

## Faith to Believe

Matt. 21:20-22

If you were to take the material in the four Gospels that describe the last week of Jesus' life and His death and resurrection, you would have a book that would be bigger than any one of the four Gospels. It is no exaggeration to say that the Gospels emphasize the Passion and of course, it is in Jesus' death and resurrection that we have the means of our salvation. Nothing is more important than that. Surprisingly, this last week of Jesus' life also includes much of His most significant teaching and what I mean is that there is uniquely in this Passion Week, statements Jesus made that are picked up later in the New Testament and that still direct our thinking on a number of very important issues.

The first case in point is the reply of Jesus to the disciples after He had cursed the fig tree and it immediately withered away. They asked, "How did the fig tree wither away so soon?" Jesus replied, "Assuredly I say to you, If you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea.' It will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive." The statement that Jesus makes here is very striking and suggests a number of questions. Were the disciples asking Jesus about how to curse fig trees or about how to get instant answers to their prayers? What does it mean to not doubt? And, Why did Jesus use the example of casting a mountain into the sea? Has anyone ever prayed that a mountain be removed and cast into the sea and then it happened, instantly, right when she prayed for it?

This is just one occasion of many in which Jesus taught about prayer. We might think first of the Lord's prayer which has an emphasis on giving God praise and honor, seeking the will of God, trusting Him to meet our needs, following His example of forgiveness and relying on Him to deliver us from the Evil One. Luke makes the Lord's prayer a step to be taken in a process of praying to get what you want from God. After so praying, a person would ask, knock, and seek like the

one who goes to his friend at midnight to ask for bread to meet a crisis of hospitality. God can be trusted to give good gifts to His children. In a similar teaching, Jesus told the story of the widow who sought justice from a very hard hearted judge who eventually gave her what she asked for because she wouldn't stop bugging him. The context puts the request into the experience of the last days when God's people will cry out for justice and for release from their persecutors. In another specific context, Jesus taught the disciples to go to each other over offenses seeking reconciliation for "whatever is bound on earth is bound in heaven" and, "if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven."

Then in John, Jesus shared His final words with His disciples in the intimate settings of the upper room and the garden. Among these final words were teachings about prayer. Jesus prophesied that His disciples would do works even greater than His own for if they would ask anything in His name, "I will do it." Then, in John 15:6, "If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire and it shall be done for you." Then, as Jesus spoke intimately with them about the nature of their friendship He assured them, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you." Finally, as Jesus spoke of His departure (meaning His death) and as He described the metaphor of a woman going through the agonies of labor that she soon forgets as soon as she has the joy of giving birth to her new son or daughter, He said, "You now have sorrow, but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you. And in that day, you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask and you will receive that your joy may be full."

In every case when Jesus taught about prayer, He emphasized the need to pray within and for the will of God. As soon as that will is known the disciple can pray confidently and specifically for that will to be done. It is as we grow in the depth of our relationship with Him (abiding in Him) that His will becomes one with our own. Wanting what He wants, we can then ask for and receive whatever we

desire. Even more fundamentally, we recognize the specific priorities that are constants in the heart of God. He cares for and will vindicate His obedient followers and to harm them is to put yourself in the path of inevitable judgment. He is the ultimate forgiver and He is always for reconciliation. He stands against the evil one and seeks to protect His own. He is as committed to saving the lost now as He was then. Asking God to do what He always wants to do is a way to pray in Jesus' name and according to the will of God and to thus, receive whatever we ask Him for.

So, let's get back to our questions about the teaching Jesus gave after cursing the fig tree...

1) Were the disciples asking about how to curse fig trees or about how to get instant answers to their prayers?

As neat as it would be to be able to do the trick of cursing a fig tree so that it instantly withers up, the disciples were certainly most interested in how to get an immediate response from God when they prayed. The cursing of the fig tree was a prophetic act and carried a message of warning to Jerusalem, a city which bore no fruit, as they were soon to kill the Son of God. Jesus' prayer (of a curse against the fig tree) was in service to the will of God who wanted Jerusalem to know the danger they were in so that they might turn from their sin and return (be reconciled) to God.

2) What does it mean to not doubt?

Think about Joe Montana or Tom Brady or any great quarterback. They are known for leading their teams to victory in clutch situations where to fail was to lose. Their teammates always say that their leader was so confident, so assured, that they knew they would prevail no matter how long the odds or how dark their prospects appeared to be. Then, surely enough, they won the game. But, Joe Montana and Tom Brady also lost quite a few football games. If you were to interview their teammates after a loss would they say, Well, Joe was just not himself today. You could see that he really didn't think we would win and so sure enough, we lost. But, they wouldn't say that. The great quarterbacks always

believe they will win, even when they lose. So, having a positive outlook and a confidence that everything will be fine or even the ability to so project that confidence that everyone around you buys in and also believes is not what Jesus was talking about. To believe and not doubt is to be certain of what God's will is so that you can then ask God to do what you know He wills to do and then watch Him do it. Let's put it this way, believing without doubting was not Jesus believing without doubting that if He cursed the fig tree that it would then instantly wither away. Instead, believing and not doubting was Jesus' certainty that God wanted Him to curse the fig tree so that Israel could have a picture of where their fruitlessness would take them. Jesus then knew what would happen when He obeyed the will of God and cursed the tree.

3) Why did Jesus use the example of saying to a mountain, "Be removed and cast into the sea." as an example of a prayer of faith without doubting?

It is a negative example and as such, it instructs us better than a positive example would. Has anyone ever done what Jesus here suggests? Has anyone heard of anyone by means of prayer alone throwing a mountain into the sea? I have never heard of such a thing and I even took church history in seminary. But, how and why would a Christ follower become convinced that it was God's will that such a thing be done? First, it would have to be God's will and then the believer must become certain that this is the case. But, what does the removal of a mountain have to do with those things that we always know to be the will of God? Is it a matter of forgiveness or reconciliation? Is it a matter of saving the lost? Is it needed in order to defeat the evil one? Will it protect Christ's followers from their persecutors? If there is no certainty that an act is the will of God then there can be no belief without doubting that such an act will take place. So far, the mountains of the world have been safe.

So, belief without doubting is to be focused on the will of God, to be surrendered to that will and to pray and ask God to do what He has shown that He wants to do. In the process of such a prayer you will reach the place of wanting what God wants so that as you ask Him for it you are asking for what you want at the same time that you are asking for what He wants. God will always answer this kind of

prayer. It is asking for what you desire from God and receiving it. It is asking in faith without doubting.