

MARK 11:12–14, 20–25. (EHV)

The next day, after they had set out from Bethany, Jesus was hungry. When he saw a fig tree in leaf in the distance, he went to see if he might find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, since it was not the season for figs. Jesus said to it, **“May no one ever eat fruit from you again!”** And his disciples were listening. ... As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered down to the roots. Peter remembered and said, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.” Jesus replied, **“Have faith in God. Amen I tell you: Whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, everything that you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”**

It’s hard to say what’s more astonishing and difficult to believe here—what Jesus does to this fig tree or what Jesus teaches us about prayer. But we haven’t come to know Jesus as someone who erupts into a tantrum without warning or who runs over at the mouth without thought or foundation. So let’s follow our Savior this evening and watch how his final steps led to a fig tree.

1.

On the evening of Palm Sunday, after Jesus had triumphantly entered into Jerusalem, he and his disciples left Jerusalem and stayed in a small village just east of Jerusalem known as Bethany, where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived.

Early on Monday morning, he and his disciples left to return to Jerusalem. In fact, they left so early that it appears that Jesus did not have any breakfast before he went. So he was hungry. He saw a fig tree in leaf in the distance by the road, so he approached it, hoping to find some figs on it. However, when he got to the tree, there were only leaves. Then Jesus said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again!” And Mark tells us that his disciples were listening.

Matthew tells us that the fig tree withered immediately, but of course it would have taken a while for the appearance of the tree to reflect what had just happened inside of it. When Jesus and his disciples returned to Bethany that night, it was probably late and dark, and they were tired. So the disciples didn’t take any notice of the fig tree.

But on Tuesday morning as they headed back into Jerusalem, they couldn’t help but notice the tree in the morning light, and it was a pitiful sight—dry and withered down to the roots. Mark writes that especially Peter remembered what Jesus had said to the tree the day before and spoke up for all of them, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered. Matthew tells us that the other disciples were also amazed and asked, “How did the fig tree wither so quickly?”

Jesus wanted this moment. He wanted his disciples to notice the fig tree and to be astonished and to ask him about it. He did not curse the fig tree in a fit of rage because he wanted breakfast that badly and the fig tree had denied him. Jesus would be a rather arbitrary and scary

person if that were the case; I for one would hate to make him breakfast. No, Mark tells us, “It was not the season for figs,” and certainly Jesus knew that even when he started approaching the tree. As true man, as a hungry man, he was probably hoping against hope to find figs there, but when he didn’t find any, he certainly wasn’t surprised or angry at the tree.

But he knew that this would be an excellent object lesson for his disciples. So he used that fruitless fig tree to teach them and to teach us.

The first thing he teaches us is rather simple. As the writer to the Hebrews says, “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31). The answer to the disciples’ question, “How did the fig tree wither so quickly?” is that Jesus cursed it. When Jesus curses things, they are cursed indeed. This fig tree withered immediately, and it only took twenty-four hours for it to show from head to toe. The most skilled arborist in the world was not going to restore that tree to health. To borrow a phrase from one of my German professors, it was *tot, mausetot, und rattenkaputt*. It was done. No one would ever eat fruit from it again.

The apostle Paul writes to Timothy and we confess it in our creed that Jesus is coming to judge the living and the dead. Later the same day that the disciples noticed the withered fig tree, Jesus himself said that on that day, Judgment Day, he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” On Judgment Day, Jesus will put all those people who were not fruitful, who did not listen to God’s word and put it into practice—whether they were baptized once upon a time or not, whether they were confirmed once upon a time or not, whether their names were on a church membership list or not—under an eternal curse.

As you sit here, staring with the disciples in your mind’s eye at that completely withered fig tree, do any of you want to be cursed by Jesus?

This event helps us to understand why the apostle Paul begs us in his second letter to the Corinthians: “As fellow workers we also urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain. For he says: At a favorable time I listened to you, and in the day of salvation I helped you [Isa. 49:8]. Look, now is the favorable time! See, now is the day of salvation!” (2 Cor. 6:1–2). Make use of God’s word and grace while you have it, before it’s too late.

2.

But the main thing Jesus wishes to teach us with this fig tree is a little more complex. He wants it to be an object lesson about prayer. When the disciples asked, “How did the fig tree wither so quickly?”, a question behind their question was: “How can *I* do that? How can I pray like that and have my prayer answered just as quickly and powerfully?”

