

MOVING MOUNTAINS BY PRAYER  
Matthew 21:18-22

Intro: This promise regarding prayer is linked with one of the miracles which our Lord performed while He was here in earth. The same account is given in the Gospel of Mark, 11:12-14, 20-26. Mark included more than Matthew did, but the accounts are essentially the same. Let me read Mark's account, and I am going to include verses 15-19 because they help even more to understand what the Lord had to say about prayer. (Read both accounts.)

First of all, we need to understand that the Lord was dealing with the nation Israel and those in the nation who professed to be the people of God--which would have included all of them. But it is easy to see in reading the Gospels that with many, perhaps with most, it was but an empty profession. However, He sought to deal with them according to their claims. The greatest offenders were, of course, the scribes and the Pharisees.

The emphasis upon Israel as the people of God is made clearer when we remember that the OT prophets referred to Israel, sometimes as a grape vine, sometimes as a fig tree, and sometimes as both. Cf. Hosea 9:10; Joel 1:7. (Read.) Obviously the purpose for having either a grape vine or a fig tree was to have their fruit.

Luke emphasized this point by recording another parable in Luke 13:6-10. (Read.) The Lord is pictured as being very patient, waiting for three seasons to give the tree an opportunity to produce fruit. And then, if it did not bear, it was to be cut down.

All of these account illustrate what the Lord taught in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, as we have it recorded in Matt. 7:20, "By their fruits ye shall know them." The goodness or badness of a tree was indicated not only by whether or not there was fruit, but by whether the fruit was good or bad.

So we need to take all of this information to the parable/miracle which we have in Matt. 21:18-20. The first thing that we see is, as Trench brings out so well in his commentary on the miracles of the Lord,

I. THE APPARENT INSINCERITY AND SEVERITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST (Matt. 21:18-20).

I say, "apparent insincerity," because, as Mark said in his account, "the time of figs was not yet."

Now we know that our Lord was never insincere or hypocritical. If He had been, it would have been sinful, and no one can ever charge our Lord Jesus Christ with sin.

But someone might say, "Didn't the Lord, being omniscient, know that the fig tree did not have fruit?" And we would have to answer to that that our Lord was not only divine, but human, and sometimes we see special evidence of His humanity. And this was such a case.

And yet we can come back and say, "Surely the Lord knew that it was not the time for figs." We would have to say that anyone knew that. What, then, made the Lord go over to look for figs?

I am not a specialist in growing figs. I like figs, and have often wished that we had a fig tree in our yard. And I don't know if what I am about to say is true of all fig tree, but it was true of figs in Israel. The fruit came first, and afterwards the leaves. So when the Lord saw the leaves, He assumed that there must be fruit--even though it was not yet the season for the fruit to come.

Evidently sometimes a fig tree will grow leaves out of season (at least that was the case here), and yet not have fruit. So if we can attribute characteristics of a moral nature to a fig tree, it was the fig tree which was being hypocritical, not our Lord. The leaves would have led any grower of figs to look for fruit on the tree. If the leaves were there, the fruit should be there also. But there was no fruit! And so He cursed the fig tree, and it immediately withered away to the amazement of His disciples.

This was a picture of Israel. They professed to be the people of God. They, as illustrated by the Pharisees, made a good appearance. But there was no fruit there. When our Lord pushed the leaves aside, so to speak, He found no fruit--and so the nation was under judgment!

How much even the disciples understood about this, we do not know. What amazed them was how quickly things changed for the fig tree. And by this the Lord was indicating that things would change very quickly with the nation Israel. It was around 70 A.D. that the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, or approximately 40 years after the Lord was on earth, and it has not been recognized as a nation until just recently--1948, to be exact.

Our Lord is never insincere, or hypocritical, but He can be severe! He is amazing in His patience, His longsuffering, but there comes the time when He acts in judgment. And when

He does, things can change very, very quickly. Perhaps you remember Paul's words to the church at Thessalonica:

For when they shall say, Peace and safety;  
**then sudden destruction cometh upon them,**  
**as travail upon a woman with child,**  
and they shall not escape (1 Thess. 5:3).

Therefore, the disciples should not have been amazed at how quickly the fig tree went from life to death! And that parable in a miracle ought to have meant the same thing for every generation from our Lord's day until He comes again. God is loving and merciful, but he is also righteous and holy. He cannot look upon sin. And one of the most abominable of all sins is hypocrisy--pretending to be something which we are not.

Now this miracle was followed by one of the greatest prayer promises that we have in the Bible.

II. A PROMISE OF PRAYER THAT WILL BE ANSWERED (Matt. 21:21, 22).

(Read it.)

Now, coming here, what did it mean?

