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Talk together about the glory of God's kingdom. —Psalm 145:11  
Love the Lord your God and walk in all his ways. —Joshua 22:5

## Suggested Starter Question

- 1 What's your experience with prayer? Tell us a bit about it.
- discouragement or disengagement
- encouragement and engagement

## Questions for Reflection or Discussion

### Observation—What do I see?

- 2 Read Mark 11:12-14 & 19-22. Peter is astonished. Does Jesus' reply seem **sufficient** to you? What does it seem that Jesus assumes—both positively and negatively—about Peter's perspectives?
- 3 Review the final two paragraphs of the Sermon Summary. What indications do you see that Peter indeed did possess the following five perspectives on prayer:
- alignment of his **will** with God's
  - alignment of his **time-table** with God's
  - alignment of his **motives** with God's
  - prayerfulness/persistence** in prayer
  - a **forgiving** spirit

### Interpretation—What does it mean?

- 4 At first glance, those five perspectives appear rather straight-forward, but some ambiguity remains. What **degree** of "alignment" with his will, time-table, and motives do you think God requires of us? Perfect vs. Growing? Constant vs. Current? Knowledgeable vs. Trusting? (etc.)
- 5 **How** can one discern his degree of conformity to those perspectives without becoming morbidly introspective?

### Application—What do I do with this?

- 6 In which of the five perspectives (above) do you think you've seen the greatest progress personally? Give a concrete example of that change in your own life.
- 7 With which of those five perspectives do you think you currently struggle the most? Why do you find that one so hard?
- 8 What questions do you still have regarding any of those five perspectives?

- 1** Ask the question, give folks a moment to plot their current experience of prayer on this continuum, then ask, “Raise your hand if you tended toward the ‘discouragement’ end of things.” (If that’s where your mark is, don’t forget to raise your hand.) Then ask for a show of hands of those who tend toward encouragement when they think of their current practice of prayer. Finally, ask for a volunteer from each group to tell a bit about their answer. (But don’t limit it to only one of each. Allow as many as wish to share about their experience.)
- 2** Jesus implies that Peter’s only lack is in the area of faith—either too little, or else misplaced. If folks come up dry, direct them to the five perspectives in mind found in , and discuss which of those they think Jesus thought Peter was doing OK on. Obviously this is a subjective issue, but if group members are able to give Scriptural examples to back up their answers that will help them discuss and clarify what each of those perspectives mean. For example, Peter seemed to lack prayerfulness when Jesus rebuked him three times, “Peter, couldn’t you even stay awak and keep watch with me for one hour?!” (Don’t worry if folks can’t quote chapter and verse for their answers.)
- 3** Read those two paragraphs aloud and discuss them as a group. Make sure you all are defining terms at least roughly the same way. Again, try to give examples from Peter’s life as a basis for your conclusions about how Peter was doing in each of those five areas.
- 4** Personality of various group members will strongly influence how “rigid” or how “forgiving” they are in these five traits. For example, does “alignment with God’s will” necessarily mean “immediate” and “total”, or can one struggle for a bit and still qualify as submissive to God in that area? Consider “perfect” vs “growing” alignment (“constant and unwaivering” vs. “current/mometary”; “knowledgeable/informed” vs. “clueless but trusting God”, etc.) as what qualifies as possessing that trait.
- 5** Again, folks will differ in the degree of certainty they need to find in themselves in order to “check that box”. This question is a window into the personality and maturity of your group members.
- 6** You likely will need to “prime the pump”, so be prepared with your own answer to this question. (But wait for others to think and answer. Check your watch—20 seconds feels like an eternity!)
- 7** ditto.
- 8** ditto.

## Sermon Summary Mark 11:22-25

Our text today is Mark 11:22-26. It is Passover season. For the Jews in Jerusalem it was a time of celebration. Thousands of devout Jews from all over the world arrived in the Holy City with hearts filled with excitement and nationalistic fervor. Into this jubilant, chaotic situation steps God's Choice Servant, the Lord Jesus. He comes into Jerusalem riding on a donkey as the people shout, "Lord save us!" (v. 1-11). Jesus cursed a fig tree and cleansed the Jewish temple (v. 12-21). The Court of the Gentiles was meant to be a place of prayer and outreach, but the Jews had turned it into what Jesus called "a robbers den." But how does this relate to Jesus' cursing of the fruitless fig tree? In the Old Testament, Israel was often symbolized as God's fig tree. Jesus saw a parallel between a fruitless fig tree and Israel's fruitless worship as symbolized by what was going on in the temple during Passover. By cursing the fig tree, Jesus was symbolically cursing the Temple.

Today's text, which records Jesus' much-misunderstood response to this withered tree (v. 22-25), is used by prosperity preachers to claim all kinds of unbiblical things. An initial reading of the text causes many to wonder, "Are the prosperity preachers right? If I have enough faith in prayer, can I have anything I want? Is that what Jesus is saying? Can I really just 'name it and claim it', just 'believe and receive'?" We have to be very careful with this verse; a whole theology based almost exclusively on this single text has permeated some Christian circles.

First, it must be noted that Jesus' teaching here on prayer immediately follows the cleansing of the temple and the withering of the cursed fig tree. In interpreting this teaching, we must not disconnect it from its temple/tree judgment context. There are some popular Christian teachers teachers do, people like Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, Joyce Meyer, T.D. Jakes, and Creflo Dollar...who rip Jesus' teaching in Mark 11 out of its biblical context, and present this as Jesus' complete teaching on prayer, which it is not! From this passage, they falsely teach that the Christian can bring what they want to God in prayer, crank up their faith to believe that they will receive it, and voila, it's theirs! This "name it—claim it" teaching mostly seems to be applied to areas of human suffering—trials and struggles related to physical health, money problems and marriage-relational stuff. Typically, it is assumed when these prayers go unanswered, the fault is not with God, but with you. Either your faith is too small, or your sin is too great! Perhaps both! They would say, "That is what is hampering the flow of God's blessing into your life." They never consider whether the prayer request was wrong—that it might be outside of God's will.

