

Sermon outline and notes:

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## Mark 11:12-14, 20-25 “The Power of Prayer”

Intro. Our story today follows the Triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, which occurred on Sunday, the first day of the week. After a full day of activity, Jesus and His disciples retreated to an area outside of Jerusalem to spend the night. On Monday morning, Jesus was very hungry, and coming upon a fig tree with full leaves, He noticed that it did not have any fruit for Him to eat. The early or smaller figs, growing from the sprouts of the previous year, begin to appear as early as late March, and ripen by May or June. Jesus expected to find some early, small fruit, but He did not. So He cursed the fig tree, making it unable to bear fruit any longer. On Tuesday, Jesus and His disciples walked by that same fig tree and they noticed that the tree had already withered, even down to the roots. The perfect tense shows this was not just a temporary condition.

What Jesus did here was unusual for him. Rarely did He do a miracle that brought damage to anything. So why did He do it? I believe that the primary reason for cursing the fruitless tree was to teach some spiritual lessons. In this context Jesus used this tree to rebuke fruitless lives. But Jesus also used this incident to teach about prayer. That will be the main topic of my message today.

In addition to that, Jesus performed a great miracle. Wasn't it amazing! Jesus could just speak the word, and the fig tree withered away to a shrunken corpse in a day or less. But that was consistent with previous miracles. For example, Jesus just spoke the word, and the nobleman's son, who was miles away, was healed. What authority Jesus had! But what is perhaps more amazing is that Jesus says that we too can have such authority! He says in v.23 that we can have mountain-moving prayer. He was probably referring to the nearby Mount of Olives. Previously Jesus had taught this as well. He said in Mt. 17:20, “if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.” Removing mountains was a common Jewish phrase, for much of Judea was mountainous. Though God can move literal mountains, we must understand Jesus to be referring to anything that seems too big to move. The phrase vividly conveys the meaning of “removing great difficulties.”<sup>1</sup> So we see that great works are not limited to Jesus, but possible to “whoever” meets the conditions.

Are there great obstacles or challenges in your life? David Jeremiah tells the story of Burleigh Law, a missionary pilot in Congo, who was once trapped in the sky by a deadly storm that seemed to come from nowhere. Burleigh lost his bearings as thunderclouds surrounded him on every side. Here and there openings appeared in the clouds, and he kept turning his plane toward those openings, following little patches of blue like a needle through fabric. Finally he saw a little landing strip beneath him, and he landed with a sigh of relief.

Suddenly a vehicle came racing up to his plane. A nurse ran to him, saying, “I don't know where you came from, but I know you are an answer to our prayers.” You see, a missionary couple had been isolated in this remote mission station. The roads were impassible and the bridges were out. The wife had become seriously ill with a high fever. Early that morning the Christians in the

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<sup>1</sup> Zech. 4:7 says, “Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain!”

village had gathered in earnest prayer for help. God responded by arranging the storm clouds in the sky to direct Burleigh Law's little plane to that very spot of earth.<sup>2</sup>

That is just one of many stories of God answering prayer in a big way. Do you have experiences of mountain-moving prayer? [Discussion: Would you like to share one of the greatest answers to prayer that you have witnessed?] Do you see God answer prayer on a regular basis in your life? Or does it seem that God does not answer your prayers? Well in order to have power in prayer, we need to meet the three conditions given in our text of Scripture today. The first condition is this:

## I. HAVE A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST

If you are going to have answered prayer like we have here, you must first of all have a personal relationship with Christ. This is implied in that Christ gave these promises only to His disciples. He gave these promises to people who had a relationship with Him. Also, only a few days later, Jesus taught in John 15:7 that abiding in Him is a condition of answered prayer (read). This promise is only given to Christians who meet the conditions given.

But with too many people, God remains outside of their lives. They want God in their lives only when they get into trouble, and even then, only long enough to get them out of the situation they are in. But prayer should not be just an emergency measure that we turn to when we have a problem. Real prayer is a part of our constant communion with our Heavenly Father, and it is an expression of our worship of God.

