

"From Fruitless Fig Tree to Faith Filled Prayers"

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Date: 24 September 2017

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[0:00] There are some people who floss at every meal. They have a thriving floss life.

They just seem to delight in flossing at all times. It doesn't matter where or when. They got their floss on them. And so after a meal, they find a place to floss their teeth without ceasing. And the rest of us watch with our mouths closed. Asking a Christian about his or her prayer life is like asking someone if they floss regularly.

Usually it's met with some kind of, yeah, if only I had more time, I'd pray more. Yeah, if only I had a better plan, I'd pray more. Yeah, if only I was like that gifted prayer warrior guy, I'd pray more. Or only if there were more prayer meetings, I'd pray more. Why don't we pray? Why are we plagued with prayerlessness?

[1:15] The majority of us, myself included, know we should be praying more. But our prayers tend to be more like christening of ships.

You know what I'm talking about? There's a ship built in a shipyard. A guy comes up, lady comes up, little speech, and then christens that ship with a bottle of champagne. And off it goes. We like to christen things with our prayers. Christen our meals. Christen our meetings. Christen our meetings. But where's the prayers of great reverence?

Of great regularity, specificity with results that can only come from God? Where are those? This morning, what I want to help you to see through God's word is that the problem of our prayerlessness isn't a lack of time.

It's not a lack of a prayer, of a plan. It's not because we're not prayer warriors with this pronounced gift. It's not because there's a lack of prayer meetings. The real problem of our prayerlessness is a small view of our God.

[2:28] It's unbelief. We don't pray because we don't trust God, trust in something else. We're too busy to pray because we've lost sight of the grandeur of our God.

So the antidote to prayerlessness is not just praying more. There is that. It's not reading books on prayers, though that would be helpful.

The real antidote, the root of prayerlessness, is seeing our God for who He is. Being aware and awestruck by our glorious God.

So here's my theory. The more aware and amazed you are about God's abiding presence, about God's unmatched power, about God's unstoppable plan, of God's providential provision in the details, of God's loving posture towards you in Christ, do you know what I'm going to want to do? You're going to want to pray to Him. You're going to want to ask Him for whatever. He's the God of the impossible. Now this morning, I would not want you to leave this service with your kind of tail between your legs because of your prayerlessness.

[3:49] That would not be my desire, nor would I think it's the Lord's. I think if you were to leave here with this sense of, oh man, I get to pray to that God, and He promises to give me everything I ask for if I'm prayed in faith, you're going out well.

You would go out strong. Now if you want your prayer life revived, would you please open up your Bibles to Matthew chapter 22.

Excuse me, 21. The book of Matthew is a story. It's a narrative. And for the majority of Matthew, he's covering like two and a half, three years.

And so it moves pretty quick. But when you get to chapter 21, everything slows down. Chapters 21 through 28 focus on the last week of Jesus' life.

Because it's the most important part. It's the climax of this narrative. It's where this gospel is proclaiming, pointing to the good news that Jesus would be crucified and on the third day raised to bring sinners back into a relationship with God.

[5:02] So a few weeks ago, we read about in chapter 21, Jesus entering into Jerusalem to a not so triumphal entry. And last week, we saw Jesus walk into the temple, God incarnate in the temple.

And we saw him with mixed results, mixed responses. There were some kids singing, Hosanna, son of David. And then we have the religious leaders saying to Jesus, we just shut those guys up. In verse 17 of chapter 21, Jesus and his gang walked back to Bethany to lodge there. And so now we pick up chapter 21 in Jesus coming back into Jerusalem.

And we're going to read a passage that's all of five verses this morning. But it's going to stoke the fires of your prayer life. So would you read with me? In the morning, as Jesus was returning to the city, he became hungry.

And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, may no fruit ever come from you again. And the fig tree withered at once.

[6:13] When the disciples saw it, they marveled saying, how did the fig tree wither at once? And Jesus answered them, truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, be taken up and thrown into the sea, it will happen.