I am convinced that Jesus was trying to teach that faith in God makes possible deeds far greater than the killing of a fig tree, that God-directed faith, acting through prayer, is able to move mountains! I also am convinced that Jesus was speaking hyperbolically, using exaggeration to make a point. We have to be very careful with this verse; prosperity preachers have erected a whole theology based almost exclusively on a misunderstanding of this single passage. This teaching has permeated some Christian circles. It is called "positive confession"—and it's sorcery, not Christianity! It's the Christian parallel to the New Age movement in the secular world. The New Age movement teaches that by visualizing what we want to happen, we can "manifest it" into existence. Napoleon Hill's book, *Think and Grow Rich*, espouses this lie. I suspect that some of you have read it. It has been on the best seller list for a very long time. It is demonic.

Scripture is clear: if we want God to answer our prayers, what we are asking for must be something God wants us to have (1 John 5:14 & Mark 14:36). When God says "No" to a prayer request, he is doing so for reasons that are holy, wise, loving and good (1 Corinthians 12:7-10). When God says "wait" it's because he gives by his time-table, not ours. Abraham and Sarah did what we often do—taking things into their own hands...to "help God out". It didn't go well for them, and it won't for us. God wants us to persist in prayer as we wait on his timing. The parable of the persistent widow teaches this very thing (Luke 18). James mentions two impediments to receiving from God: prayerlessness and impure, worldly motives (4:1-3). Abiding in Christ (ie., living obediently and dependently) makes our prayer life fruitful. There is no question that God honors faith (Hebrews 11:6), but we must realize that it is not the amount of faith that determines success in prayer, it is the object of our faith. Jesus taught that a mustard seed- size amount of faith, when directed towards an omnipotent God, can accomplish the miraculous (Luke 17:5-6). Our faith is not in our faith; our faith is in God. Faith has zero power in and of itself. Faith's effectualness is found in the power and will of the God in whom faith is placed. Today's passage is not teaching that you can have whatever you want by naming it and claiming it. We must ask, "Is the prayer request right?", "Is the timing right?", and "Am I right—are my motives and goals pure?"

Finally, in v. 25 Jesus includes one more issue that hinders our prayer lives: the problem of unforgiveness. If we want to have power in prayer we must be quick to forgive others. Every time we pray, the topic of forgiveness should be uppermost in our minds because the only reason we have access to God in prayer is because of the forgiveness Jesus purchased for us at the cross. So when we approach God in prayer, Jesus says that we should both confess our sins to God and be prepared to forgive those who have sinned against us. There is both a horizontal and a vertical aspect to forgiveness: God's forgiveness of us, and our forgiveness of others. We must forgive others, just as we have been forgiven by God. A failure to forgive others hinders our prayer life. But if we align our wills with God's, if we live in dependence upon him and practice the grace of forgiveness, then we should pray in faith, remembering that sometimes God will say, "Yes", other times he'll say "No", and sometimes he says, "Wait." But always we should draw near with confidence to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16).

## Digging Deeper in your Daily Quiet Time

**As Christ approached his crucifixion, he spoke of the barrenness of Israel's religion, the need for all peoples of the earth to have access to the salvation he came to purchase, and thus our need for prayer. Following is a rich prayer from a Christian of an earlier time. This week let it be your guide as together we overcome our misconceptions about prayer.**

**Monday—Saturday: Read the prayer below each day—slowly, thoughtfully, and, if possible, aloud. Hear yourself saying these words. Let God hear you pray them to him. In your journal record...**

- **Which words and concepts particularly warm your heart?**
- **Which words and concepts perfectly express your love for God?**
- **Which words and concepts challenge coldness or hardness in your heart?**

My Father, enlarge my heart, warm my affections, open my lips;  
supply words that proclaim "Love shines at Calvary."  
There, grace removes my burdens and heaps them on your Son,  
made a transgressor, a curse, and sin for me;  
There the sword of your justice smote the Man, your fellow;  
There your infinite attributes were magnified—and infinite atonement was made;  
There infinite punishment was due—and infinite punishment was endured.

Christ was all anguish—that I might be all joy,  
cast off—that I might be brought in,  
trodden down as an enemy—that I might be welcomed as a friend,  
surrendered to hell's worst—that I might gain heaven's best,  
stripped—that I might be clothed,  
wounded—that I might be healed,  
thirsty—that I might drink,  
tormented—that I might be comforted,  
shamed—that I might inherit glory,  
entered darkness—that I might have eternal light.

My Savior wept—that all tears might be wiped from my eyes,  
groaned—that I might have endless song,  
endured all pain—that I might have unfading health,  
bore a thorny crown—that I might have a glory-diadem,  
bowed his head—that I might uplift mine,  
experienced reproach—that I might receive welcome,  
closed his eyes in death—that I might gaze on unclouded brightness,  
expired—that I might live forever.

O Father, you did not spare your only Son, so that you might spare me,  
your love designed and accomplished this wonderful transfer.  
Help me to adore you by lips and life.  
O that my every breath might be ecstatic praise,  
my every step buoyant with delight,  
as I see my enemies crushed,  
Satan baffled, defeated, destroyed,  
sin buried in the ocean of reconciling blood,  
hell's gates closed,  
heaven's portal open.

Go forth, O conquering God, and show me the cross: mighty to subdue, comfort, and save. Amen. <sup>00</sup>