

Confident Prayer  
Mark 11:20-26

“Whatever things you desire, when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you shall have them.” Does Jesus really mean that? I mean, doesn’t this sound a lot like the prosperity gospel that all those phony TV preachers are peddling? “Just send in your donation to prove your faith and God will give you a Cadillac. God wants you to be rich!” Or more seriously, and far more cruelly, maybe you’ve heard this before: “Just pray hard enough and you won’t be sick anymore. Just pray with more faith and your loved ones won’t die.” Our reason, our personal experience rebels against all this, but given what Jesus says in today’s passage, are those TV preachers right? Is Jesus just telling us to “Name it and Claim it?”

Well, to understand this verse, we need to keep its context in mind. We need to remember the significance of the withered fig tree, the miracle that prompts this entire discussion. Its sobering example should keep us from getting too far off the rails.

So what happened to the fig tree? Three weeks ago, we read in verses 12 and 13 that Jesus had gone up to this particular tree to see if it had any figs on it. It did not, and so in verse 14, Jesus cursed it, saying that no one would ever get fruit from it again. Verse 20 tells us that on the following morning, it had already withered away. Jesus made it dry up because it was not fulfilling its purpose, bearing fruit.

So, what happened between the time that Jesus cursed the fig tree and the next morning when the disciples discovered that it was withered? Jesus had gone into the Temple, and found it to be just like the fig tree. The Temple was no longer bearing the fruit of true worship, of true devotion to God. By cursing the fig tree, Jesus was thus saying that the Temple would also soon be destroyed because it was not fulfilling its purpose.

So, what does this judgment on the fig tree and the Temple have to do with Jesus’ subsequent teaching on prayer? How should the Temple and the fig tree inform our expectations when we pray? Well, I suppose most obviously, Jesus’ judgment on the fig tree and the Temple gives the lie to the prosperity gospel, doesn’t it? I mean, if Jesus were really encouraging Christians to be selfish in verse 24, if He really meant that if only we pray hard enough we can have everything we want, He surely picked a very odd time to do that. In fact, if the prosperity gospel were true, it would reverse everything He had just taught His disciples in the Temple.

For what did He do there? He threw out the moneychangers and those who sold doves at outrageous prices. In other words, He roundly condemned those who were trying to turn religion into a profit-making venture, those who were taking advantage of the faith of others for their own material gain. So, what sense would it make for Jesus suddenly to endorse on an individual level what He had just condemned at an institutional level? Why would he throw the moneychangers out of the temple only to endorse the selfish greed of TV preachers and their listeners?

No, given Jesus’ judgment on the Temple and the fig tree, there is no way that He is preaching the Prosperity Gospel. Whatever this passage means, we are not to make our own house of prayer into a robbers’ den. We must not do what pagans do, and try to manipulate God into fulfilling our selfish, materialistic desires.

Instead, we must understand Jesus' answer in verse 22 – “Have faith in God” – as the rubric, the heading, the controlling sentiment by which we view the rest of the passage. Whatever the content of our prayers may be, they must always be founded on and infused with faith in God.

Okay, so what does this faith in God look like where it comes to prayer? Well, in the withering of the fig tree and the cleansing of the Temple we see what true faith is not – faith in God doesn't mean trusting that God will grant us material prosperity, satisfying all our selfish desires. No, treating God as some kind of heavenly Santa Claus, demanding that He give us whatever we want whenever we want it, is actually the opposite of faith in God, isn't it? Such a selfish attitude is really putting our faith in ourselves, trusting that we know better than God what is best for us. That's not faith – that's presumption.

And this sort of presumption isn't just limited to the physical, material sorts of things the moneychangers in the Temple wanted, the sorts of things that that the TV preachers encourage us to ask for. No, Jesus gives us another negative example of faith in verse 26, this time illustrating a spiritual sort of selfishness – “If you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.” For what are we to think about someone like that, the sort of person who prays that God will forgive him, even while he refuses to forgive others? Is someone like that really trusting in God? Or is that sort of person just treating his religion like heavenly fire insurance – claiming God's grace just so that he can continue to live a selfish, bitter, hateful life? No, that's not real faith. That's not really trusting God.

For true faith isn't focused on the self at all, is it? No, true faith is, as we would expect, focused on God Himself. And that's why verse 25 describes a truly faithful person. For someone who really trusts God is willing, even eager to forgive others.

