



Speaker:  
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## The Centrality of Prayer

Series: The Gospel of Mark · 39 of 39

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And on the morrow, when they were come from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves he came, if haply he might find anything thereon. And when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves (for the time of figs was not yet). And Jesus answered and said unto it, "No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever." And his disciples heard it.

And they come to Jerusalem. And Jesus went into the temple and began to cast out them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, and would not suffer that any man should carry any vessel through the temple. And he taught, saying unto them, "Is it not written, MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED OF ALL NATIONS THE HOUSE OF PRAYER? But ye have made it a den of thieves!"

And the scribes and chief priests heard it, and sought how they might destroy him, for they feared him, because all the people were astonished at his doctrine. And when even was come, he went out of the city.

And in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. And Peter, calling to remembrance, saith unto him, "Master, behold, the fig tree which thou cursedst is withered away." And Jesus answering saith unto them, "Have faith in God. For verily I say unto you that whosoever shall say unto this mountain, 'Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea' and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith. Therefore I say unto you: what things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them. And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any, that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.

We pick up our story this week on day two of this Jerusalem visit.

Just to remind you, the party had arrived at Jerusalem, and Jesus entered riding on a donkey. We noticed it was a triumphant entry but also a sombre time for Jesus. He was, after all, in his final week on earth. And his exit from this world would be so terrible that part of him was dreading it.

Let's summarise today's account then. Having spent the night in their accommodation in Bethany, Jesus and the disciples are about to re-enter Jerusalem. We come across this strange bit of theatre. Jesus makes his way over to a fig tree. Finding no fruit on it, he pronounces a sentence on the tree. It would, he said, never produce fruit again.

They enter Jerusalem and make their way to the temple. And there, we see a side of Jesus we haven't seen so far. He takes issue with the commerce taking place in the temple and starts kicking over tables and shouting! It would look to most onlookers like a case of antisocial behaviour.

But Jesus was conducting a lesson. It was an unusual approach, to be sure. If you imagine your pastor shouting from the pulpit and going around kicking tables over and evicting members of the congregation, I imagine you'd be shocked!

Bible students have come up with all sorts of ideas about what exactly happened during this incident. And some have suggested Jesus brought the entire proceedings to a halt—all the trade, worship, and sacrifice.

This is unlikely. The temple court was huge. To give you some idea, it was about the size of twenty football pitches. It had the capacity to hold around 70,000 people. It's more likely his protest was noticed by quite a few people, but it wasn't serious enough for the temple police to be called.

The reaction of the religious leaders is interesting, although not unexpected. Jesus has been attracting disciples. And every one that follows Jesus is one less to follow them. They risked losing their status. And it's for this reason they want Jesus damaged in some way. They intend either to bring disgrace on Jesus's name or have him killed—either will do.

My message today is in two parts. One point is positive, the other negative. Firstly, we'll look at what the withered fig tree has to say about prayer. Secondly, we'll look at how the tree speaks of a coming destruction.

## The Fig Tree and Prayer

### The Importance of Prayer

I imagine most people reading this passage will conclude the traders in the temple were involved in some kind of deception—overcharging for animals or inflating the exchange rate. But I don't think that's the case.

Let's take a step back and talk for a second about what they were doing there. People came to the temple to make sacrifices to God. They'd buy the animal then take it to be sacrificed as an atonement for the sins of themselves or their family. However, the money in use in their society was that of Imperial Rome. And because the money carried the image of the Emperor and other objectionable things, it was forbidden to use that money within the temple. So you'd take your Roman money to the Jewish money exchangers. They'd give you the equivalent amount of money in an acceptable currency.

It's said these stalls were originally sited on the hills of the Mount of Olives just outside the walls of the city. So we can imagine it was quite natural to bring the stalls into the grounds of the temple itself. People wouldn't have to buy animals outside the city and walk them all the way in. So it sounds like they were providing an important service.

So what was Jesus's objection? What he says is partly a quote from the book of Isaiah:

[Isaiah 56:7](#) Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar; for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people.

The most obvious interpretation is Jesus is saying this is a place of prayer, but they've turned it into a marketplace. Maybe that is the correct understanding, but I suspect that's not quite the case.

Part of Jesus's brief and angry lecture was a quote from another prophet, Jeremiah:

[Jeremiah 7:11 - Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the LORD.](#)

Now what's interesting here is, when Jeremiah used this term "den of robbers", it had nothing to do with inflated prices or dodgy exchange rates. The leaders in Jerusalem who Jeremiah was denouncing were guilty of something entirely different. They were oppressing people, even widows and orphans. Innocent people were being killed. False gods were being worshipped all over the place.

