



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Mark 11:12-26

Mark

“Tree Cursing, Temple Cleansing”

TRANSCRIPT

Good morning. Our passage is Mark chapter 11 this morning and we will look at verses 12 through 26. So if you have your Bibles and have them open, follow along with me as I read, beginning with verse 12. You remember that the Lord has entered into Jerusalem in what we have come to call the triumphal entry and then he departed as evening came to Bethany, where He would spend the night. That’s the home of Lazarus and Mary and Martha, and probably spent the night in their home. And we read that that was His custom in this last week of His life on earth. We read in verse 12:

“On the next day, when He had departed from Bethany, He became hungry. Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went *to see* if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He answered and said to it, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again!’ And His disciples were listening.

“Then they came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple and began to drive out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves; and He would not permit anyone to carry goods through the temple. And He *began* to teach and say to them, ‘Is it not written, “MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL THE NATIONS”?’ But you have made it a ROBBERS’ DEN.’ The chief priests and the scribes heard *this*, and *began* seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for all the multitude was astonished at His teaching.

“Whenever evening came, they would go out of the city.

“As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots *up*. Being reminded, Peter said to Him, ‘Rabbi, behold, the fig tree which You cursed has withered.’ And Jesus answered saying to them, ‘Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, “Be taken up and cast into the sea,” and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be *granted* him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be *granted* you. Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who also is in heaven may forgive you your transgressions.”

Now if you’re reading from the New American Standard Bible as I am, you’ll notice that verse 26 is not included, and if you look at the marginal note, it is put there. And if you’re reading from the King James Version, you’ll find it in your text. But in the margin we read verse 26. “[‘But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.’]” The reason it’s in the marginal note is because the best manuscripts do not contain that verse in Mark’s gospel. Now it is included in Matthew’s gospel in Matthew chapter 6, and so it is a genuine verse of Scripture. But probably not original with Mark’s gospel. This was probably an addition made by a scribe who felt like it ought to be finished according to what one would find in Matthew. But since it is probably not in the original text of Mark, we will not treat it in our lesson this morning.

May the Lord bless this reading of His Word and bless our time of study together. Shall we bow now in a word of prayer?

Our gracious heavenly Father, we do thank You for the great privilege that is ours this morning to come together as the body of Christ, a people chosen from the foundation of the world, a people whose salvation was purchased in time by the blood of Your Son of which we have sung this morning, that cleanses us from all unrighteousness. And as we contemplate that, Father, that You sought us out when we were not seeking You. You purchased us at the cost of Your own Son when we were Your enemies. We marveled at the grace that is contained in that thought. And we pray, Father, that as we consider the passage before us this morning and consider some serious matters that You would remind us of who we are by Your grace and that

that grace, that understanding of it would have a good influence upon our lives. And as we consider these things this morning, may You prepare our hearts for the rest of the day and for the week that is before us, that we would be witnesses for You in the marketplace and the neighborhood, wherever You are sending us, wherever we are to carry out Your will this week, throughout our lives for that matter. Prepare us for our mission in this world to which you have sent us. May we be effective witnesses for Christ, both in deed and in word. We're reminded of your grace from our passage as we contemplate what we have from You.

Father, we pray that You would bless us spiritually, individually, and bless us as a church. Pray for the members of this assembly that You would put within our hearts a hunger for fellowship with You and a desire to live a life of faith and a life that's pleasing to You. Ultimately, Lord, that comes from You. That's Your work that You perform in us, so we pray that You would do so. We pray You'd bless us as a congregation, bless us as we serve You in various capacities. We pray for the elders. We pray for the deacons. We pray that You'd give to us wisdom and diligence and the great responsibility that has been laid upon us. Pray for the Sunday school teachers and pray Your blessings upon them. We thank You for their labors and the effort that they have put into that which they teach to our children, and pray that it would have its good effect and bear fruit. Give them encouragement. We pray for the workers, the secretaries, the maintenance personnel. Bless them. We thank You for their diligence. Pray that You'd continue to bless them as they bless us.