And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive if you have faith. This passage can be broken into two basic sections.

Verses 18 and 19, a very unique warning. And then verses 20 through 22, a compelling call to prayer.

So these five verses have a warning and a compelling call to pray. Christ the King Church, our risen King, calls us to faith-filled, mountain-moving prayers as exercises of faith in Him.

These kinds of prayers call on God to restore marriages. These kinds of prayers call on God to deliver people out of addictions. These kinds of prayers call on the God of the impossible to change idolaters into worshipers of the one true God by the powerful grace of God.

[7:36] These kinds of prayers, faith-filled prayers in an unbelievable God, brings peace to strained friendships. These kinds of prayers are prayers by followers of Jesus that say, God, you alone can change the spiritual landscape of our city.

What I want you to see is a healthy, robust understanding of who God is, fuels a healthy and robust prayer life in Him.

So let's look at this warning in verses 18 and 19. And you'll notice it involves a fig tree. Let's just walk through.

Jesus is walking back to Jerusalem from lodging in Bethany. Evidently, He's hungry. He's probably staying at Mary and Martha and Lazarus' place. And I don't know, maybe they didn't have enough food to go around.

So this two-mile walk, He gets hungry. And on the way, He would do what all of us are doing. On the way, you're looking for a place to eat, He sees a fig tree by the side of the road.

[8:46] What you need to know now, at this time of the season, it would have been early for figs, but it's possible. And so He sees something about this tree that must have been inviting, so He goes to the tree.

And when He gets to it, what we read is that He found nothing on it but leaves. Here's why that's significant. It's an interesting way of saying there's no fruit.

Just leaves. No figs. Fig trees bear fruit soon after the leaves show. And so the expectation would be, you see leaves, you'll find figs.

So Jesus is expecting to find figs on this fig tree, but He only finds leaves. The fig tree was showing promise, but it didn't deliver.

Promise without fulfillment. It's like when you go into a restaurant and there's this open sign and you sit down and the waiter comes up and says to you, glad you're here, but I'm sorry we have no food.

[9:53] You'd be like, but the open sign was on. You'd be disappointed. Your expectations wouldn't be met. At this point, one would expect Jesus

to be like, all right, no figs.

I'm just going to move on to the next fig tree. But do you see what He does? He curses the fig tree. May no fruit ever come from you again. And the fig tree withered at once.

That's striking. So there's the story. We've got to ask the question, what's the significance about it? What's it doing here? I think we all have a sense that there's something more going on here than Jesus not getting figs and throwing a little three-year-old fit.

Something more is going on here. And there are three clues as to what's really going on. The first clue is Jesus' extreme response. He doesn't move on.

He pronounces judgment. And that fig tree withers. And we're left saying, boy, that seems really strong for a fig tree not producing figs. But it's in the unusualness of it that should get our attention.

[11:07] Something going on here that's more than we might think. So Jesus' extreme response is a clue that there's something more going on.

Something else is being communicated by this act. But then there's how Matthew has this placed. The location of this withering of the fig tree in the gospel of Matthew.

Specifically, in relationship to what immediately comes before and comes after this passage. This withering of the fig tree is sandwiched between two very interesting passages.

The first passage is Jesus in the temple. And they have these children who are singing his praises of Hosanna, son of David.

And then religious leaders are telling Jesus, will you just please quiet them down? And the religious leaders are telling Jesus to quiet them down. Because they don't believe Jesus is the Messiah, the son of David.

[12:14] It's a snapshot of the unbelief of the leaders in Jerusalem. And then if you look at verse 23, Jesus comes back into the city, goes back into the temple.

And all of a sudden, the same leaders, they literally question Jesus' authority. By what authority do you do all these things? They're questioning his authority because they don't believe he's the Messiah.

It's another snapshot of the unbelief of the religious leaders of the time. And so what's going on here is this fig tree incident is sandwiched between two examples of unbelieving spiritual leaders of Israel.

