

Jesus Explains How Prayer Works

Mark 11:12-14, 19-26, Matthew 21:18-22

Good morning men! Let's kick it off with a shout out. Today we're going to welcome a new group called MALES. It stands for Men Altering Lives Every day Spiritually. Good job guys putting that together, they meet at the First United Methodist Church in Millville, NJ. The leader is Dave Maxwell and they are doing *Man in the Mirror's Journey to Biblical Manhood* and they're using the online videos to participate in that. So let's give them a rousing Man in the Mirror welcome! One, two, three, hoorah! Welcome guys, we're glad to have you with us.

The series is *Hanging Out With Jesus: Stories About Jesus From The Gospels*. We've been going through the gospels one story at a time in chronological order and last week we started the story about the fig tree but the story of the fig tree actually ends the story after the story we looked at last week, so we're going to jump into that this week and take a look.

To get started, are any of you guys here jugglers? Anybody know how to juggle? You know how to juggle, would you be my volunteer, come on up and do some juggling for us? You actually may want to reserve your applause to see how he does! Your name? Jesús is going to juggle for us, and I'll give you a choice. You can use these three blocks or these three Easter eggs. He's going to do the three blocks, so Jesús has quite a bit of self-confidence, so let's see you do your work here. Look at this man, all right! Way to go Jesús! Okay, now put those back there and now we're going to graduate to something a little more challenging. I have three glasses here, three glass glasses, three expensive glass glasses... maybe not that expensive. I want to know if you feel like you can do those. What's the matter Jesús, don't you have enough faith? Um... no. Okay, I think Jesús made a good decision. Thank you Jesús for being a good sport; let's give him a round of applause.

So the idea here that I want to point out is that we're going to talk about prayer in this message, and Jesus is going to explain how prayer works. Prayer is built on trust, trust a synonym for faith, and faith is a synonym for believing. Faith is a very fragile thing, trust is a very fragile thing you know in your personal relationships. It has to be cared for and nurtured, so I want to make sure as we begin and go through this that you understand that I understand that God understands that your faith even though it may be strong in some ways, yet is still as fragile in other ways and needs to be nurtured. So I want us to be very careful today as we approach this subject of Jesus explaining how prayer works, because this is what Jesus says. Jesus says that if you ask for anything in prayer believing and do not doubt, you will have what you have asked for.

Now, that's a problem, because you have prayed for things in the past, believed God would answer those prayers, and you have not received what you prayed for. So this is a very troubling and perplexing text from this perspective. If you're a Christian, it will stop you dead in your tracks, and if you're a non-Christian, it might keep you from becoming a Christian because it just doesn't seem believable, trustable, faith worthy, because of your experiences with prayer in the past. So let's jump in and I want us to take a look at the passage in Mark 11, we're going to read the whole passage starting at verse 12:

The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not

the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

Now this is one of the most perplexing little stories in the Bible. We're going to talk about it in a moment, and people have been trying to figure out what in the world was going on here for a long, *long* time. It's a very difficult passage, and where for centuries others have failed to be able to explain this, this morning I will... Well, okay maybe not! Down to verse 20:

In the morning, (this is the first morning after the second cleansing of the temple) as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

"Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain (the mountain of olives), 'Go, throw yourself into the sea (probably the Dead Sea),' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them.

And then he repeats this. Any time you see something two times in scripture, it's for emphasis.

"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

The Indisputable Promise of God

The first thing we want to talk about is the indisputable promise of God. The fact that Jesus (and Jesus is God of course) has made this promise that if you ask for anything in prayer believing, you will receive the thing you have prayed for. This is indisputable. Now in theology we have a concept called the Analogy of Faith and it simply means you use scripture to interpret scripture. The opposite of using scripture to interpret scripture is to use what is called an atomistic exegesis, in other words you take one little verse and you spin off what you think is the meaning of that text, but without taking into account the other verses. So this is the indisputable promise of God, but just to use this scripture to interpret scripture principle, let me read to you a few other verses that Jesus says about his teaching on prayer. You can write these down, I'm not going to give you enough time to look them up, so just listen.

The first would be Matthew 17:20: I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain move from here to there and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.