Pray, Lord, with those that have various needs: emotional needs, spiritual needs. Give encouragement to families that are having difficulties. Bless those who have material needs. We pray that You would give them the provision that they need and through their need draw them close to You through prayer, which is effective when prayed in faith.

We pray, Father, for our nation. We pray for our leaders. We pray that You'd bless them. Bless our president. Bless his cabinet. Bless those in the senate and the congress. Bless the authorities You have placed over us at the state and local levels and all the various capacities. Father, we pray that You'd give them wisdom, and we pray that they would govern and guide this land well, that peace would be preserved and Your church might prosper. To that end, we pray that You'd bless us this

morning that we might be, as we've prayed already, made fit for the ministry of the week.

Bless our time now, Father, in preparation. We pray that You'd bless our time of singing and prepare our hearts for a study together in Your Word. We pray these things in our Savior's name, Amen.

When most of us think of the word "sin" or of a sinful person, we think of an immoral person. We think of the prostitute. We think of the pervert. We think of the murderer. We think of theft. We think of sins of that nature, scandalous sins. Well, there are other sins that maybe don't come immediately to mind because they're not as obvious. Perhaps they're the sins that we're all guilty of, sins of the inner man, sins such as pride, and such as hypocrisy. And yet these are the sins that are particularly odious to God. The hypocrite is the man who professes faith but has none, who doesn't trust in God, who only acts like he does. Unbelief is at the root of hypocrisy. In fact, it's at the root of all sin. Paul makes that very clear in Romans 14:23, where he writes, "Whatever is not from faith is sin." But the hypocrite not only has no faith in God, he hides his unbelief behind a mask of religion and devotion to God and all the time he's simply living a lie, a lie that you and I may not detect, but which God does. He sees it very clearly.

Now I mention this point because to appreciate our passage and to understand it, we must understand how evil and how damning hypocrisy and unbelief are. And to understand our passage, we must understand how important, how necessary faith is, how important it is, how necessary it is to have faith in God as our Lord says, because that is the way to an effective Christian life, to an effective and powerful prayer life. Now the Lord will come to that point, but He comes to it by way of the problem of hypocrisy and by way of what, to many, is a very strange incident, when the Lord approaches a fig tree looking for fruit, and when He finds none, He curses the fig tree and causes it to wither.

Now this has been described as the Lord's only miracle of destruction. And as I said, to many it has proved a very strange passage and in fact proved very hard to accept. The New Testament scholar T. W. Manson dismissed it as a tale of miraculous power wasted in the service of ill temper. Bertrand Russell, the unbeliever and skeptic of a generation ago cited this incident in his book *Why I Am*

Not a Christian as one of those reasons for not being a Christian. He thought that the Lord's anger at a fig tree called into question His wisdom and His virtue and was reason for putting Him below Buddha and Socrates. In the minds of many, this is a passage that, as one writer puts it, "bristles with difficulties." But difficulties that are blown out of proportion and difficulties, I think, that disappear when understood in their context, the context of Israel's unbelief, its hypocrisy, and the judgment that would come upon the nation as a result of it.

You'll remember the background of the incident that unfolds for us this morning. The Lord has entered Jerusalem on palm Sunday, riding on the foal of a donkey. He has come in what we call the triumphal entry, and He did that in fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, "Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, Humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey." He came deliberately fulfilling prophecy and the multitudes understood that. When they saw Him, they received Him with wild enthusiasm, greeting Him as their King with shouts of "Hosanna." But the Lord's entrance was more than just a fulfillment of prophecy. It was also an acted parable demonstrating the kind of king that He was. They were expecting a conquering king, and yet He came not riding on a horse, not bearing a sword, but He came riding on a colt. He came humbly as the Prince of Peace. And when the people would realize that later in the week, their enthusiasm would die and the shouts of "Hosanna" would be replaced by shouts of "Crucify Him."

The nation as a whole was not looking for a spiritual savior, but for a political king, a political deliverer. And their spiritual condition was not only demonstrated by the empty show of enthusiasm with which they greeted Him when He entered Jerusalem, but it was also evidenced by what was taking place within Jerusalem in the temple itself, where merchants and money lenders had set up shop. The Lord has already seen that. After entering Jerusalem, Mark writes that He went "to the temple; and after looking around, He departed for Bethany." The day ended quietly, but it was the quiet before the storm.