So this act against the fig tree is very intentionally placed. And it's communicating something serious about the religious leaders.

Now here's the other thing you need to realize. There's a pattern in your Bible of prophetic sign acts. A-C-T-S. Prophetic sign acts.

[13:24] Typically, God would call a prophet in the Old Testament and God would say, Oh, I want you to say this to this people, thus saith the Lord. So a prophet speaks on behalf of God and he uses words to do it.

But that's not the only way God would use a prophet to communicate his truth to his people. Do you remember the prophet Hosea? Do you remember what God asked him to do?

God had the prophet Hosea marry Gomer, who is most likely a prostitute. And his marrying of Gomer was a prophetic sign act.

He was, God was speaking, communicating to his people through that act of the prophet. And here's what God was saying. Hosea marrying the prostitute Gomer is like my relationship with you, Israel.

I'm like a faithful husband and you're like a faithless whore. A powerful prophetic sign act. And then when he turned to the book of Jeremiah, you see example after example of God calling Jeremiah Jeremiah to do these sign acts for his people.

[14:36] So here's where all this is going. That's the third clue. Jesus is communicating something through this withering of a fig tree.

He's communicating judgment. He's communicating judgment on the religious leaders. It's a prophetic sign act of judgment on the unbelieving leaders.

The fig tree represents the leaders. The leaves of the tree represent their religiosity, their piety, their impressive practice. But the fruitlessness represents their unbelief.

They don't see Jesus as he truly is, the Messiah, the son of David, who have come to set up a whole new kingdom. It's a kind of hypocrisy born of unbelief.

It's having leaves but having no fruit. The religious leaders were denying Jesus and therefore they were denying God's salvation.

[15:45] So his words of judgment are fitting. May no fruit ever come from you again. The leader's fruitless unbelief condemns them. They reject Jesus.

God rejects them. It's a prophetic sign act. And the withering is the anticipated destruction that will come upon them for their unbelief.

Unbelief. And so what you've got to realize here is this is incredibly serious. Unbelief is incredibly serious to God. He's calling them out as hypocrites.

A promising foliage of religion. But they're missing the fulfilling fruit of faith in Jesus. Of all people, these Old Testament leaders should have known that their Old Testaments were pointing to Jesus. And in their unbelief, they didn't see it. And God holds them to account for it. All this is implied.

[16:54] Nowhere in here does Jesus say he's about to wither the tree. He's like, okay guys, now pay attention of this prophetic sign act I'm now going to perform. No, it's when we come to our Bibles with an awareness of these clues that we realize what it is.

So this morning, here's the warning for us. God takes unbelief seriously. Because unbelief is a denial of who he is and of what he is doing in Jesus.

Now what we see happening with the religious leaders is their unbelief metastasizing into a hard-hearted rejection of Jesus and a denial of God's salvation.

For those of us who are followers of Jesus, chances are unbelief hasn't metastasized like that. But it's like a malignant polyp inside of you. Unbelief can be present in our hearts.

And what it can show up as is prayerlessness. It's a soft denial of who God is. It's a soft denial of what God can do.

[18:14] It's a denial of God and a self-reliance. So this warning that Jesus is showing here, it's very unique.

And it's a warning against unbelief. And we can walk away with a warning of unbelief for ourselves. And how do you respond to something like that? You respond by repentance.

You respond by recognizing it and confessing it. And then exercising faith. And that's exactly where Jesus goes.

So we've looked at the warning. Now, let's look at the compelling call to faith. Jesus is calling us out of unbelief. And he's calling us to a compelling faith in an amazing God.

And we find this in verses 20 and 22 of chapter 21. In verse 20, we read the disciples marveled at what they saw Jesus do.

[19:26] They were amazed at this display of power. But it doesn't look like they understood the prophetic significance of what happened.

So let's just pretend we're all in glory. The redeemed around the throne. And Peter walks up next to you. And you're like, Peter, can you just kind of relay to me what you saw on the road into Jerusalem with the withering tree incident?