And then in Luke 11:5 he talks about the parable of the man who has a friend who comes at night and asks for three loaves of bread. I can't help you, we're all closed up for the night. Jesus said, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs. So I say to you, ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you, for everyone who asks receives, everyone who seeks finds, and everyone who knocks the door will be opened to him. Which of you fathers who, if your son asks for a fish will give him a snake instead? And so forth.

Then Luke 18:2 and following. This is the parable of the persistent widow. There was a widow and this judge who didn't fear God nor care about men. This woman came to him seeking justice, and she just kept bothering him until he finally was like okay, just to get her off my back, I'm going to go ahead and

give her what she wants. And Jesus said listen to what the unjust judge says and will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you that he will see that they get justice and quickly! However when the son of man comes, will he find faith on Earth?

Two more. John 14:12. Part of what I'm doing here, by the way, is that when you think about where does this trust come from, where does this belief come from, where does this faith come from? You don't sit in your chair in the dark and have this come upon you! We get our faith from hearing the word of Christ, it is the trustworthiness of God and his word that gives us the confidence that we need in order to have this faith. That's why we're looking so much at this. So John 14:12-14. Jesus says: I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father and I will do whatever you ask in my name so that the son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name and I will do it.

Finally John 15:7: If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given you.

So the indisputable promise of God is that he will give you what you ask for if you believe in prayer without doubting. He is unequivocal in making this claim, but is it true? Because you have prayed for someone you love that had cancer and they died. You have prayed that your home wouldn't go into foreclosure and you wouldn't lose it, but you did. You have prayed that your investments wouldn't be wiped out, but they were. You have prayed for the salvation of a loved one, and they're still lost. You have prayed along with millions of others for spiritual revival and awakening in America, and it hasn't happened. You have prayed for the reconciliation of your marriage, and it hasn't happened. You prayed that you wouldn't have to get divorced, but you did. And on and on, and yet Jesus says ask whatever you wish and it will be given you. Jesus says whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours. So how do we reconcile these two scenarios? How can it possibly be true?

Well the first thing we want to look at in Mark 11 is this idea that you can say to this mountain be taken up and cast in the sea and it will happen; so one of the rules of interpretation for scripture is that you use the normal rules of literature. In the normal rules of literature, if somebody says my son is the best kid in the whole world, you know what they mean right? You know that he's not really the best kid in the whole world but to him he's the best kid in the whole world. It's called hyperbole, overstating the case to make the point. If I were to tell you I always do a devotion, a daily quiet time, you understand that I don't really mean that I always do, I'm using hyperbole, a form of exaggeration to make the point. We can apply that rule of literature here; every theologian who's ever looked at this verse understands that when Jesus says about the mountain into the sea, he's using hyperbole. He's overstating the case to make a point. The point is that if you really believe, you can do what seems like impossible things! There are things that you want to have happen that look impossible, but you can make them happen with faith!

Then the next thing I want us to look at is how could you ever possibly believe certain things would happen? Let me give an example. I want to pray for a 100 year old tree to be in my front yard next week. Okay, so there are some things that are so far-fetched that even though I can say I believe, they aren't likely to happen. People often are miss-taught about prayer, and I was one of them. I was taught that you could manipulate God. The idea was that I could work God to do things that were outside the prevue of what God was ever going to do. Now I suppose someone could find a way to transplant a 100 year old tree in my front yard next week, and if you know how to do that I would appreciate it if you

would, but the reality is that I don't have the faith to believe that will happen. No matter how much I try to conjure that faith up, I just don't have it. So you see there's a difference between what God can do, and what God will do. I have enough faith to believe that God *could* actually do it! Well, maybe not the 100 year old tree, but in terms of saving your marriage, I absolutely have faith that God could do that! Do I have faith that God will do that, no. Do you have faith that God will do that, you know what probably not, but you might! Because God will give men gifts of faith. So when God says if you can believe and not doubt, if you do believe and don't doubt that is because God has given you the gift of faith to believe that thing. Now I have known and you have known people who were sick with cancer who prayed and said that I believe that God is going to heal me, and they didn't. They died.