The ___ of our passage resumes in verse 12, early on Monday morning. The Lord is on His way back to the temple to clean out the merchants, to cleanse the temple. And as He walked, Mark writes, "He became hungry." At a distance, He

saw a fig tree in leaf and approached it expecting to find figs. Now, to some this is one of the problems, one of the difficulties with which this passage bristles as it's been said, because He comes looking for figs as Mark writes, but he also writes at the end of verse 13 that it was not the season for figs. And so the question is asked, "Why was He expecting figs out of season? And why did He curse the tree when it wasn't the season for figs?" He curses it for not bearing figs, and yet it wasn't the season. And so to some, that seems unreasonable.

But really, that misses the point. The fact that it was not the season for figs is the reason that Jesus went to that particular tree. The fact that it was in leaf is what caught His eye because it was out of season. It was unexpected. And sometimes on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, which is the protected side of that mountain, fig trees will produce leaves and figs early in the months of March and April. The figs are green. They're not very good, but they are edible. And since fig trees produce leaves and fruit at the same time and sometimes the figs appear on the tree even before the leaves appear. There was reason to expect fruit on the tree. Its leaves advertised that it was bearing fruit, but when the Lord got to the tree, He found only leaves. As William Hendrickson writes in his commentary, it promised much but provided nothing.

And when the Lord saw that, it reminded Him of Israel's spiritual condition, a nation with great religious show but no spiritual fruit. And so seeing this, He saw in it an opportunity to give His disciples an important object lesson, and He cursed the tree. Verse 14, "He answered and said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again!' And His disciples were listening." Now, He didn't curse the tree because of His hunger and His disappointment in not finding fruit. This isn't an act of anger on His part. He didn't curse the tree because it didn't bear fruit. After all, it wasn't the season for bearing fruit. He cursed it because it made a show of bearing fruit. It promised fruit, but it produced none. It was a hypocritical tree, just like Israel. And hypocrisy was Israel's historic problem. We see it all the way through its history. The prophets of the Old Testament, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the others would castigate the nation for their hypocrisy.

They filled the temple with sacrifices and yet outside the temple, they committed murder and idolatry, and the same problem persisted in our Lord's day and

throughout His ministry we see Him addressing the leaders of the nation as hypocrites. We saw it back in chapter 7. In chapter 7, He quotes Isaiah against the scribes and the Pharisees with the words, "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me." The nation put on a show, but there was no reality to it. So the Lord's action here was another acted parable, intended to illustrate the judgment that would come upon Jerusalem and the nation due to its hypocrisy.

And I think if we want to compare His act with something, we can compare it with the act of Moses. You remember Moses came down the mountain after receiving the ten commandments. And what does he see? He sees the nation of God's people who had just been redeemed from slavery in Egypt doing what? Engaging in idolatry and revelry. And what's he do as a result? He breaks the tablets of stone. He wasn't mad at those tablets. He wasn't taking it out on the tablets. He was angry with the people and their infidelity. And in a gesture of that anger, and perhaps something of a parable in itself of what would happen to those who had rebelled, the tablets are broken. The Lord here is not angry with the fig tree when He curses it, but He sees what is taking place in the nation and the curse that is put upon that fig tree illustrates what will befall the nation, and Jerusalem, and the temple due to its hypocrisy.

And as an illustration, it prepared the disciples for what followed when they leave the barren fig tree and they go to the barren temple. To get there, they crossed over the Mount of Olives and as they descended the western slope, the temple would have been in full view. It was a magnificent building built of massive stones. All that remains of it today is a part of the outer wall, mainly the western wall, which we know as the wailing wall, but in our Lord's day it was a large complex of courts, each one progressively restricting access.