It had to mean that the nation of Israel was a nation characterized by works, not faith--works in place of faith. These who claimed to be the people of God knew nothing about trusting the Lord. They, especially the Pharisees, and the people under their leadership, were working to make themselves acceptable with God. Prayer was not a vital force in their lives. It was only a formality, which God detested. It all looked good (like the leaves on the fig tree), but there was nothing real, nothing genuine, about the lives of the Pharisees, nor about the lives of the people who followed them. And yet they were surrounded by mountains of difficulties!

Now these verses on prayer have a spiritual application, that is, the Lord was speaking of the various, immovable mountains which the people were facing, but let us take the words in their literal sense first.

When the Lord said, "this mountain, He evidently was referring to the mountain upon which Jerusalem rested, or the Mount of Olives which could be seen in the near distance, just beyond the valley where the brook Kidron flowed. And the Lord said, "Verily I say unto you...done." (Read verse 21.)

You know that those words, "Verily I say unto you," were words which our Lord used frequently to emphasize that what

He was saying was the absolute truth. They are words which ought always to attract our attention. As in this case, they introduce other words which as far as mere man is concerned, are impossible.

The disciples marveled at the way the fig tree withered away, which was a confession that they had never seen anyone else do that, and they certainly would have felt that it was impossible for them to do it.

But the Lord took them beyond that small miracle, small by comparison, to tell them that a prayer of faith could actually remove "this mountain"! If the first caused the disciples to marvel, this would have been absolutely ridiculous to them. This was something which had never been done, and it certainly would have been something which would not have even entered their minds. We have our earth-moving equipment today, but even small hills often take days to make level. What would you think of a prayer that would remove a mountain into the sea (which was some distance from where they were), and do it as fast as that fig tree withered. That is what the Lord was saying could happen.

What was the Lord doing?

He was seeking to get the disciples, and anyone else who happened to be listening, to get their eyes off of themselves and their limited, very limited resources, to get their eyes not only on a God Who answers prayer, but on a sovereign God Who can do anything that needs to be done. And surely there is not much that is greater than moving a mountain.

If the Lord wanted to do it, He could pick up Mt. Hood and move it over land 150 miles and out into the ocean, and He could do it as fast as it took the fig tree to wither. Do you believe that? How long would it take man to do that? He could never do it, and wouldn't even consider it.

The Lord was seeking to show the disciples that the Pharisees were depending upon what they thought they could do, and were at the same time ignoring the sovereign power of the Savior Who can do things that we have never even considered.

Has God ever done this? No so far as I know. Could He do it? I have no doubt but that He could, and would, IF it would serve His purposes and bring glory to His Name.

Look at verse 22. (Read.) "And **all things**, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive."

Now what does it mean to believe, or to have faith? What are

we to believe? Are we to believe that God can move mountains? In Psalm 78 Asaph said that the Israelites "spake against God" and said, "Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?" (v. 19). It sounded ridiculous to them that God could feed approximately two million people in the desert. But He did! And He did it for forty years, and they never went hungry! He said that He would, and He did!

This is what we have to remember about faith. Faith is believing that God can do whatever He has promised to do.

And if we want to know what He has promised to do, we have to go to His Word.

But thinking of these words of our Lord in our text tonight, let us think of the application that it has to our lives.

All of us have mountains in our lives, that is, things that are just as impossible for us as moving Mt. Hood into the Pacific Ocean. These are the things that cause us to be discouraged. We don't see how we can ever get around them, or over them, to say nothing of moving them. But God has been moving mountains for His people for a long time.

Do you know one big mountain that the Lord has moved for all of us? It is the mountain of our sin which stood between us and God. I wonder if this is what Micah had in mind when he wrote these words:

He will turn again, he will have compassion on us;  
he will subdue our iniquities,  
**and thou wilt cast all their sins**  
**into the depths of the sea** (Micah 7:19).

That is a mountain that we could not have moved.

We all have our mountains--you have yours, Lucille and I have ours. But we have a mountain-moving God. The things that are impossible to us, are possible with our omnipotent God. And whatever is according to His will, and designed for His glory as well as our spiritual good, He can do, and He will do!

The possibility of our getting a church building of our own is a mountain, and it gets a little bigger each day. Property is high. Construction is high. But God...!

Concl: And so what does it all mean? It means that we need to believe God as He has revealed and expressed Himself in His Word, and then we need to pray. And we pray knowing that God is able to do whatever He wants to do, and so we pray, and wait upon Him, seeking as we wait to do His will and to live the way He wants us to live.

May the Lord enable us to trust Him and to believe His Word.

One final word: Let me read Isa. 40:3-5. The world is yet to see how truly great the power of our God is--in handling spiritual problems, and in handling physical problems as well.