One of our own, one of our former table leaders, Scott Alexander, who used to sing to us, absolutely had faith that he was going to be healed, and he died. So what kind of faith did he have? Is it faith that God will do the thing or faith that God could do it if that was God's will? Well, Scott brought his faith under the mantle of God's good, pleasing, and perfect will for his life and in some sense his prayer did come true. He did not die, because he still lives! I want to pray that I'm going to live forever, that I will never die. Guess what? I absolutely know that God will do that, that I will never die, because I have eternal life in Christ. So this body will shed away, but I will never die.

There are things that we can pray for that we absolutely know will happen. What are those things? Anything that God has promised in scripture will come to pass. For everything else, check with him and see which way he wants to go. We can ask God to give us things. If we really long for something and it's righteous and it serves the Kingdom's purposes, and it doesn't go against the will of God and we are having trouble believing. If you need more faith, then ask God to give you more faith as a gift. If it is his will, then he will do that, you will believe and not doubt and you will have the thing that you pray for. This is not just some mind game, this is not some sort of mental gymnastics, this is the truth that is spoken by the historical Jesus in the Biblical record in which Jesus says exactly what he meant and he meant exactly what he said, and that is that whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours. Now here's the thing, if you're praying for something like God I really have faith that you're going to make this marriage work. Maybe it looks like it just isn't going to work, but I believe, I have faith. That's either true that you have that faith, or it's not true that you have that faith, and you know what, you know! You know in your spirit if God has given you a special gift of faith for something that is not otherwise predictable.

So Man in the Mirror has this grandiose plan to hire 330 Area Directors and I absolutely have faith that it's going to happen, but in the sense that it's something that God could easily do. I believe for some reason, and I have no doubt that he will do it. Where does that come from? I humanly speaking don't have what it takes to believe that that could happen. So it must be a gift of faith. As it turns out, one of my pastors has told me in the past that God has given me the spiritual gift of faith, 1 Corinthians 12, but he can give that to you too for different things.

You know, we are sure going to run out of time here. I knew this was a three part series when I was preparing it, but I'm going to go ahead and accelerate this. Here's the Big Idea for the day: **Let God "edit" your prayer to something you can really believe.** So if you're praying God, make me a business success, make me wildly successful in business. I want to be the top salesman in my field. Do you have the faith to really believe that that's God's will for your life? Probably not. Besides, James 4:1-3 says you don't get what you ask for because you ask with the wrong motifs. If your motifs are for yourself and not for the glory of God and to bring yourself under the will and the mantle of God's leadership, then the

chances are you don't really believe that's going to happen, and you don't really have the faith to believe that will happen. You're trying to play mental gymnastics with yourself.

If you're a young Christian, it's not unusual to have the way of operating that I had, and my credo was plan, then pray. So I never went to God with a blank sheet of paper and said God what should I pray? What should I ask for? I always decided what I wanted, then went to God and told him all the benefits for why it would be a good idea for him to give me what I wanted. Now the credo today is pray, then plan. If you have something that you really want, that's okay, but instead of coming and trying to persuade God that you really believe this and therefore he has obligated himself to give it to you, bring your prayer to God. If you're standing at the fork in the road and you already know which way you want to go, that's okay, but treat it humbly. Bring it and put it before the foot of the cross, ask God to give you what you want, but Father if I have somehow mistakenly not asked for the right thing, will you edit my prayer so that it's something that I can actually believe. Would you do that for me? Or if you don't know what to do, you have no idea how you're going to save your marriage, then just come with a blank sheet of paper and put it there. If you have no idea how you're going to bring your kids to faith in Christ, if you have no idea of how you're going to live with this back pain for the rest of your life and you want it to go away, then bring your sheet of paper to the Lord. Ask him to help you write something down and edit it out so that you can have a prayer that you can really believe. Oh my gosh, it's truth!

The Indisputable Power of God

The indisputable promise of God is believable because of the indisputable power of God. This idea that Jesus withers this fig tree, they have been debating whether or not there was a moral implication to that for centuries. I don't know! When you look at a text there are necessary interpretations, there are probable interpretations, and then there are possible interpretations. So it's possible there's a moral implication here, that that's why you know it's a metaphor for judgment and that's the house of Israel. I've read it all, and I don't know, but one thing I do know is that a necessary interpretation is that this is an indisputable display of the power of God, to wither this tree. That seems to fit to me with the point that Jesus is trying to make. He's giving a visible witness of his indisputable power so that when he makes his indisputable promise there is evidence here that what he said was true.