The outer court which surrounded the temple proper was the great court of the Gentiles, and through it a person would enter into the inner precincts of the temple. The Gentiles could enter into this area, very large area, and there they could come and there they could worship the Lord. And from that place, they could look up at the temple itself and its marble and gold and all of its splendor and be aided by doing that in their worship. But they couldn't go beyond that. And to prevent them from doing so, to prevent them from entering into the rest of the temple, a stone barrier had been

set up that surrounded the temple and a notice was posted on it, both in Greek and in Latin forbidding men of another race, forbidding Gentiles from entering on pain of death.

Well, it was through this court of the Gentiles that the Lord and His disciples entered, and when they did they were greeted by the noise and the smell of a stockyard. The temple court was filled with cattle and sheep, merchants and money changers. It had been turned into a marketplace. Now the reason this had been done was for the convenience of the pilgrims coming up to Jerusalem. At least that was the official reason. Each family coming to passover needed an animal for the passover sacrifice and the passover meal. And it was much easier for a pilgrim to buy the animal in Jerusalem, which was guaranteed to be kosher, than it was for him to bring up an animal from a distant part of the land with the possibility of arriving there after all of the inconvenience of bringing it to find that it was ceremonially unfit for sacrifice and for the meal. And so much easier for them to simply purchase the animal there with a guarantee that it was ritually pure and fit for sacrifice and for the passover. And since pilgrims had to pay an annual temple tax, which had to be paid in Jewish coin, specifically in the Tyrian shekel, foreign currency wasn't accepted so if foreigners came, they had to exchange their money there in Jerusalem. It was much more convenient for them to simply do it there at the temple. And so everything that was done could be justified on the basis of convenience.

But convenience is no justification for profaning that which is holy, and further all of the business that was taking place in the temple could have just as easily taken place outside the temple on the Mount of Olives, someplace like that. But the market in the temple was a very lucrative business for all involved: for the merchants who charged exorbitant prices, and particularly for the authorities who received a percentage of everything that was made. In fact, the rabbis would call this temple market – which to them was a scandal, as well – they called it the “Bazaars of the sons of Annas.” And you remember Annas was the high priest at this time and Caiaphas was his son-in-law. Caiaphas is thought to have been the one behind the marketplace.

Earlier in our Lord's ministry, He had come upon a similar scene. John records it in John chapter 2. At that time, He was so incensed by what He saw, John

writes that "He made a scourge of cords, and He and drove *them* all out; pouring out coins and overturning tables." This time, some three years later – that at the beginning of His ministry, this at the conclusion of His ministry – seeing that they had resumed the practice, He again uses force. There's no mention here of a scourge being made, but He did begin casting out those who were buying and selling and "overturning the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves."

Then He did something which He didn't do the first time. He took up the position of a guard over the temple. Verse 16, "and He would not permit anyone to carry goods through the temple." The rabbis had forbidden anyone from entering the temple with a staff, sandals, or with a wallet in order to keep the temple area sacred and prevent it from becoming a shortcut for merchants or just for travelers who were moving from, say, the Mount of Olives to another part of the city or from another part of the city over to the Mount of Olives. It was much easier to simply cut right through the temple rather than going all the way around the temple, which was a massive complex and would take some time and be somewhat difficult. So what people were doing in our Lord's day is they were simply going right through the temple, treating it as though it was simply a common pathway. And so with an act of force, the Lord restored the sanctity of the temple by expelling the merchants and kept its sanctity by preventing pedestrians from turning it into a common pathway.

Now, as I said, this was the second time that the Lord cleansed the temple, but it's the judgment of some that He did it only once, either at the beginning of His ministry as John records in John chapter 2, or at the end of His ministry as is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But to many, we cannot see two cleansings. In fact, one New Testament scholar, James Barr, writes that any attempt to see two cleansings and harmonize the gospel accounts is, in his words, ludicrous. And yet very little reason for discounting two cleansings as is every given other than the two similar events seem, as one writer has put it, improbable.