One day someone complained to me that God did not answer their prayer. One problem was that this particular person showed little to no evidence that they are a believer. How can they expect God to answer *their* prayers? Their sin and unbelief is a barrier between them and God. (Cf. Isa. 59:2).

Do you have a personal relationship with Christ? Is that reflected in a regular prayer life? If not, you need to repent of your sins and trust in Christ as Savior. That is the first step to having power in prayer.

The second condition of answered prayer is this:

## II. HAVE FAITH IN GOD

Jesus said to His disciples in v.22, "Have faith in God."<sup>3</sup> Then in v.23 He said that if anyone "does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says." Then in v.24 He says, "believe that you receive them, and you will have them." Three times in three verses He emphasizes faith as an important condition of answered prayer. If we are going to do great things for God, we must have faith in God.

Now there are 3 characteristics of true faith that I see in our text:

A. Faith Should Be Directed *to* God - Notice that Jesus did not merely say, "Have faith." We are not talking about faith in faith. Instead, we are talking faith *in* God. "In God" is literally "of God," but it is an objective genitive, God being the object of faith. After all, faith is only as good as the object of your faith. Ours is not so much a problem of the *amount* of faith, but of the *direction* of faith. For example, on one occasion the disciples asked, "Increase our faith" (Lk. 17:5). In

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<sup>2</sup> Virginia Law, *Appointment Congo* [Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1966], pp. 20-21.

<sup>3</sup> A few older texts have "If you have faith...", but the point is the same.

effect our Lord replied, “If you only have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can uproot this tree and make it be planted in the sea.” His point was that it is not the size of your faith that really matters, but *whom* your faith is in, “Have faith in God.”

George Mueller left a lifelong record of His prayers and their answers. When asked by a friend to explain his secret, Mr. Muller replied, “Have faith in God.” If I interpret George Muller correctly, he was not placing the emphasis on the word “faith,” but rather on the word “God.” George Muller knew God, so his faith was not in his own boldness and daring, but in the living God

So the first key to biblical faith is making sure your faith is directed to God. Furthermore, by understanding certain attributes of God, we can build our faith. For example, have faith in God for:

1. God Is Omnipotent – God is all-powerful. We see this right here in our text. Jesus had the power to cause the fig tree to wither on His command. And by His power He can even move mountains! So put your faith in God. He has the power to answer your prayers.

2. God Is Truthful - The dictionary defines faith as trust in the honesty and truthfulness of another person. Titus 1:2 says that God cannot lie. As we get to know God through His Word and through our personal experience, we find that He is worthy of our trust, and our faith in God grows.

Often, we practice faith. Most of us trust our doctor, who prescribes medicine or some other treatment, and we usually follow the treatment plan by faith. How much more should we have faith in God! Faith in God is believing that God is honest and will therefore do what He says He will.

Another attribute of God that builds faith is this:

3. God Is Loving and Generous - Rom. 8:32 says, “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” A God that loves us so much that He would give His Son, how much more shall He give lesser gifts? Then James 1:5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” God will not fuss at you for daring to ask something from Him, though you are unworthy of any gift. Do you see how knowing the character of God encourages faith in God?

A soldier in Alexander the Great’s army greatly pleased the ruler and was informed he could ask any sum of money of the king. When he brought his requests, however, the request was so great that Alexander’s treasurer refused to pay it. When Alexander was finally consulted, he is said to have replied, “He knows how great Alexander is, and he has asked as from a king; let him have what he requests.” A prayer warrior is not afraid to ask great things of a great and generous God.

So true faith is directed to God, for He is all-powerful, true to His Word, and loving. Knowing His nature should encourage faith in Him. So let the focus of your faith be upon *God*, and what you know of His character. Furthermore, we see from our text that:

B. Faith Should Be Without Doubt – Again, Jesus said in v.23 that if anyone “does not doubt in his heart, but believes that ... he will have whatever he says.” The word “doubt” (*diakrino*) refers to a divided judgment, or a wavering doubt. Unbelieving, doubting prayer is a waste of energy, time, and words. James 1:6-7 says, “But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.” As you pray, don’t allow doubt to fill your mind

regarding your prayer request. Yet too often we have some doubts that God will indeed answer our prayers. Don't doubt, but have faith in God!

