

Powerful Prayers

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- [0 : 0 0] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy, truly, to bring God's Word to you today.
- A special welcome if you're new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here, and we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community, and as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced that there's no one so good, they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in His Word.
- We're continuing our series in the Gospel of Mark. You'll remember that the Gospels tell the story of Jesus and His life and His death and His resurrection, and as we come to this passage this morning, there's really no two ways about it.
- We have a difficult text of Scripture before us. It's difficult to understand. It's difficult to hear. It's hard intellectually because it appears, at least on first reading, that somehow we can control God.
- We can have supernatural powers if simply we have enough faith. And it's hard spiritually because as we come to this passage, it has the potential to bring us maybe guilt or shame or cynicism as we look at things that we've cried out to God for, we've prayed earnestly for, and God has chosen not to grant that.
- [1 : 3 5] We wonder if something was wrong with us if we didn't just have enough faith, and so maybe we found ourselves in a place of resignation or cynicism.
- So as we come to Jesus' teaching here, I say sometimes, as I do now, I'm going to say something, not everything, as we try to unravel the knots of this passage to both satisfy our minds, to understand it, and also to address our hearts as we face the challenges of just living as Christians, crying out to God, and feeling like at times He doesn't hear or answer.
- And so it's with those challenges that we're going to turn now to God's Word. I invite you to turn with me to Mark chapter 11. We're going to start at verse 20, and remember that this is God's Word.
- God tells us that His Word is a lamp to our feet, and it's a light to our path, which means that God has not left us to stumble alone in the dark, but instead He's given us His Word to show us the way to go.
- And so that's why we read together now, starting at verse 20. As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to Him, Rabbi, look, the fig tree that you cursed has withered.
- [2 : 5 1] And Jesus answered them, Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, be taken up and thrown into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him.

Verse 24, Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also, who is in heaven, may forgive you your trespasses.

I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's Word. Our Father in heaven, we do praise you and thank you again this morning that you teach us and instruct us, that you challenge us and you encourage us with your Word.

We ask that you would do that this morning. You would especially help us to understand clearly what Jesus is teaching in this passage, and that you would encourage us to be bold in our prayers, and comfort us and sustain us in the prayers that we have prayed for months and years and perhaps decades, that you would stir up our faith, that we would see Jesus in his beauty and his glory, and that our love for him would grow more and more, that you would change us, that we would look like him.

We thank you that even though we haven't earned these things and we don't deserve them, we can ask them with confidence because we ask them in Jesus' name. Amen. As we come to this passage, we're picking up where we left off last week.

[4 : 39] You'll remember that we had first this cursing of the fig tree by Jesus, which was an illustration that he was acting out, that he was living out, so that he could tell his disciples what was actually going on with the temple, that the temple was all leaves and no fig.

It was all external appearances, but no substance. As we move on from that episode, Jesus cleaning out of the temple, it appears to be important to Mark to tell us once again about this fig tree.

And so we see in verse 20 what we didn't learn last week, which is the totality of its destruction. It's not just that the fig tree has been destroyed, but it has been destroyed away, all the way to the roots.

Jesus has taken here a scorched earth policy towards the fig tree, that this destruction here is total and utter and complete. And so Peter represents the surprise of the disciples in verse 21.

He says, look, Rabbi, the fig tree that you cursed has withered, which reminds us that it wasn't clear what the conclusion would be in the previous passage. There's all sorts of ways this could have played out when Jesus says, may you never bear figs again.

[5 : 50] And here it plays out in an incredibly dramatic and severe way. It is complete and quick and total, more than Peter perhaps expected. That's important for us to understand as we head into this next story because what Jesus says next assumes Peter's surprise here.

Verses 22 and 23, Jesus is essentially saying, oh, you think that's a big deal? You think it's surprising and powerful to wither a fig tree away all to its roots?

Look up. You see that mountain over there? If you have enough faith, you can throw that into the sea.