We just, what was that like? He would probably say something like this. You know, we saw Jesus do some really amazing things. But that one stands out. Because I know Jesus was hungry.

I was hungry too. Mary and Martha didn't have enough food to go around. So we went into Jerusalem hungry. And he walked up to that fig tree. And he spoke a curse on it.

And we were amazed. We were kind of like, whoa, where did that come from? And we were amazed. And it's like Peter would say then, we didn't realize the full significance of what happened until after his resurrection.

[20:32] But we'll never forget it. The disciples weren't asking why Jesus did that. They were asking how Jesus did that.

How did the fig tree wither at once? How did you do that, Jesus? And Jesus answers in a way that should inform the way we pray.

Okay. Jesus calls us to faith in God. To trust in him and to not doubt him.

In verse 21, Jesus says, truly I say to you. Now, if you're a follower of Jesus and you read those words, truly I say to you, you need to tune your ear. Because it's like Jesus is saying, listen up.

This is important. He says, truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, let's camp out here.

[21:33] If you have faith and do not doubt. Jesus doesn't come out and tell us what is the object of faith here.

He just uses a shorthand. If you have faith and do not doubt. What's behind that though is Jesus, Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience.

And Matthew knows that what these Jews will believe is that Jesus is calling them to faith in God. Not faith in faith. Faith in the living God.

It would have been obvious to the original Jewish recipients. The emphasis here is not on the amount of faith we're to have, but the object of our faith.

Faith in God. Doubt. Doubt is another word for unbelief. And where faith is an act of reliance on God, doubt is an act of reliance on something other than God.

[22:48] And so a way kind of to fill this passage out for us to understand this verse better would be this. Truly I say to you, if you have faith in God and do not doubt God, then what you see me do here, you'll do more.

You can say to that mountain, go jump into the sea and it will. And it will happen. And so what we can walk away here is Jesus saying, doubt less, trust more, go pray, we're done, it's hot, amen. Amen. But here's the deal. This week, there's a really good chance something in your life is going to go sideways.

Maybe it's a relationship. Maybe it's your finances. Maybe it has to do with your job or your health. It's going to go sideways. And when whatever it is goes sideways, that sideways is going to be specific.

It's going to be concrete. And it's going to be in your face. It's going to be right there. And so if you approach in that moment when things go sideways and you're like, I just need to believe in God.

[24:10] And you're holding on to some kind of vague, general sense of God. Do you know what's going to happen? You're going to be overwhelmed.

You're going to be tempted to unbelief. Jesus doesn't spell out here the specific and concrete things about God we must trust.

So I'm going to be tempted to unbelief. So I'm going to do that for you. I want you, when you're faced this week with something going sideways, something specific, something concrete, something in your face, I want you to call to your mind specific, concrete realities about your God that will help you exercise faith and pray.

So let's fill out this sense of faith in God a little bit. Setting your trust on some very specific and concrete realities.

The first one, think of it in terms of five P's. P number one, God's present. He says, I'll never leave you nor forsake you. When things go sideways in your life, what does unbelief say?

[25:35] I'm by myself. I'm all alone. But what God says, no, I'm present. I'm here. I will never leave you nor forsake you. I'm with you always, even to the end of the age. But not only is he present, God's powerful.

In Matthew 17, we read with God, all things are possible. When things go sideways, what unbelief will say is something like this. This is never going to change.

I'm stuck. I'm stuck. I'm stuck. It's never going to change. That's not belief speaking. That's unbelief gawking.

Unbelief. It speaks in the currency of never. I'll never change.

I can't stop doing this or that or this. Fill in the blank. We'll never get out of debt. My neighbor will never come to Jesus. I'll never fit in.

[26:37] My marriage will never recover. My children will never come back. Our church will never be culturally diverse. I will never see my LGBTQIA friend come to faith in Christ.

It's never going to happen. We'll never be able to really help mentally ill and homeless people in this city. Unbelief runs with the words of never.