Well, it's true that there are similarities, strong similarities between what we read in John chapter 2 and what we read here in Mark 11. But similarities don't discount the fact of it happening again. In fact, there are many differences between the accounts, significant differences. And when you consider the problem here, or the

assumed problem, you consider the situation, is it really improbable that this would happen a second time? Not, I think, when you consider the event in light of human nature, and at least if you have the understanding of human nature that I do. Not when you consider that the men behind this market were men who didn't listen to the Lord, in fact men who were His implacable enemies, men who were violently opposed to Him and who stood to lose a lot of money if they didn't reorganize their business. Money is a powerful influence in the lives of individuals, and certainly in the lives of those men.

All things considered, a second cleansing is neither ludicrous nor improbable and harmonizes well with John's account and with what we would expect from our Lord's character and what we would expect from the sons of Annas. They had once again, to use the Lord's statement in John, "turned His Father's house into a house of merchandise." This time, however, He uses even stronger language than that. He doesn't call it a "house of merchandise." He says that, in verse 17, they made the temple a "robbers' den." And His concern here was not only for the sanctity of the temple. It was certainly for that, but it was also for the spiritual welfare of the people and what this was doing to their spiritual welfare, particularly the welfare of the Gentiles who had come there to worship.

As we mentioned earlier, the one place that they could worship in the temple was the court of the Gentiles. That was the one place open to them, but now it was effectively closed with the crush of people buying and selling, along with the flocks and the herds of animals, the sounds of bartering and of cattle would have made prayer impossible. It all showed a complete disregard for the spiritual well being of the Gentile. It showed a complete indifference toward Gentile salvation. And yet Gentile salvation was not unimportant to our Lord. In fact, it was every bit as important to Him as Jewish salvation. And so having cleansed the temple, He quotes Isaiah 56:7, which shows how important Gentile salvation was to the Lord. "Is it not written, 'MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL THE NATIONS'?" But as it was, it was not a house of prayer, but a den of robbers.

And that's an expression that the Lord borrows from Jeremiah chapter 7, the context of which is very similar to this. Context revolves around the temple and all of the immorality and idolatry and murder that was taking place in the city of Jerusalem,

and yet the people would go to the temple and because they were offering sacrifices, they thought everything was fine, everything was well. In fact, they had an expression that they would use. They would say, "The temple, the temple, the temple." And Jeremiah quotes that. Everything's fine with us because we're at the temple, regardless of all the sin that is taking place outside. And the Lord to Jeremiah calls it a "den of robbers."

Now the word that is used here for "robbers" is far more strong than the idea of a simple thief, "one who steals." A robber is one who steals and who plunders with violence and murder. And spiritual plunder, spiritual violence was being done in the temple because by inhibiting the worship of the Gentiles, the Jewish leaders were robbing them of their privilege to worship and the blessing of that, and they were destroying the Gentiles spiritually, destroying the name of the Lord before the Gentiles who would approach it.

These leaders had used their spiritual privileges as an opportunity for financial gain, a sin that's not uncommon in our own day. Men who call themselves Christian ministers enriching themselves at others' expense, preying upon weak individuals and bringing disgrace upon the name of God. This is a problem that we can see in a variety of ways, and were we to take the time to explore it, we could see a variety of ways in which it applies to us. The house of God, the church – and I know this is not the temple, but this is where God's people gather – is not to become an occasion for making money. It's not to be an occasion for anything that we gain for ourselves, but is to be a place where people are given, people are built up in the faith. I see a lot of ways in which this particular problem can apply, in which the name the of Lord is disgraced in churches.

That's what Israel's leaders were doing. In the midst of a magnificent temple dedicated to the worship of God, they were doing business. Perhaps businessmen can enter into a church for that very reason. They don't come for any other reason than to promote their business and to gain some contacts of their own. I think in principle, if that's what's done, that's no different than what the Lord is condemning here. They were doing business in the temple. They had set up another god. They were worshiping the god of mammon. For all their show of religion, with their sacrifices, with all of the prayers they gave, the public prayers and the fastings, that whole show,

it was merely a sham. It was a religion that was empty. Their spiritual life was dead. The nation thought that all was well because they were worshiping in the temple, but the temple was as barren as the fig tree and the Lord's cleansing of it foreshadowed the judgment that would come upon that very place in the very near future.