In other words, making a fig tree wither to its roots isn't anything. Disciples, you all ain't seen nothing yet.

If you are impressed by that, you are too easily pleased. There is so much more power than you realize. There is something greater even than what you've seen.

[7 : 00] Now when Jesus in verse 23 says, look at this mountain, that helps us understand that he's talking about not just mountains in general but a specific mountain. There's disagreement about whether he's referring here to the Mount of Olives that he crosses over as he approaches Jerusalem or if he's referring to the Temple Mount where the Temple itself stands.

Regardless, there is a little-known historical fact that's important for us to know as we come to this passage to be able to understand it. And that little-known fact is this.

Neither the Temple Mount nor the Mount of Olives, believe it or not, have ever been cast into the sea. That's actually never happened. And it's important for me to point that out because it highlights the first thing we need to understand about this passage which is the form of Jesus' teaching here.

When Jesus tells them, hey, if you have enough faith, you can throw a mountain into the sea, Jesus is using what we might call an overstatement. Some have referred to it as an exaggeration or a hyperbole or a proverbial saying.

And unless you think, in case you think I'm making this up to take a hard passage and make it easier, remember we've already seen this. Mark 9, verses 43-47, Jesus says, hey, it's a good idea to cut off your hand, cut off your foot, tear out your eye.

[8 : 25] None of you, however, here have cut off your hands, your feet, or torn out your eyes as far as I can tell. And so you're in agreement. There's times when Jesus uses an exaggeration to make a point.

The same thing is true in Luke 12. You have a passage about this on the back of your worship guide. Or Luke 14, excuse me. Jesus says, you should hate your family. And yet, so many of you are sitting here with your families because you know, right, Jesus is making an overstatement.

He is saying something extreme to make a point. And the point here is this, that prayer is very powerful. But it's more impactful, it's more memorable for Jesus to say, hey, prayer's so powerful you can take mountains and cast them into the sea than to say, oh, you think that's big?

Well, prayer's a really big deal. That might go over the disciples' heads, but here, Jesus, as the master teacher, gives them this image to help them remember forever how important it is that they would pray.

Jesus is simply telling them this, prayer can accomplish more than you imagine. Prayer can make the impossible possible.

[9 : 43] And so that helps us escape the trap that's been used by those who have abused this passage that somehow we have to take it woodenly or literalistically that if we just have enough faith, God will do anything for us.

God is somehow this genie in the bottle and if our faith can rub that bottle just the right way, then we will have the superpower to do whatever we want in this world. And yet that is not what Jesus is teaching here.

He is simply telling them, look, what you've seen here is nothing compared to the power that is available to you through prayer.

And so that's the first thing we need to understand about Jesus' teaching here is the form of his teaching. That in this, he is using this overstatement, this hyperbole, this proverbial saying.

The second thing we need to understand to make sense of this teaching from Jesus is the context of his teaching. That he's teaching this in the context of the overthrow of evil, the clearing of the temple which prevents God's people from actually accessing God's presence.

[10 : 51] The point of confusion here for those who abuse this passage or misunderstand it would be in verse 24 when Jesus says, whatever you ask in prayer. And the confusion would be if we make the word whatever mean anything or everything.

And whatever does not mean anything or everything and so I want you to think about it this way. You invite me to your house for dinner and I come over and being the housebroken, well-trained guest that I am with just really clear boundaries, as soon as I come to your house, I make a beeline for your freezer.

And I pull open the freezer door and I say, what do we have in here? And there it is, it's glowing and bright in your freezer, I see that you have the quart of Blue Bell ice cream.

And so I say, yes, this is what I've hoped for and longed for, that is what I want. We haven't eaten dinner yet. And so what do you say to me at that point?

You say, Matthew, you can have whatever you want. What does that not mean? It does not mean that you have invited me to go upstairs in your house and take all your guns and all your jewelry.