So why does Jeremiah call them "robbers"? Well, their robbery was of two kinds: they were *robbing people of justice*, and they were robbing God of worship. And we can map that over to the passage we're in today.

This outer court was the only place Gentiles were allowed to be in. Yet the Jews were cluttering it up with their market stalls. And even if the Gentiles could go about their business with all this going on, it still counts as a hindrance. So my point is it wasn't so much that it was inappropriate for people to conduct commerce in the court, but more that these traders were taking over the place.

So we can see why Jesus quoted from Jeremiah. He enters the temple and sees that **God is robbed of the worship of the nations, and the nations were being robbed of their place in the house of prayer**. By clearing out the traders, Jesus does two things for the Gentiles.

Firstly, his actions picture the opening of the court to the Gentiles in a literal sense. I seriously doubt all these traders will have permanently abandoned trade in the temple just because this one man had an outburst one day. But many will see his point. They were to be making way for the Gentiles, not getting *in* their way.

Secondly, his words and actions foreshadow a time coming very soon when the Gentiles will be admitted to the kingdom of God in a way never before possible. A time when Gentiles all over the world will be able to enter the court of God in prayer right where they are.

But see, friends, how important prayer is according to Jesus. He is one who not only prays constantly himself but urges us to do the same. So this is Jesus's encouragement for you and me today: that we should pray without ceasing, and in a spirit of real humility encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ to likewise go to God often and in earnest.

## Power of Prayer

I decided on the length of today's passage for good reason. But let's imagine you read most but not all of it. You'd read about the fig tree that Jesus cursed. You'd read about the disturbance in the temple he caused. And you'd read about the fig tree shrivelling up within 24 hours.

The way Mark sandwiches the temple incident between two mentions of the fig tree would likely lead you to conclude that the purpose of Jesus doing that to the tree was to picture something like the Jewish religion dying.

However, I decided to include what happened next. And it'd be difficult to separate it. Because you see here that Peter brings the withered tree to Jesus's attention. So you might expect Jesus to say something like, "Ah, do you see how I did that to picture the judgement on Jerusalem?" or something like that.

But Jesus says nothing of the sort. Instead, he started talking about faith and prayer! And this has puzzled many Bible students down the centuries. Some have concluded the fig tree was primarily about judgement on Israel and only secondarily to do with prayer. But we can't escape what Jesus said. And again, what he said was in direct answer to Peter's mention of the withered fig tree. So I believe we must conclude the purpose of Jesus's "cursing" of the fig tree was at least as much about prayer as anything else.

Jesus then wants the disciples to know that **the very power that he used to perform this miracle with the fig tree was available to them**. *Have faith in God*, he says.

I've always been astounded at the promises Jesus makes to his followers about prayer. It's a real blessing to be part of God's plan, and especially to know that our prayers are used by God to fulfil his purposes. He's destroyed tyrants and brought deliverance for God's people in response to their prayers, for example.

And the promise here is just as immense. I probably don't need to say this, but we're not to understand what Jesus said literally. He doesn't want us to pray that Mount Everest will be uprooted and thrown in the Pacific Ocean! He's using *hyperbole*. That is, he's come up with an extreme example of something to get his point across.

This idea of moving mountains wasn't new. We see an example of it in the sayings of Job:

[Job 28:9 He putteth forth his hand upon the rock. He overturneth the mountains by the roots.](#)

Job was speaking like Jesus. The idea of God just tipping mountains over gives us small insight into his incredible power. And we learn from these things the incredible reality that this power can be requested by us. God is not in the business of tearing up the landscape and making a mess through our prayers; but he does bring about monumental changes to our world because of our petitions.

Think about how he wreaked such havoc on Egypt, one of the most powerful nations in the world, all as a result of the prayers of his people. Or consider how the most severe persecution of believers in Imperial Rome was ended overnight, again through the earnest supplications of Christians. In the change that came over the Emperor Constantine, the Great Persecution was outlawed.

Nothing's too hard for God, friends. He can as easily shatter empires in response to your prayers as make the smallest change in your private circumstances.

I'd like us for a few moments to consider this verse from the book of Revelation:

[Revelation 8:8 And the second angel sounded, and as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea; and the third part of the sea became blood.](#)

So this also involves a mountain being thrown into the sea. And of course the context is all about judgement. Mountains can be used to represent rulers or empires.