A young husband was about to purchase a medical insurance policy, but his wife said she did not feel right about it. She just did not trust the company. She insisted that he not buy that policy. How would you handle such a situation? On the one hand, the concerned husband could criticize her for her doubts. He could accuse her of being obstinate and urge her to be more trusting. He could tell her that she really should appreciate all the time he spent choosing this policy. This approach basically sees her opposition as an attitude problem.

On the other hand, he could address her doubts by focusing on the credibility of the insurance company. He could, for instance, tell her something about the character of the company and its founders. He could show her a financial statement and tell her how much money the company has in reserves. He could show her customer ratings. He could go over the policy with her and explain what the company has promised to do in case of medical need in the family. He could call a friend who already has a policy with the company and let him tell how pleased he is with their service.<sup>4</sup>

Even so, when you pray, if doubts tend to work their way into your mind, focus on the credibility and power and love of God. The more you know Him, the more you will trust Him, and not doubt. Furthermore:

C. Faith Should Be Expectant – One indication of true faith is that we have an expectation that God *will do* what we ask. We see this aspect of faith in our text. In v.23 Jesus says that if someone “does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says *will be done*, he will have whatever he says.” Note that we must believe that what we ask in the name of Christ “becomes” or “will be.” Also, in v.24, “you receive” is a present tense. But some of our oldest manuscripts have an aorist tense, which sees the fulfillment as already happened. As far as you are concerned, the prayer has already been answered! Faith “sees” the fulfillment even before it happens. To believe that He *can* answer is not faith. It is to believe unhesitatingly that He *will*. Expectancy is the test of real faith. We expect so little. Most people aim at absolutely nothing in life and hit it right on the head!

John Bisagno shared the story of his 5-year-old daughter coming to him one day requesting a doll house. According to Bisagno, “I promised to build one and went back to reading an engrossing book. So I glanced out of the study window and saw my daughter with her arms filled with dishes, toys, and dolls, making her pilgrimage to the corner of the yard, where by now she had gathered a great pile of playthings. I asked my wife what the purpose of that impossible pile could be. ‘Oh, you promised her a doll house and she believes you. She’s just getting ready for it.’” It is not hard to imagine how quickly the father went to the task of building that doll house. He threw the book aside, raced to the lumber yard for supplies, and quickly built the little girl a doll house. He didn't want to disappoint such faith and expectancy. Indeed, when we pray for rain, we should get our umbrellas ready!

You say, “Pastor, how can I have faith like *that*? How can I build my faith in God?” Well we have already discussed the importance of knowing the character of God. But I can give you more insight into building your faith. In order to have expectant faith that is free of doubt, this is what you need to do:

1. Know God's Will - 1 John 5:14 says, “Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.” So we are not to interpret this

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<sup>4</sup> Wayne McDill, *The 12 Essential Skills for Great Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994).

passage to mean that if you pray hard enough and really believe, God is obligated to answer your prayers, no matter what you ask. It has well been said that the purpose of prayer is not to get man's will done in heaven, but to get God's will done on earth. Our prayer requests must be consistent with God's will. In the model prayer Jesus taught us to pray, "thy will be done...." (KJV).

Let's suppose you buy a lottery ticket. Would you be able to pray in faith that God help you win that big prize? Based on Scriptures against greed and gambling, I personally do not believe it is God's will to play the lottery to begin with. So how can you pray in faith that God would help you win the prize?

So this is another reason why it is important to learn God's Word. It is only as we know God's Word that we will know God's will. Don't rely upon your own thinking to determine God's will (Prov. 3:5; 16:25).

Knowing God's will should help you overcome the problem of doubt. Not many of us mentally doubt God's *ability*, but we do often doubt if He is *willing* to answer our prayers. We can have authoritative prayer as we have complete faith and do not doubt that what we ask is in perfect accord with God's will. Whenever we do not know the will of God, we are simply unable to have faith. Consequently, before we do anything, first we need to know whether it is God's will.