[12 : 19] Whatever does not mean anything or everything. When you say, Matthew, you can have whatever you want. What you mean is you can have whatever you want in the context, in the realm, in the sphere of the freezer.

And if I'm lucky, in the sphere of the refrigerator. There's a context to that statement. When you say whatever, you don't mean anything in the world. You don't mean everything in your house. You mean whatever you need to eat from this refrigerated instrument.

Okay, there's a realm, there's a context, there's a boundary, there's a limit on your statement there. I might also never be invited for dinner again. Same thing is going on here with Jesus is that there is a context and a realm.

When Jesus says in verse 24, whatever you ask in prayer, he is speaking in the context about the advancing of God's kingdom, the destruction of evil, and the erasing of what separates God's people from God's presence.

We are not in the realm of the refrigerator, we're in the realm of the clearing of the temple that has just happened and the withering of the fig tree. The withering of the fig tree is destroying those things that have spiritual appearance but no spiritual substance.

[13 : 32] Whatever you ask in prayer in that genre, whatever you ask in prayer for the advancing of God's kingdom, whatever you ask in prayer for the defeat of evil and the overthrowing of spiritual strongholds.

One pastor puts it this way, we can move mountains in our prayers, the mountain we are moving is the overthrow of a broken world and the coming of the kingdom of God.

Which means that this morning you have already prayed that God would cast mountains into the sea because that's exactly what we pray for in the Lord's prayer.

we come together and say, hey, may your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. For God's kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven is much more difficult than shriveling a fig tree to its roots.

It is in fact much more challenging than casting a mountain into the sea. It is something that only happens if God's supernatural power is at work in the world.

[14 : 43] And so you might be thinking, oh man, that's all this passage means? Like, we're downplaying it. It just means the Lord's prayer. No, I don't say this to downplay this passage but to highlight and emphasize what a radical act of faith it actually is when we pray the Lord's prayer together.

Remember verse 25 of this passage. Jesus says, hey, by the way, when you're praying, you also need to forgive. And if you're honest, you know how hard it is to forgive someone who has truly hurt you.

It is harder to do that than to cast a mountain into the sea. We are asking God when we pray for his kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven to do what no earthly government has ever been able to accomplish.

Dynamite can destroy mountains. We have the technology right now to cast mountains into the sea. We do not have the technology to move the human heart.

We do not have the technology to break the forces of evil once and for all. We do not have the technology necessary to restore dignity and worth to people who are on the margins.

[16 : 09] We do not have the technology to rescue the poor and bring down the arrogant. Now, I didn't share this with you last week because I didn't want to brag, but I do want to tell you this week I actually personally have the capacity to shrivel fig trees to their roots.

I have a can of Roundup 360 in my backyard right now. And even if I didn't, we all know Home Depot is less than 10 minutes from this church.

And I guarantee you they have it in stock. Roundup 360 cannot destroy the sin in our hearts to its root.

God's power at work through prayer is much more powerful than the shriveling of a fig tree. It makes putting a mountain into the sea look like nothing.

When we pray for God's kingdom to come, we are praying something impossible and radical and revolutionary. we are praying for power that can come from God and God alone.

[17 : 36] And so we can say mountains truly are moved when we pray in our congregational prayer for our army chaplains and they are able to speak clearly about the gospel and soldiers are moved in their hearts because of that.

God has moved a mountain. That is harder than withering a fig tree. It's harder than casting a mountain into the sea. When we pray for children who are taught in our Sunday school classes week after week that in 40 years they would still love Jesus and be part of his community in the church, we are praying that a mountain has been moved, that God would move mountains that are beyond our control.

To do that is much harder than withering a fig tree. When we pray for oppressive and unjust systems to be replaced by the love of God and his gospel, we are praying for mountains to be moved.

And so what Jesus here is saying is that the power of God's kingdom, the defeat of evil, those are the prayers that God cooperates and answers. Jesus always and ultimately answers the prayer, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

He just doesn't always answer it in our way on our timetable. And so that's what's going on in this image of the mountain.