Jesus answers their question-behind-the-question this way: “Have faith in God. Amen I tell you: Whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, everything that you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

So what *is* Jesus teaching his disciples and us about prayer?

First of all, he is teaching them in whom they should always place their faith and to whom they should pray. They should trust in God, and pray to him in Jesus’s name. After all, who has the power and control that Jesus has?

Jesus tells a fig tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again!” and it happens immediately. Do you or does anyone you know have that kind of control? Do you have control over your next heartbeat? Over your next breath? Over the sun, wind, rain, and snow? Whether the crops grow, and your ability to harvest them? Over the shipments of food and clothing to your favorite stores? Do you have control over the affairs of the earth, over what will happen tomorrow? Of course not! That’s exactly why the disciples asked Jesus how the fig tree withered so quickly; they knew they had no power to do anything like that. But Jesus clearly did.

Jesus does not want us to pray to a false god. He wants us to pray to the true God, to do so we must pray in Jesus’s name. If all Jesus has to do is speak the word, and this fig tree immediately withers down to the roots, then he clearly has the power to hear all our prayers, and the power to answer them.

Second, and closely related, Jesus is teaching us to pray boldly. Jesus said if we pray to him in faith, not only can we cause a fig tree to wither up just as he did, but we can also say to this mountain, “Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,” and it will happen! Keep in mind where Jesus and the disciples were when Jesus said this. They were between Bethany and Jerusalem, on the way to Jerusalem. So when Jesus said, “this mountain,” he may have meant it like, “any mountain you choose,” but he may also have meant the mountain they were looking at—the temple mountain on which Jerusalem was built. If the disciples thought any mountain was impervious to removal, it was that one. But Jesus says, “No! Just ask, and it will be removed and thrown into the sea!”

Now it is important to remember Jesus’s point here. Jesus is not telling us we *should* pray for such frivolous things as withered trees and removed geographical features. The apostle John, who heard Jesus say these words, clearly understood this, because he later wrote in 1 John 5: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything *according to his will*, he hears us.” Where is God’s will found? In his word. Does his word tell us that God wants us to go around moving landmarks like mountains and rivers? Nowhere that I can find.

That is why when we pray for things that are *not* revealed as God’s will in his Word, like having a bumper crop or a raise in salary or safe travels on our vacation or removal of a mountain into the sea, we do well to add, as Jesus himself did, “Not my will, but yours be done.”

But the point is that we have a God who, if it *were* his will for us to remove mountains and put them into the sea, has the power to do that, would have the desire to do that, and would do that for us without a problem. So as the hymnwriter says: “You are coming to a king—*large* petitions with you bring, for his grace and power are such, none can ever ask too much” (John Newton).

Do you have a child, a parent, a relative who seems to be lost cause? Who seems to be on the road to hell with no hope of return? That sounds to me like a case just as hopeless as a fig tree withering on the spot. But Jesus did that! Not only that, but he makes it clear in his word that God our Savior wants *all* people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. Not only that, but if your child, parent, or relative is baptized, that means that in baptism God himself made your relative a pledge that they would have a clean conscience before him (1 Pet. 3:21). That sounds to me like a large, mountain-moving petition that you should boldly bring before God.

Or even with things that are not expressly revealed as God's will... Let's say that your mother was just diagnosed with terminal cancer. That sounds to me like a case just as hopeless as a fig tree withering on the spot. But Jesus did that! Not only that, but God tells us that he has the power to heal us from all our diseases (Exod. 15:26; Psalm 103:3). So should we just think it's useless to pray, "Lord, if it is your will, make Mom better"? No way. And how should we pray it? Like there's only a thread of a chance that God could answer our prayer? No way. This is the God who could pick up the Red Hills and throw them into the Missouri River right this instant if he wanted to do so.

Or what about forgiveness for your sin? Adultery, in lustful thoughts, or in action? Murder, in hateful thoughts, or in action? Theft, in greed and covetous thoughts, or in action? Disobedience, to parents or to government or to others in authority? What about that? Here we have an explicit promise from God that he *will* remove this mountain. Micah 7 says, "You *will* tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea." And the apostle John says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and *will* forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." So we can come before God and, though we have tears in our eyes, boldly and gratefully pray, "Lord, pick up this mountain of my sin and hurl it into the sea of your Son's blood!" And he will do it, yes, he must.

