

Being Confident in Prayer

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[0 : 0 0] If you hold anything against anyone, forgive them so that your Father in heaven may forgive your sins. It's a tough one, and this reading this morning is, let's, this passage this morning clearly is a difficult one, because when you look at how commentators interpret this, there are several that sort of verge from one end of the other, is Jesus just having a bad day, has really, just is this a teaching experience for his disciples? I don't think so. You know, if it's a teaching experience where I'm going to walk out of here and possibly face death, then I may think about how I do things in this service. Jesus is very clear about what he's doing.

If we put this into context, what has happened? Mark shortens the account. There's this been triumphal entry into Jerusalem. People have welcomed Jesus. He is the Messiah. He is coming.

Welcome Jesus. And then, and then Jesus pays a short visit to the temple, just pops his head in round, just to see what's happening. And I guess Jesus is pretty upset with what he has found.

He then goes off for the night to sleep, we're told. And this is where the story starts the next day. He is travelling into Jerusalem with his disciples. And here we get the story of this fig tree. Given the time of year, there wouldn't be figs on it, but it had the potential. Year in and year out, this fig tree has got the opportunity to fruit and make great fruit. Jesus is making a point. He clearly had in his head that this was a significant thing that he was about to do. This is all joined up with part of the teaching.

As we know, he went ahead to attend the temple. Frankly, we know that the temple had become no more than, as Jesus had said, it was more than a trading station. People were basically exploiting other people. They were selling doves at exploited prices. The money changers were basically ripping people off left, right and centre. The temple was everything that it shouldn't be. It was frankly an abomination to God. I did put a line in there. It actually made parliament look good, but maybe that was a comment that I shouldn't throw in this week. It was, I think this passage is a tipping point. And we all have them, where something significant shifts in us and through us.

[2 : 5 2] And this was a shifting point in this holy week. Jesus had got to the point where something had to break. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, probably not at this moment in time.

Jesus is making a point. The tables are turned over. Everything's thrown into a ray. But as we read in scripture, clearly Jesus gathered people and said, yeah, actually, you're right.

This isn't the way we do things. This isn't right. So clearly the leaders at the time were rather miffed, to say the least, that Jesus had pointed out to them, pointed out to the multitude, this is not the way you do things in my temple. And when you see something so beautiful and precious to the Father, what do we do? Do we turn a blind eye and just let it continue happening? Just allow it to go down the slippery slope. Or do we, as Jesus here, what is clearly a very, very social action moment? Let's do something about it. And everybody is left, we are left in no doubt that Jesus was reclaiming something, seeking to reclaim as he walked down this painful road to Good Friday.

So with this significant moment having occurred in the temple, they then just happen to wander past this fig tree, which has withered and died to the root within, presumably, a few hours. This doesn't normally happen. What a great opportunity. In his heart, Jesus must have thought, the prophets have come before, people aren't listening. This is a nation that I've come to save and had all its fruitfulness, all its potential. Here they get this stark vision of what it is when you don't nurture something and it doesn't bear fruit. What do we do with that? What do we do with the bigger thing? What do we do when we're faced with issues? Where is our focus? Where is our faith? Where do we stand when we see things that are going on that aren't of God? My experience, and maybe it is yours, that often, sometimes we're deflected and we focus on the smaller things in life and we miss the bigger picture, the bigger blessing that God wants to show us. I don't know whether in front of your computer screen, and if you're like me, you've spent a lot of time in front of a computer screen, far too much over the last 18 months.

Now, I've never had what is called a dead pixel. Anybody that's had a dead pixel on their screen means that out of all these amazing, and I will tell you that on a standard 1920 by 1080 screen, there is 2,073,600 pixels. These little things that make the screen up. But isn't it strange how if one pixel breaks, that is where our focus is. We focus on the one thing rather than the bigger picture and the blessing. Never mind all the rest that are working well, this one dead pixel is the one we focus on, and dare I say it, become obsessed with. Is that one thing for you in the great multitude of the blessings that God has given us? Maybe this morning we think, what is that dead pixel for us?

[7 : 03] Is it a person? Is it a situation? Is it a past church you might have attended, or a relationship with somebody that you had? A person at work maybe. Out of all these things of which we are blessed, if you are anything like me, and I'll be totally honest, sometimes that one pixel, that one situation, that one person is the thing that I become obsessed with, rather than seeing the bigger picture.

And Jesus this morning gives us the answer to the dead pixel on our screen and in our life. Because when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. Jesus told this great teaching thing, what is getting in the way of this thing of bearing the full fruit of each and every one of us have in our lives? What holds us back? What gets in the way? What is the person I am tempted not to send a Christmas card to this year? Who has marked off my Christmas list? Who I should be phoning them up and saying, bless you. Who is the person that maybe I may be tempted to cross over the road and not engage in conversation because of something in the past? Where is that challenge for me to pick up the phone?