[18 : 57] How do we make sense of this hard saying? We have to know the form of Jesus' teaching. His form is in exaggeration. We have to know the context of his teaching which is in the kingdom.

And we are not out of the woods yet. Because we also have verses 23 and 24 which would at first glance make us believe that maybe we can somehow name it and claim it if we just have enough faith whatever we want in this life will happen.

Or on the other side maybe we're filled with shame and guilt because obviously we don't have enough faith or God would have acted. And so we're going to head straight into that as well.

Verse 23 says if you don't doubt in your heart but this man believes what he says will come to pass it will be done for him. No qualifications. If you have enough faith it's going to happen.

Verse 24 whatever you ask in prayer believe that you have received it and it will be yours. I want you to think about this and understand it in the context of verse 22 where Jesus says have faith in God.

[20 : 09] Now in our confession this morning we already hit the first two elements of Charles Spurgeon's definition of faith. First that faith is knowledge but it's also trust or belief. It's not just knowing the facts but that they're believing that they're true.

Spurgeon gives a third element though which we might call trust or action which means I live as if these things are true. I don't just say in my head I believe them but my feet and my hands and my heart show that I believe those things.

If that's what we mean by faith if that's the faith that we're talking about in this prayer then we can say that Jesus is teaching this. The direction of our prayers must match the direction of our lives.

The direction of our prayers must match the direction of our lives. Don't expect God to answer your prayers if you pray for the kingdom and refuse to live like the kingdom is true.

In fact that's the logic that's given in the Lord's prayer right? Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. It is in that sense that we believe that we've already received it.

[21 : 25] In the sense that we're praying for the kingdom and we're living as if the kingdom is true. We're demonstrating that faith by our actions. We're not just saying words but there's an integrity there's a consistency between what we ask God for and the way that we act in the world.

And so that helps us understand why verse 25 is here. Verse 25 is one application of that principle. Okay, your prayer and your life needs to move in the same direction so verse 25 whenever you stand praying forgive if you have anything against anyone so that your father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.

verses 23 and 24 are not saying be perfect and have superhuman faith and then whatever you want to happen will happen.

It is saying this, live out the Christian life. Live your life in such a way that if Jesus doesn't come back and if the kingdom is not true you will lose big time.

That's what it means to believe your prayer has already been answered. It's to truly live into the kingdom. First Corinthians 15 talking about the resurrection Paul says hey by the way if Jesus didn't rise from the dead we Christians we should be pitied more than anyone else in the world.

[22 : 55] We're actually the stupidest people. We're going to lose more than anyone else. Matthew 17 Jesus clarifies he talks again in that passage about moving mountains and he says hey you know how large and great your faith has to be to move a mountain?

It has to be so large and great that it's like a mustard seed. The smallest of all the seeds. The smallest amount of faith can move mountains.

that's what it means to believe that we already have it to receive it. It means that we are living as if our prayers are true.

I told you we have two challenges before us this morning. One to satisfy our minds and understanding what it is that Jesus is actually teaching in this passage and the other one is to address our hearts because I can talk about the power of prayer as much as I want and I am very aware that for all of us many of us in this room who have lived as Christians for any amount of time we have had seasons of prayer perhaps in the past perhaps in the present and we have not seen the kingdom come in the way we wanted or expected.

And so this passage raises up for us either this sense of cynicism and despair prayer isn't worth it I am going to continue to go through the motions of the Christian life but I have shut my heart down I am not going to risk hoping again.

[24 : 32] Or it has brought us to places of guilt and shame. Man if I had only prayed more back then then things would be different. If I had more faith then I wouldn't be in the situation I am in now.

In other words we have to answer this question what do we do when our prayers aren't answered? How do we respond when we pray that God would move a mountain and we see the mountain still standing? I have a mentor I'll call him John and John grew up in a Christian family and his parents were both believers and when he was an adult his parents decided that they did not want to be married to each other anymore.