Well, the reaction of the religious leaders was predictable. They had a vested interest in the temple and Jesus was not only presenting Himself as the King, as He had the day before when He came riding in on the foal of a donkey, presenting Himself as Lord of the people, but He's also now presenting Himself as a Priest, as Lord of the temple. And in that authority, He shut down their market, and Mark says, began teaching the people. He restored the temple to its proper function and multitudes were listening to Him with astonishment, Mark writes. So He had taken the temple away from the priests. And all of this only increased the hostility of the authorities and increased their determination to put Him to death. Verse 19 states they "*began seeking how to destroy Him.*"

Well, the Lord left that evening and returned to Bethany, but the next day, Tuesday morning, on their way back to Jerusalem, the Lord and the disciples passed by the fig tree that He had cursed the day before, and it was completely destroyed, "withered from the roots *up*" verse 20 states. And when Peter saw it, he was amazed that in so short a time, a vigorous tree full of leaves could become a stalk of dry branches. And remembering the Lord's curse and realizing the power of that curse, he pointed out the tree to the Lord. And the Lord responded to Peter not by explaining the meaning of the fig tree, not by saying, "And Peter, that is what is going to happen to the temple because of what you saw there going on there yesterday, what is going to happen to the city of Jerusalem because of its hypocrisy."

He doesn't do that. Doesn't give the lesson of the fig tree. Instead, he addresses Peter's question, at least the question that was on Peter's mind, the question of how it was possible to produce such a miracle. How did He do that? That's what Peter's wondering, and the Lord gives a very simple answer. How miracles like that occur, the Lord says, "Have faith in God." Know God. Know His will. Trust in Him. Follow Him. Obey Him. And where there is faith, there is life and truth, not hypocrisy. And true faith, faith that takes God at His word, it bears fruit. In fact, it's so effective, it's so powerful that it can move mountains. That's what the Lord says

in verse 23. "Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it shall be *granted* him."

The mountain that the Lord was referring to was probably the Mount of Olives upon which they were standing and from which the Dead Sea is seen off to the west. And so the image that the Lord was drawing for the disciples was that of uprooting the Mount of Olives and then throwing it into the Dead Sea. It's an example of obvious hyperbole or exaggeration on our Lord's part and frequently, the Bible uses the image of removing a mountain as a proverb for overcoming difficulties.

And here the Lord's point is there is nothing too difficult, nothing impossible for those who have faith in God and pray in faith, because there's nothing impossible for God. And so He adds in verse 24, "Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be *granted* you." Faith is necessary for effective prayer.

We need to make clear what that means because there is a lot of false teaching today on the subject of faith and prayer to the effect that the answers to our prayers, to getting the very things that we want in life is dependent upon the amount of faith that we have, meaning the amount of faith that we can manufacture, that we can generate, so that the success or failure in the Christian life, in the final analysis is really a human effort. What that really amounts to is not having faith in God, but having faith in faith.

And when that happens, people set their minds on themselves. They don't set their minds upon the Lord. They don't look to God. They look to themselves because it's all dependent upon their faith and how much faith they can generate, which then is used as a commodity, as a kind of spiritual currency, as something with which we can barter with God and try to manipulate Him. Then, answers to prayers are treated like rewards, something that we earn, something that we deserve. But then when the answers don't come, as they so often do not come with that kind of mentality, then there's great discouragement. What's wrong with me? And there's spiritual turmoil in such a situation.

Faith is not making ourselves believe what we don't really believe. In the New Testament, belief is simply trusting in God's revealed will and not doubting it.

Trusting in God, faith and prayer is effective when we trust Him, trust in His revealed will, and pray according to it. John makes that very clear in 1 John 5:14-15. And there John writes, "This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything –" anything, if we ask anything " – according to His will, He hears it. And if we know that He hears us *in* whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him." And God makes many promises to us, and He's made a great deal of His will made known to us, and we are to know that and we are to pray according to those promises, according to that will. And that is essential in defining what effective prayer is. As John says, it must be according to His will, according to what He has revealed.