2. Know God's Promises - This enhances faith, for when you have a promise from God, you can have confidence that He will keep His promise, for He cannot lie (Tit. 1:2). Abraham had this kind of confidence in God. "He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God" (Rom. 4:19-20). Faith takes the promise of God, and says, "I am confident that it will be exactly as God said it will be, because I have confidence in God." For example, God has promised to meet our needs (Mt. 6:33; Phil. 4:19, etc.). So if you meet the conditions of work and stewardship, you can pray with confidence that God is going to provide.

In my previous church I was planning to attend the Southern Baptist Convention, but I didn't have enough money to pay for Cheryl's expenses. We were young and on a very tight budget. The very morning we were to leave two men in my church (Paul Jackson and Billy Wilkerson) gave money to cover Cheryl's expenses. God provided!

So if you want to have power in prayer, you need to have faith in God. That will come as you get to know God's character, His will, and His promises. That requires a regular study of God's Word. It requires a daily walk with God. As you grow in faith, you will grow in power through prayer.

Yet there is another condition to powerful prayers that we see in our text:

### III. HAVE A FORGIVING HEART

You know, many would question the effectiveness of prayer. It does seem that many of our prayers are not answered. Many preachers, especially on TV, put the blame on our lack of faith. But perhaps a more important reason is found in v.25. There Jesus said, "And whenever you stand<sup>5</sup> praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses." Prayer is effective and pleasing to God only when it issues from a loving, forgiving heart. But an unforgiving spirit will short-circuit the power of prayer. When we Christians do not forgive, we set up a roadblock in our prayer life. I must be in fellowship with both

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<sup>5</sup> For the people of Bible times to stand praying was not at all unusual, especially for public prayer. But it is by no means the only prayer posture mentioned in Scripture. Jesus is not saying this is the only proper position in prayer. But we see from the rest of the verse that the condition of your heart is far more important than the position of your body.

my Father in heaven and my brethren on earth if God is to answer my prayers (cf. Mt. 5:21-26; 6:12, 14-15; 18:15-35). That is why the prayers of churches and Christian individuals are often so powerless. There has been much disagreement among Christians that has resulted in splits in families, churches, and denominations. Often, professing Christians will not even speak to one another. Bitterness and unforgiveness linger in the heart. When that happens, our prayers are hindered. By the way, 1 Pet. 3:7 indicates that if you don't treat your wife right, your prayers will be hindered as well! Read it for yourself!

Argumentation: You may question why forgiveness is required for answered prayer. One reason is found in Psa. 66:18. David said, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." There we see that willful, ongoing sin will hinder our prayers, and refusing to forgive is a sin.

Most of you know the story of Job. When Job suffered tragedy, there were three so-called friends who came to see him. I say "so-called" friends because if you had friends like Job, who needs enemies? But when it was all over, God said to Job, "Job, pray for your friends." The Bible says that when Job prayed for his friends with a spirit of forgiveness, "the Lord turned the captivity of Job" (42:10 AV). That is the literal translation. Job got out of the prison of his own unforgiveness and anger, and God blessed him greatly and answered his prayers.

Has anyone hurt you? What have you done about that hurt? Have you carried a grudge? Watch out! Jesus warns that God will not forgive you if you do not forgive others.

Conclusion: Is God answering your prayers? Have you seen God do great things in answer to your prayers? If not, you need to find out why. For example, are you sure you are saved? Do you have expectant faith? Is there unforgiveness in your heart? Psalm 139:23 says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts." Let the Lord show you why your prayers have not been answered, and respond in the right way. Perhaps you need to be saved this morning. Or perhaps you need to make a commitment to get to know God better, that your faith may grow. Or perhaps you need to forgive someone. If God has forgiven you for your many sins, surely you should not withhold forgiveness from someone else.

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: Matthew* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975); John Bisagno, *The Power of Positive Praying* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965); Dick Eastman, *Change the World School of Prayer* (Studio City, CA: World Literature Crusade, 1976); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2010; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986); Watchman Nee, *The Prayer Ministry of the Church* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1973); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through Online Bible); Lehman Strauss, *Sense and Nonsense about Prayer* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1974); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Diligent: Mark* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Mark (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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