And John begged God that he would move that mountain. He begged that the kingdom would come in such a way that his parents would not get a divorce. And they did.

Later John met the love of his life and they married and they had great hopes and dreams of children together and they prayed that God would move that mountain.

And he didn't. And so I asked him at one point I said what have you done with that? How do you work through that in light of God's promises to you about prayer and what you believe about his goodness?

[25 : 56] And he said this. He said that took several years to really work through because there's so many other ways that I've seen God's goodness. You use what you've seen in the light to help you trust in the dark.

I don't understand Lord why you would let this happen but I also know this is a broken world and that's not your fault. that's our fault. I need to trust that you're still with me in this and you haven't forgotten me.

You use what you've seen in the light to help you trust in the dark. And then he goes on to say this.

When prayer does not change things I need to trust. Lord you are still good and I don't know why you haven't answered this but I trust you and I'm going to keep asking. That doesn't mean there aren't times when I'm in sorrow.

That's why so many of the psalms are lament psalms because of unanswered prayer. God knows how grieving that can be and so he gives us the language to use in the face of unanswered prayer.

[27 : 11] prayer. The same trust that allows us to pray allows us to keep following God even when we don't see what we want to see.

You use what you've seen in the light to help you trust in the dark. Of course that's what we sang this morning, right? We sang how long?

How long until you wipe our tears away? How long until we see you descending from the sky?

Of course if you read the book of Psalms you know that at the end the last psalms are all psalms of praise which is the psalmist's way of teaching us that in the end all of our laments turn into songs of praise to God if we wait long enough.

The kingdom will come fully and finally. Finally Jesus teaches this knowing that the most painful unanswered prayer in all of history will happen to him soon.

[28 : 25] You'll remember as Jesus is facing his own death he prays out to God and he basically says look I want there to be another way for this to happen but not my will be done your will.

And so Jesus' prayer goes unanswered and Jesus himself removes the greatest mountain he removes the mountain of sin that separates us from God because of his unanswered prayer he suffers the punishment the death that we deserve and he lives the perfect life that we did not so that we can cry out how long so that we can pray to God asking him to move mountains so that we can have the faith that accesses the very power of God.

When we don't know where God is or how he is acting we simply look to Jesus on the cross. Jesus. And we know as we're told by the apostle Paul all the promises of God are yes and amen in him.

All our prayers for mountains to be moved, all our prayers for the kingdom to come are, have been answered and will be answered in Jesus.

Jesus. I mentioned before Charles Spurgeon who's a famous Baptist preacher in London in the 19th century and the story is told of five young college students who were spending a Sunday in London and so they decided hey here's what we really want to do we want to go hear this great Charles Spurgeon guy preach because we've heard about how wonderful he is.

[30 : 19] So they're waiting for the doors to open and this unassuming man comes in and greets them and he says gentlemen let me show you around would you like to see the heating plant of this church.

They thought this was a strange request because they happened to be visiting in the month of July but they decided to amuse this old man. They didn't want to offend him so we're told they're taken down a stairway.

A door was quietly opened and their guide whispered this is our heating plant. To the surprise the students saw 700 people bowed in prayer seeking a blessing on the service that was soon to begin in the auditorium above.

Softly closing the door that man introduced himself to them. It was Charles Spurgeon himself. Prayer moves mountains.

Christians. It is the heating plant of the Christian life. And as we pray in faith for God's kingdom to come we use what we've seen in the light to trust in the dark.

[31 : 37] Let's pray. Our Father in heaven we praise you and thank you for your word for your promises of prayer and for your encouragement to us.

We ask that you would use this teaching in our lives. That we would cry out to you more and more with hope and longing that the direction of our lives and the direction of our prayers would be one and the same.

Knowing that you're the one who gives us the power and the grace. We ask these things in Jesus name. Amen. I invite you to stand