The fig tree is withered? Yes it is, so have faith in God. Have faith in God and I tell you, you can say to that mountain be taken up and cast into the sea and it will happen. Everything you ask for, anything you ask for in prayer, if you believe it, it's done! The point here is that my power is released through faith. My power is released through believing, by trusting, taking this fragile faith that you have and allowing me to give you a gift of faith. The Big Idea today: **Let God "edit" your prayer to something you can really believe.**

How To Pray Without Doubt

Finally, how you can pray without doubt, a few ideas. I'm going to probably run these off kind of like a list. So this is how to pray a prayer that you actually believe.

First thing is step back and believe in the trustworthiness of God himself and his holy word. Bill Bright says faith is like a muscle, the more you use it, the better it gets. Experience with God and with prayer will indeed give you more faith in God's trustworthiness, and there are so many things that attest to that. That's a talk for another day I suppose. Let me give you five steps to prepare your heart.

The second thing is to prepare your heart. I'll give you five ways to prepare your heart to pray a prayer that you'll actually believe. Number one is check your motifs. I said James 4:1-3 earlier, you don't get what you want because you ask with the wrong motifs, so check your motifs, and make sure they are right. What are the proper motifs? That you're Kingdom oriented. Second, it talks about at the end of this passage that if you stand praying and hold a grudge against anyone, go and forgive them. So forgive others and seek forgiveness for your own sins, confess your sins. You see that in Mark 11:25. The third thing you can do to prepare your heart is to abide in Christ. John 15:7 If you abide in me my words abide in you. Then ask whatever you want and I'll do it! So the idea that we're abiding in Christ, that means remaining in him, that means walking with him, that means submitting to him, being surrendered to him, that means that we don't come with our own agenda, we come looking for his agenda. Fourth, ask God for a gift of faith. You can look it up in 1 Corinthians 12 if you want to study the gift of faith, but ask God to give you the gift of faith so that you can believe for the thing you want. Will he do that? He may do that, he may not, but ask him for a gift of faith as you prepare your heart. Fifth, submit to God's will and timing. 1 John 5:14-15 And this is the confidence we have. If we ask for anything according to his will, he hears us, and if we know that he hears us, we know we have the thing for which we have asked. So submit to his will, his purpose, his timing, that's how you can prepare your heart.

Then, know that your prayer has already been answered. When is prayer answered versus when is prayer granted is the reason that this text is so difficult, because Abraham prayed and believed God that he would have a son, and how many years went by before he had his son? 25 years! He was 100 years old! So when was the prayer answered? When it was prayed, when he was 75, when he believed. When was it granted? 25 years later, and it's this whole timing thing that causes many men to stumble in their believing, but if you have faith, don't give up. Never give up, know that your prayer is answered, and then sometimes it's yes, sometimes it's no, sometimes it's wait, but every prayer is absolutely answered the instant you pray. There is no delay in the answer, do you understand that? It's not like you pray and pray and God says hmm, let me think about it, give me a few more days, I don't know, step up your prayer vigil here, show me a little more performance here and I'll think about it. That's not the way it works! The instant you pray, BAM! God answers your prayer! But then when it comes to the granting of the prayer, there are many other factors involved, way beyond the scope of what we're doing today.

So what is the prayer need, what is the thing you want to have happen? Jesus has absolutely made an indisputable promise that your prayer will be answered when prayed in faith. He has shown his indisputable power to make that happen, and so our part in this is to come humbly and to let God edit our prayer into something that we can believe. Because when we believe, it's done! Let's pray!

Closing Prayer

Our dearest Father, thank you so much for giving Jesus these teachings on prayer. Lord, I know even as I just read them over again and again this week, I found my faith swelling. Not because I have faith, but because your word is true and it made my faith swell. So I pray, Father, that we would be men of your word, men of your truth, and I pray that we would all receive the things that we want and ask for because we believe, and we believe because we've allowed you to edit our prayers into something that we can actually believe. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.