Now let me illustrate that from the life of Abraham. Abraham, as you know, is the great example of faith in the Old Testament, and also in the New Testament, as well, because Paul and James, they quote him. They look at Abraham as the example of faith. Now, Abraham's great act of faith came in terms of his son Isaac. His name was Abram, exalted father. He had no son. Then his name was changed to Abraham, father of a multitude. He had no son. Well, you can see how Abraham would come to the point and thought, "I need a son." Well, what did he do? He gets a son. He gets Isaac. How did he get that? Did he get it by coming to the conclusion, "I need a son, and so I'm going to believe hard enough that I get that son," and he conjured up enough faith to which God saw it, and God was pleased, and God gave him his son Isaac? No. He received a son when he was beyond the age of producing a son, when Sarah was beyond the age of bearing children because God promised him a son and Abraham believed that promise. God said He would give it to him. Abraham didn't doubt Him. He believed Him and the son was given.

That's the way it is with faith. Faith is believing in what God has revealed. So faith trusts God, trusts His will, His promises, trusts in His character. Faith doesn't trust in faith, and it doesn't insist on its own way. It relies upon God and, as the Lord says, does not doubt. Doubting calls God's power into question. It calls His character and His Word into question. And we will never be effective in prayer if we doubt God's promises and His character.

So how do we get the kind of faith that the Lord is speaking of here? That's really the question that I think is on the mind of the person who's paying attention to

the text and reading it. We want to know how we can have this kind of faith, faith that moves mountains, faith of the kind that we see, for example, in the apostle Paul, who said, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." How do we get that kind of faith? By first of all realizing that faith is a gift, and then by looking to Him as the One – the Lord as the One – who makes faith grow, who supplies it. That's what the disciples did. In Luke 17:5, they said to the Lord, "Increase our faith." And that's a prayer that God will answer, and He will do it in a variety of ways. He'll do it as we study the Scriptures. That's fundamental to faith that grows and faith that produces the kind of prayer life that we see here.

As we study His Word, as we follow His will, as we walk in obedience, He will lead us into risky situations, situations in which we are forced, compelled, to come before Him in prayer because we find ourselves over our head, can't extract ourselves from the situation. We can't overcome the mountain that we just find in our way, and so we must look to Him, and as a result of looking to Him, answers are given in His way and in His time, and when that happens, then our faith increases.

When I come to a subject like this, my mind always turns to George Müller, who outside of the Scriptures is perhaps one of the greatest examples of faith in prayer of anyone that I know of. In fact, his life was dedicated to being an example to Christians and to the world of how God provides for His people when they seek Him through faith and prayer. And his life is filled with many examples of that. As you probably know, he started a ministry with orphans in England, which rapidly grew into a large ministry with many needs. He never solicited money and never failed to feed every orphan every day. They never missed a meal, and yet he never asked for money. He never made his needs known except to his staff, who along with him, prayed to the Lord. That's who they made their needs known to. He was doing what God had called him to do, and when mountains got in the way, as they always will when we're following God's will, he and his staff would pray, pray in faith without doubting, and over and over again, they saw miraculous provisions made.

If you are doing what God has called you to do, you can be sure that God is going to provide for you in all of your needs and in the best way and at the best time, regardless of the mountain. As I said, the mountains will always be there. God will always give you the way around the mountain or remove the mountain. He may not

remove the mountain. And I don't think that we must demand that from the text. The mountain may stay there because that's where God wants it, but He will give you the grace to make it around that mountain because what we have in our Lord is a benevolent God, benevolent with His people.

And we must trust in Him. That's what our Lord encourages us to do. That's what George Müller did. He writes in his journal of praying for funds during a very dark time in the ministry of that orphanage, and, "While in prayer," he writes, "I was enabled firmly to believe that the Lord would send help." And later that day, help arrived. As he goes on to note, "Before I ever prayed, the help had been sent." He didn't know that at the time, but it was. And some have seen that as being explained in verse 24, "Believe that you have received them." Before we ever pray, our needs are being met and we're simply to trust in the Lord to meet those needs. He believed faith was a gift. Müller says that on many occasions. And that God alone can increase that faith. And so he looked to Him to increase the faith. He looked to Him through reading the Word. He was a diligent student of the Scriptures while he believed God's Word and prayed with faith.