So is this what Jesus was encouraging the disciples to do? Pray for the downfall of people and governments? Well you'll know we're to pray for the *well-being* of rulers and governments. Still, it's fair to say we are encouraged to pray in positive *and* negative ways. We're to pray constructively, e.g. for the salvation of others, healings, etc, but we're also to pray in a *destructive* way. For example, we could pray for confusion in the enemy's camp. If some anti-Christian law was proposed by the government, we could pray for its failure.

It's possible Jesus was using the example of the mountain just to encourage people to pray in a general way. But it's also possible he was including in that a hint about his own faith, a faith that had 100% confidence in the destruction of Jerusalem. Interestingly, the temple sat on a mountain, making it even more likely he was making a subtle reference to the overthrow of Jerusalem and, by extension, Israel.

### Conditions of Prayer

These extravagant promises by Jesus, telling his disciples that whatever they ask of their heavenly Father they'll get it, are not unconditional. I can't even imagine the chaos that would be caused if every prayer of every Christian were answered by God. Every selfish prayer, every prayer not in line with God's revealed will...we'd be in a mess.

There are conditions that need to be met for God to give us our requests. The first one, as you can see in verse 24, is *faith*. When we ask God for something, we need to genuinely believe not only that God is able to grant requests but that he *will*.

You must have some faith to pray at all. No one decides to pray to God unless they believe there *is* a God. And when you think about it, praying would be the most time-wasting religious activity if there was no God. And yet prayer is central to the life of a Christian, and we need to have a real trust that God will give us what we ask for. This is how James tells it:

[James 1:6–7 6 But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord.](#)

Do you see then how pointless it is to pray with only a faint belief that God will do what you ask? Let me be clear. Using the previous example, if you did pray against the introduction of some law that was bad for the church, you should be turning on the TV the day after, fully expecting to see a BBC reporter describing the surprise collapse of this new bill. That's the type of faith that we need.

When Elijah prayed for rain, he got up and gazed at the horizon fully expecting to see a rain cloud. There being none, he prayed again. And he went back and looked on the horizon

again, fully expecting to see the cloud. And God made him pray a lot more before giving him his request. The point is Elijah fulfilled that condition of prayer: he had complete faith that God was going to change the weather patterns of that day in response to his earnest petitions.

In verses 25 and 26, we see another condition for prayer. This one is about forgiveness. The principle is clear: with a harsh spirit towards other people, God will not listen to you. He's forgiven you, and he expects you to forgive others. If you choose to not forgive others, carry on praying if you want, but you may as well be talking to the wall. Worse than that, you cannot get forgiveness if you have that attitude.

We were talking the other day about this story Jesus told in Matthew's gospel. A man had been forgiven of the debt, but *he* was not at all merciful to someone who owed *him* money. So let's look at these verses from the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's gospel:

**Matthew 18:32–35** Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, "O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me. Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee?" And his lord was wroth and delivered him to the tormentors till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses.

It's severe, but it looks to me like the eternal future of an unforgiving person is at stake here. To put it bluntly, if you're an unforgiving type of Christian, you're probably *not* a Christian.

We've mentioned faith and forgiveness as two conditions that need to be satisfied if we're to expect God to grant us what we want in prayer. These are the ones Jesus chooses to mention here. But they're not the only ones. For example, prayers need to be in line with God's will.

This is without doubt a difficult area in many ways. There is not a Christian who's ever lived who hasn't asked this question, "How can I know God's will?" It's a tough issue. However, God has graciously indicated to us in his word, the Bible, several things we CAN ask for that are definitely in line with his will. I'll give you just three examples:

- **Salvation.** The word of God is full of encouragements for sinners to go to God for salvation. And this is all evangelism is. We take the promises of God and broadcast them to the world. Those people who've become aware of their sinfulness, and who are persuaded there are severe consequences to be faced because of it, are urged by evangelists to pray to God for deliverance. So we can tell the sinner to go to God in prayer with absolute confidence that he won't reject any who go to him in sincerity.
- **The Holy Spirit.** For the one who's been to God in repentance, and placed their faith in Jesus Christ, the Word of God assures them that if they ask for the Spirit, God will certainly do it. That is, the believer who wants to be even more influenced by the power of God's Holy Spirit has God's guarantee that he'll get it. Listen to this in Luke:

Luke 11:13 If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children' how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?