But God's power goes beyond our never. God's power goes beyond our never. God's power goes beyond our never. God's power goes beyond our never.

God's power goes beyond our never.

God speaks in terms of all things are possible when I'm involved. Because I am unlimited in my power.

God's presence, God's power. God has an unstoppable plan for the fullness of time. God has an opportunity to unite all things in him. It's unstoppable.

[27:40] When things go sideways, you may be tempted to think like this. Man, my life is shot. It's done. No future. No way out.

God says, no. I've got a plan. It's bigger than this. And you're part of it. God's providence. Not only does God have a plan.

But God is working in that plan. He's bringing it about. He's providentially making provisions for us. So when things go sideways and you're thinking, man, everything is out of control right now. It doesn't feel like God is involved. It feels like the sovereign God of the universe has just let this thing go. And now we have this crazy kind of fire hose out of control.

It's just not true. God is providentially orchestrating events according to his plan. By his power, he's there with us.

[28:42] And what you need to know is, five, his posture towards you is one of love. If you're in Christ, God loves you so much that he would send his only son for you.

If he's willing to do that, what else is he willing to do? When things go sideways, we can tend to think like this. Man, no good can come from this.

No good can come from an addiction. No good can come from a divorce. No good can come from this job loss. No good can come from this neighborhood. No good can come from this.

No good can come from this. No good. God has good for you, whatever the case. He's working all things out for the good of those who love him.

And that good is divine in the next verse to be conformed to the image of Christ, to share in God's holiness. We're talking about faith and not doubting.

[29:42] When things go sideways this week, you're going to be tempted to unbelief because things that go sideways are specific and concrete. And the way that you respond in faith is setting your trust in specific and concrete things about God.

About his presence and his power and his plan, his providence, and his posture towards you. We find all these things revealed in the scriptures.

God reveals who he is in the Bible. The Bible gives us the stuff we trust in. Set our hearts on. Specific and concrete.

So when Jesus says, truly I say to you, if you have faith, if you're trusting in these specific and concrete things about God and not doubting that, trust him for amazing things, it's easier to doubt God when you have a vague and general sense of who he is.

That makes it really easy to doubt him. But the greater clarity you have about him, the more you know him with specifics and concrete, I see him doing this then, it will strengthen your faith.

[31:16] It crowds out unbelief. Truly I say to you, if you have faith in this present, powerful, glorious plan, providential, loving posture towards you, God, and you don't doubt that, you can take a mountain, you can tell, go, jump into the sea and it will.

By the way, there's no actual historical record of a disciple of Jesus by faith calling a mountain to be cast into the sea.

It's what's called hyperbole. Jesus is using extreme language to make a point. It's impossible for a mountain to be cast into a sea, for man at least.

But God's able to do the impossible. Do you want me to give you something impossible that God did? Are you familiar with the book of Acts? In the book of Acts, the early church, God by his spirit empowers them and the gospel spreads like wildfire from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth.

No human being can do that. That's a work of the living God. God is able to do the impossible.

[32:45] When you see God for who he is, when you have a healthy, robust view of who God is, it should start stirring you to pray, to trust him for things, things that are bigger than you because all things are possible with God.

And whenever shows up in your thinking, you've got to ask a question, is this of faith or is this of unbelief? In verse 22, Jesus applies this teaching about faith in God to prayer.

He says, and whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive if you have faith. There's the ask. If you ask in prayer. Prayer is simply talking with God and Jesus points to a specific kind of prayer, asking God for things.

And do you notice what he says to ask for? Whatever. Look at verse 22. It's right there in your Bible. Jesus says, and whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive if you have faith.

Whatever. Now, I'm guessing some of you who read that may get a little uncomfortable like I do because people will read that and they will misuse it. They'll say, I want a Learjet for my ministry.

[34:07] Okay. But let me help you understand that whatever. Think about in terms of scope and God's love for you.

Whatever in your life. Ask for it. Whatever. What's behind that is this. God is concerned with every detail of your life.