Why is that? For starters, someone who really has faith in God has, by definition, transferred his trust from himself to God. So, why has he done that? First, because of what he knows about himself. Down in the core of his being, the one who truly trusts God knows that he himself is nothing more than an unworthy sinner. But he also has faith in God because of what he knows about God. Down in the core of his being, he knows that God has been merciful and gracious to him. Someone who is truly trusting God thus has a life that is so marked by humility, so amazed by God's grace toward him, that forgiveness flows out of him as naturally as water flows from a spring.

In other words, the sort of faith that Jesus encourages us to place in God in verse 22 is primarily a relational sort of faith, a trusting sort of faith, a humble sort of faith. Real faith is thus the opposite of the prosperity gospel, because true faith involves turning away from our own reason, our own experience, and our own desires and trusting God to lead us and guide us and provide for us.

It is this sort of faith that David describes in Psalm 131, the trust that a weaned child has in its mother. So, what does faith have to do with a weaned child? Well, think about what a weaned child doesn't do any longer. He is no longer a nursing babe that clings to its mother at times purely out of hunger, because it wants to be fed. A nursing babe is not trusting but demanding, and often insistent.

Is our relationship with God ever like that? Do we ever pray, “God, I want this,” or “God, help me do this,” or “God, why don't you do that?” I don't know about you, but all too often, I find it far easier for me to cry out to God in hunger or frustration or even in desperation than in quiet, simple faith.

And haven't we all, at one time or another, prayed earnestly that God would do something for ourselves or our loved ones, only to go on worrying about that very same thing? But when we do that, when we claim to give our problems to God only to snatch them back from Him and go on worrying about them ourselves, are we really trusting God? Do we really have faith in Him if we don't leave our problems in His hands?

In contrast, in Psalm 131, David urges us to have the faith of a weaned child. For unlike a nursing babe, a weaned child no longer seeks his mother for what he can get from her. Instead he is quiet in his mother's arms, simply taking comfort in being with her. Just so, true faith in God is satisfied to be with God, not because of what He gives us, but simply because of Who He is.

And if we have that kind of faith, a God-centered, humble, trusting faith, if we are in the right sort of relationship to God that verses 26 and 27 describe – living in a state of forgiveness with God and with one another – then of course if we ask God to do something, we should confidently expect to receive it. For if our hearts and minds are so closely attuned to God's grace, so closely aligned with God's desires, whatever we want will of course be what God wants, what is truly best for us and for others and for God's glory. If that's the kind of relationship we have with God, and those are the kinds of prayers we pray, of course we can be confident that God will give us whatever we ask for. I mean, why wouldn't God want to answer those kinds of prayers?

But this sort of quiet confidence in prayer may be the biggest challenge for us Presbyterians. Now, I think we know we should pray humbly, and we know our prayers should arise from a close relationship to God and to other Christians. We know that, even if our prayers don't always live up to that standard. But do we really pray confidently? Do we pray with certainty that God will answer our prayers? Or on the contrary, do we catch ourselves hedging our bets in prayer – I know I do? Do we ever think that maybe we shouldn't ask for something, so we won't be disappointed if God doesn't give it to us?

Let's think again about those impossible situations in our world: terrorist violence, enormous debt, failing schools, fracturing families. Sure, we pray about such things, but are we really expecting God to fix them? Or are we will hoping that another politician with a better idea will come along and set everything straight?

Or think about those equally impossible situations in our personal lives: strained relationships, money troubles, confusion in the face of difficult choices, chronic sickness, temptations, loneliness and grief. Sure, we pray about these things, but are we really trusting God to fix them? Or are we just going through the motions of prayer, all the while not really expecting anything to change?

But what did Jesus say? Jesus said that even moving a mountain wasn't too much to ask, for nothing, after all, is impossible for the God to whom we pray. So, can we be bold enough to pray about big things, even seemingly impossible things with confidence? And if we aren't, isn't that just as faithless as the selfish prayers that we so rightly condemn?

Yes, of course we should pray with humility, not dictating tactics or timelines to God. And of course we should seek a closer walk with God, so that our prayers will be as closely aligned with His will as possible. But can we have enough faith in God to trust Him, really trust Him, with all those impossible things – the sickness and grief, the broken relationships and the money problems, the temptation and frustration, the discouragement and despair? And instead of offering up desperate, hopeless prayers,

instead of praying as a last resort just because there's nothing else we can do, can we have the faith to pray with confidence?

So, I suppose those TV preachers are at least partially right – prayer is powerful because our God is powerful. So, why shouldn't we pray boldly, confidently, even extravagantly? Is anything too hard for our God? And since He's already given us His own Son, can we doubt that He will hold anything back from us that we need?