- **Wisdom.** Someone once described wisdom to me as taking the things you've learned and applying them to your present situation. For the believer, throughout their life they've learned things about people, and it'd be useful to be able to draw on that knowledge to know how to interact best with people now. And more importantly, they've learned things about God that they could apply to their everyday life. They need wisdom. Here's another promise in the Scriptures, and it's found in the first chapter of James:

James 1:5 If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

For you who are believers, let me briefly offer some guidance about prayer.

Very often, Christians don't receive from God what they ask. And, not wanting to bring any dishonour on God, they make excuses. They might say, "Ah well, God sometimes says no". That may be true sometimes, but it could be the believer has a fault in their prayer life. After all, Jesus has said you will get what you ask for—if you're praying properly. Instead of apologising on God's behalf, we should be more willing to say, "No, I didn't get [that thing] off God. I need to examine myself to see what I'm doing wrong."

Another point is it's preferable that you pray to the Father. You may contend that God is a Trinity therefore we can pray to the Holy Spirit or Jesus as we can to the father. But I'm only suggesting we model our prayer life on the examples in Scripture. In John's gospel, we hear Jesus say the following:

John 16:24 Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name. Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.

The general pattern then is to pray *to* the Father *in the name of* the Son and *in the power of* the Holy Spirit.

And keep praying, brethren! Keep at it. Because fervent prayer is an indicator of spiritual life, while lack of prayer is a sign of spiritual declension.

## The Fig Tree and Destruction

It's always fascinated me how humans can have feelings towards inanimate objects as if they were alive. A British sitcom from the 1970s saw a man furious at his car which wouldn't start. He threatened the car first, then went and took a branch from a tree and started to thrash his car with it! And there's been lots of times when my children have been sad when balloons float off into the sky, thinking they all alone up there!

I suspect some people will feel a bit sorry for this fig tree. It's sitting there, growing away, each year producing leaves and figs for passing travellers. It sounds like Jesus was angry at the tree for having no figs on it, even though the fruit wasn't due to emerge for another six months!

Bertrand Russell, the famous philosopher, and historian, in an anti-Christian book, accused Jesus of “vindictive fury” for being unkind to the tree. But these things are said by those who don’t WANT to believe and are looking for reasons not to. They misunderstand Scripture and aren’t interested in how to approach the Scriptures in a proper way. There’s nothing in our account to say Jesus was angry, for a start.

This business with the fig tree was an act of theatre by Jesus. The whole thing was staged by him to teach something both about prayer *and* **nothing less than the destruction of the Jerusalem temple**. The very earliest commentary on Mark’s gospel explained it in a similar way, as a parable acted out by Jesus.

This is the reason some Bible scholars say we shouldn’t call this “the cleansing of the temple”. It can give people the wrong impression—that Jesus came to the temple to begin a process of reforming it. No. Jesus didn’t go there to reform the temple but to abolish it!

The green leaves on the fig tree were almost like a promise of fruitfulness. And it’s the same with the temple. There was lots of activity there. There were millions of animals being sacrificed. And prayers were being said without ceasing. And yet, for all this religious activity, **there was spiritual deadness**.

By quoting from Jeremiah, Jesus is hinting he’ll do to that temple what God did to the old one.

The withered fig tree was hugely symbolic of the end of this dead religion and the start of a brand-new era in God’s purpose:

- The very notion of the temple was being redefined. It was no longer a structure made of bricks, but a body of people all around the world.
- Instead of God’s relationship with mankind being restricted to the Jewish people, he would now draw into his family people from all nations and tongues.
- And the frenetic slaughter of millions of animals was to be ended by one sacrifice—that of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. As unpleasant as all that was, each animal and bird played a role in God’s purposes by becoming a symbol of one ultimate sacrifice to end them all.

The Jews would succeed in their plotting. They wanted Jesus dead, and they got it. And here’s the great irony: **in getting rid of Jesus once and for all, they helped to usher in a new era, where Gentiles would have access to God in prayer in a way they couldn’t imagine**. The Gentiles wouldn’t be concerned about the destruction of the old temple, because they would become the new temple of God itself!

There we have it. The fig tree and the temple. The account is full of complexities, but at least today we’ve been able to extract some very fundamental principles from it. WE are now the temple of God. God lives within us in a special way. And he encourages us to not be barren like that old fig tree or the unfruitful nation of Israel, but to understand the centrality of prayer in the Christian life and act accordingly, by being people dedicated to prayer.

Amen.