And I will tell you, I was convicted greatly just before being ordained. I thought I had everything sorted and there was no unfinished business with God until he showed me a list of about six people that I needed to have some difficult and redemptive conversations with for this very, very thing, to actually be able to move on. And if Jesus can forgive, so can we.

I have heard this difficult thing for many of us. We would know from where we have been hurt, from disappointments in our life, from situations we have come from, that forgiveness sometimes isn't just rapid, it is a process. But it is a process in which God can be part of to bring us forgiveness and his redemption as we will learn as we go through the story. Because redemptive justice and apology, let's be frank, may never come in the way we're expected from somebody else.

We could wait all our life for that. Sometimes the hard thing is to say, let's clear our plate and come with clean hands and a pure heart by making that move. Otherwise, believe you me, it will destroy you.

[10 : 02] And things in you will die, like the dead pixel, like the tree, like the fig tree. It will never mature. It will never grow the fullness of fruit that we are called to do, because there will always be that thing that's there.

Jesus uses this and asks me, asks me personally in this scripture, what is the pixel or the pixels in my life? Where is it that fruit isn't being grown? Because something's got in the way because of an issue.

And then we remember, of course, that Jesus said, Father, forgive them. At the end of this week, on a Friday, after all that he had been through, after everything that he could have said, that he could have done, that he could have held in resentment, on the cross, says, Father, forgive them.

Because they probably don't know what they're doing. They probably don't know what they're doing. They don't know what they're doing to us. They don't know what they're doing to our relationship.

They don't know how it's marring God's image, not only in them, but in us as well. Get to the point, this is it. Father, forgive them, because maybe they don't even know what they're doing or they have done.

[11 : 24] But I'm going to make the move, as Jesus did, so that we can have that freedom. Our psalm that we had, Jesus gives us that confidence in prayer.

I can't do this forgiveness thing in my own strength, I know, because maybe like many of us, I have this inbuilt sense of, I want some form of justice here and now, on my terms.

That's the issue, isn't it? Often I want it on my terms, not on God's terms. And so we are then, as Jesus said, we are freed from this sense of wanting retribution and justice on our terms.

And you can often come to him, but, you know, as it said, who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in this holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart.

I remember having a conversation with somebody many years ago, for whom that verse was really significant in a family issue that they were dealing with.

[12 : 40] They said, I want clean hands and a pure heart in this. I've had enough. It's got to start somewhere, and it's got to start with me. Clean hands and a pure heart.

In our service of healing and wholeness today, as we come and share communion, as we come and have an opportunity to be maybe anointed with oil, if that's what you wish, if you sense there's a fresh beginning here, our bodies, as we come to receive communion, we acknowledge that our bodies are the temple.

Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. You know, what is there that's cluttered? What tables, I ask myself, have to be turned over? In my temple, in order for it to be holy and acceptable for the Lord.

What needs to be turned over for me? What needs to be turned over for us? Our stubbornness, resentment, long-held accounts, greed, selfishness, the list can go on.

But we know what tables need to be turned over for us to come with clean hands and a pure heart, to stand with Jesus in that place where in his strength he can forgive and remove our eyes from the pixel on the screen and see the multitude of opportunities and blessings and fruit that will come from us and that we'll be blessed with.

[14 : 09] Blessings to follow him. Are we confident in our prayer of confession this morning? Do we truly believe that we walk out with clean hands and a pure heart or ready and empowered to do the thing that we need to do, to say our sorries?

Maybe again, when you go home and over lunch or wherever today, maybe start listing the blessings. I love that song my grandmother used to play, you know, count your blessings.

It's an old one, but it's so true. Count your blessings. And when you start counting them, they will infinitely outnumber the broken pixel on your screen.

I promise you. And also it helps to focus what that broken pixel is. Freedom to speak, freedom to share. Do you want to know the fullness of God?

Ask him to help. Taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed is the one who takes refuge in him. Fear the Lord, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing.

[15 : 23] The lion may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. Come, my children, listen to me. I will teach you the fear of the Lord, whosoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days.

Keep your tongue from evil, your lips from telling lies. Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it. It's great advice.

I pray today as we come for communion, for those who maybe are listening on a podcast, wherever they are today, that maybe you may take time to count your blessings.

And maybe as Jesus taught in this short, but very clear teaching, quite dynamic teaching, that he gave to those around us to come to that point where we come and we can seek God's forgiveness for ourselves, but also have the power and strength to blossom as we forgive others.

Should we just pray together as we come and move into a time of prayer? Holy Spirit, would you come and strengthen us for whatever this has stirred in us?

[16 : 43] Maybe a picture, a situation, a person, maybe something that is extremely live for us at the moment, something that may be historic.

Whatever it is, Lord, we come to you and say, we want to be that fig tree that bears fruit and season to the fullness of what you would want.

We pray for our church and our country at this time as well. We thank you, Lord, for the authority of scripture on which we base your love and your continued confidence in us and for us.

And so, Lord, send us out, we pray this day, as we share our communion in the power of your spirit. In Jesus' name.

Amen.