where no man could go. But now in me, you can draw near to God. Ask, believe, receive."

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