And I might add this. As you study George Müller's life, he was very careful with his money, very frugal what he did. He managed things very carefully. I don't think that we can expect mountains to be moved in our life if we're frivolous in our life, if we're not wise with our business or wise with our life. He was a very wise man. He walked in the will of God and the mountains that were there were mountains that God removed, were not mountains so much of his own doing.

Well, on one occasion, and I give this as another example of the faith of this man and the effectiveness of his prayer. On one occasion, he actually brought to the table the orphans before there was a meal to be served. There was no food in the orphanage, and yet the orphans were seated at the dining table. The staff was anxious about the situation and Müller told them not to be worried. God would provide. He had prayed. And the Lord did provide. The orphans never knew that there was a tense moment there. They simply received every day, and many such occasions occurred as that.

Well, we could list other examples from Müller's life and the lives of other men: Hudson Taylor, many different people, businessmen and how they have lived by

faith and seen God provide. Bingham Hunter has written an excellent book on prayer entitled *The God Who Hears*. And he writes, "I have come to think that prayer results in growth in faith when there is something at risk. Repeatedly in both Scripture and Christian history, I have found that God is willing to encourage faith through answered prayer in those who by doing His will have found themselves confronting some kind of risk. In other words, people who set out to do the Lord's will are walking in His way, and meet a mountain. The mountain ultimately is God's doing to become an occasion for prayer and strengthened faith." He writes, "These risks are rarely created by the petitioner, but occur as the believer follows a path of obedience – *[glitch in audio]*

– prophets who through faith conquered kingdoms. And we could add to that moved mountains. And not all of these men were wealthy. You examine their lives and you see that many of them were poor. In fact, the author of Hebrews concludes by saying they went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains and lived in caves and holes in the ground. Don't think that the life of faith is going to make you rich, make you healthy, make you popular. Just read that passage in Hebrews and you'll see that's not the case. Don't think that God is going to supply all of your needs to the degree or the amount that you want them supplied. He may, but He may not. What the life of faith does guarantee for us is that it will bring us into closer relationship with God almighty and through prayer allow us to see mountains moved. So effective prayer occurs when we have faith in God, as He says.

And the Lord adds in verse 25 when we have the right attitude toward others, as well. Verse 25, "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven may forgive you your transgressions." The point of that is not a tit for tat. That is if I forgive someone, God will forgive me. The point here is attitude. The person who doesn't forgive others but harbors bitterness in his heart, that person doesn't understand the grace of God, doesn't understand the greater forgiveness that he or she has been forgiven. In fact, may show that they don't know forgiveness at all. Such a person is a hypocrite, just like the nation and the fig tree, having a profession of spiritual life and devotion, but not the fruit of it. God doesn't answer prayers of that kind of life. Effective prayer

involves a loving heart, a heart that understands grace and evidence of that is the willingness to forgive.

Putting all of this together, fruitlessness invites a curse. Faith is the solution. Genuine faith results in fruit, in fact in effective, powerful prayer and genuine faith is characterized by love. Is your life fruitful or is it fruitless? Do you have faith in God? Specifically, do you have faith in His Son who died in the place of sinners? Can you say, "Yes, I know Him as my Savior"? Do you come to this place perhaps every Sunday, sing hymns, bow your head in prayer without a knowledge of Jesus Christ? If so, then that's simply a show. Even if it's enthusiasm, it's empty enthusiasm.

And if that's the case, if you've not put your faith in Jesus Christ, then let me invite you to do that, to trust in Him, to put your faith in the eternal Son of God who took to Himself a human nature in order to die in the place of sinners so that all who come to Him will receive forgiveness. If you have not done that, regardless of your attendance here, regardless of your interest in spiritual things, without Him, then you are very much like that fig tree and under a curse. So my exhortation to you, my invitation to you is believe in Christ. Pray to Him for forgiveness and He will answer that prayer, receive you to Himself and give you – *[End of Audio]*