Finally, Jesus is teaching us to pray confidently, no matter whether we must add, "if it is according to your will" or not. After all, he says, "Everything that you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." If we pray in Jesus's name, trusting in his salvation, trusting in his love for us, trusting in his power exercised on our behalf; if we ask for things according to his will, and submit our will to his when we ask for things he has not addressed in his Word one way or the other, then there can only be one answer we receive from Jesus—"Yes, I will do what you have asked."

Oh yeah, Jesus? What about when we have prayed, "Lord, make Mom better, if it is your will," and Mom died of cancer anyway? What about when we have prayed, "Lord, my financial situation is not looking good. Please don't let any of my cattle die this year, if it is your will," or, "Please give me a raise in salary, if it is your will," and then one of our cows died the next day, or we got laid off the next day?

I struggle to find illustrations that capture what Jesus is saying here, because no one can make this promise quite like Jesus can and then come through with it, but let's try this: Let's say that a little girl named Susan, maybe eight years old, goes to her father and says, "Daddy, I was thinking. Maybe if I get straight As on my report card that I'm getting next Friday, you could take me somewhere special the following weekend, like fishing, or to a nice restaurant? I don't want to tell you what to do, but I thought it might be a nice reward."

Let's say that her dad thinks it over and says, "You know what, Susan, that sounds like a good idea. If you get straight As on your report card, I will do what you asked. I will take you out fishing with me the following weekend, just you and me, and we'll also stop somewhere nice to eat on the way back."

Then Susan brings her report card home to her dad the next Friday and sure enough, it's all As. But then the following weekend comes, and her dad seems busy and he doesn't so much as say anything to Susan about their fishing trip. But Susan is a very trusting girl. She trusts her

dad so implicitly that she thinks, “He can’t possibly have forgotten about his promise, and I know he loves me. I’ll just keep my mouth shut and wait and see what he does.”

And lo and behold! The day after the school year ends Susan’s dad comes up to her with a big grin on his face and says, “Susan, I know I promised to do what you asked and take you fishing and out to eat that one weekend a while ago. And I could have, but I thought it over some more and talked with your mother before that Saturday, and we decided that we wanted to do something much more special for you than just one day of fishing and one fancy meal, and we wanted it to be a surprise. So all of us are leaving tomorrow for a month-long vacation in Europe. You are I are going on a chartered fishing trip in the sea, we’re going to take a cruise on the Rhine, we’re going to visit and stay overnight at several castles, eat at a bunch of really nice restaurants, visit some toy stores where I can buy you some amazing handmade toys, and even stop at a theme park—all because you have done so well in school and your mom and I are so proud of you.”

Unless you are an anal nitpicker, would *any* of you say that that father did not keep his word to his daughter, that he did not do what his daughter asked? Do you think Susan would complain that her dad hadn’t kept his word? “No, Daddy! You promised me a *one*-day fishing trip, not a whole month of awesomeness!” I would hardly think so. In this case, the father did something *far* better than what his daughter asked.

So too, we cannot escape Jesus’s words: “I tell you, *everything* that you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” Jesus’s answer to our prayers is *always* Yes. Sometimes his Yes is our Yes, sometimes almost eerily so, when he answers our prayers right down to the last little detail. But perhaps more often his Yes is a far better Yes.

That better Yes may not always (or ever!) be as obvious as the father’s answer to Susan’s request. Just consider the Yes that God the Father gave Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. “Father, if it is possible, take this cup of suffering from me.” God the Father’s answer certainly seemed to be a flat-out No. “No, Jesus, you drink that cup of suffering to the dregs. You go and die!” But we know just how far better of a Yes his answer was. Jesus’s suffering and death resulted in our salvation and certainty of heaven, and it resulted in the greatest possible glory for Jesus.¹

The disciples must have marveled at Jesus’s words and actions on this day, but you know what? We have all the more reason to marvel at his words, because we have seen where Jesus’s final steps ultimately led. He took all our mountains of sin and threw them into the sea of his blood when he paid for them all on Calvary. He also put our worst affliction, death, under his curse. And he proved it by rising from the dead. The tomb—his and ours—stands there like a powerless, shriveled up fig tree, wondering what in the world has happened to it.

So keep following Jesus’s final steps, and all his steps, in his word. And keep revisiting his steps to this fig tree from time to time. That way, we will not have to fear his curse, because we will not only trust his word, but will also produce its fruit, and we will have the confidence that he hears and answers all of our prayers, until our own final steps follow his to heaven. Amen.

¹ This means that God’s better Yes to us might also be a hardship, sickness, death, or other suffering—a Yes that teaches us patience, draws us closer to him, and draws our hearts away from the world.