Every detail. Ask him anything. Anything. He's interested in it all. He wants to help you. He's put no limits on what you can ask him for because he wants you to trust him with every area of your life.

Maybe you don't know what to ask God for. Just start by saying, asking God, God, what should I be asking you for? That's where you start. I've started there before. Now, whatever, that whatever also includes things that are seemingly impossible.

That relationship, that debt load, that addiction, whatever covers it.

[35:17] Ask Jesus. Ask God to change you. their question really starts coming in like this.

What are you waiting for? What's keeping you from asking him for whatever? So we have the ask, and then we have the promise.

Jesus promises in verse 22 that whatever you ask, you will receive. Now, a promise is only as good as the one who makes it.

And if you think about the character of Jesus, that means this is a promise you can bank on. His character is literally impeccable.

You can trust him fully. Now, Jesus doesn't say when or how you will receive what you ask for. He just says that you will. So you set your expectations accordingly.

[36:18] But what you have here is an invitation. More than that, a promise. Ask, and you will receive. God is eager to answer.

There is a condition. This promise is not some blank check that God has signed in order for you to get whatever you want. And the condition comes in the little phrase, if you have faith, you will receive if you have faith.

Are we asking for something that is good and pleasing in God's sight? Then it's a matter of time before you receive it. But if we're asking for something that's grievous to God, well, that's not of faith.

And there's no promise that we'll receive it. If anything, you can be sure you're not going to receive that. Praying in faith is asking God for things we know that please Him and that are good for us.

We find those things in our Bible. That's why we pray for marriages. That's why we pray for self-control and holiness. That's why we pray for opening of doors to the gospel in this city.

[37:36] Now, you may not receive something you ask for because God's aware of something you're not. And you can trust Him in that.

We'll trust Him to answer us according to His wise counsel, His will. But the invitation stands, come to me and pray.

Ask me for anything. So what are you waiting for? God's present. He's powerful.

He's got an unstoppable plan. He promised us to providentially provide all of your needs. His posture to you is one of love as a loving Father.

And if that weren't enough, He's promised to give you everything you ask in faith. Sealed by the blood of Jesus. What are you waiting for? Step out in prayer.

[38:37] Ask for things that only God can give. This morning we've been warned about unbelief in a rather unique way. And here, we're called to faith.

Faith exercised in asking God for whatever. forever. We've got a God eager and able to answer our prayers.

So this morning, will you start praying? Not because you have to. Because you get to. We've got a wonderful God.

God. So here we have Jesus in Jerusalem, in between conflicts with religious leaders, days before His crucifixion, and He's tenderly compelling His disciples to pray.

Let's do the same. Let's pray. Will you bow your heads with me now? Lord God, we confess our unbelief and how it shows up in prayerlessness.

[39:52] God, we confess that we go in and out of our lives and we think about You once in a while. God, would You change that in us? Would You bring about a renewal of our minds in which we think of You more often and we think of You more gloriously as You are?

God, would You do a work in us by Your Spirit accompanied by Your Word in which You help us to see You and savor You for who You are? And in so doing, God, would You would You provoke us to ask You for things that only You can answer?

And so this morning, we come to You, God, and we ask for some things. God, would You make us a multicultural church? Would You bring people into this gathering and as part of our church from various walks of life, from various ethnicities, from various economic backgrounds?

God, would You form in us a people who sing Your praises and You get a unique glory for that?

God, we also ask that You would open up doors for the gospel, that You would save more and more people, that You would add to our number new Christians.

God, would You pray as well that we would be a people who stand for righteousness in this city, that we show mercy to those in need.

[41:21] God, would You give us wisdom in helping people who are the most difficult to help? We need that, God. God, would You set us apart for Your name's sake as we seek to step into these things.

God, You are able, You're all-powerful, You're with us, You're for us. God, would You do a mighty work in and through us for the glory of Your name so that You get all the praise.

It's in Your name we pray. Amen.