

The Amazing Power of Believing Prayer

When Jesus entered Jerusalem He performed two prophetic signs: He cursed the fig tree, and He cleansed the Temple. The next day, Peter noticed that the fig tree had died, and Jesus then gave His disciples an important teaching.

Mark 11:20-25

²⁰ As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. ²¹ And Peter remembered and said to him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.” ²² And Jesus answered them, “Have faith in God. ²³ 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. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵ 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.”

Jesus takes this moment in His disciples’ lives to teach them a vital lesson about the Christian life: no matter what powers in this world are arrayed against them, God has given them an even greater power. When faced with the evil powers of our world, we must do two things:

1. Take note of the enormous power of Jesus Christ (vv. 20,21)

Peter may do many things wrong, but here he does something very right. He simply remembers, he notices, that what Jesus said has come true. The things that would destroy us in this life are much more powerful than we, but we must remember that Jesus’ power is even greater.

2. Take hold of the enormous power of the Christian (vv. 22-25)

In verse 21, Peter spoke to Jesus about Jesus’ power. In verses 22-25, Jesus speaks to Peter about Peter’s power. He tells him three things that we, too, must grasp.

A. Our power comes through our faith (vv. 22,23)

It is by faith that we are justified before God. It is also by faith that we do amazing things. Notice that Paul tells us that by faith “you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one,” and John tells us that this same faith “has overcome the world.” The reason faith has such world-transforming power is that faith unites us to Jesus Christ. It is then that His power that works through us. When Jesus says that, with faith, we can speak to a mountain to be removed and it will be so, He is using a powerful biblical metaphor to say that we have the ability to do the impossible.

B. Our faith is chiefly exercised through prayer (v.24)

Jesus has already shown us in Mark’s gospel how important prayer is, first of all by His own example (Mark 1:35) and secondly by His teaching (Mark 9:29). Prayer is the Christian’s greatest weapon. J.C. Ryle put it this way:

I have read the lives of many eminent Christians who have been on earth since the Bible days. Some of them I see, were rich, and some poor. Some were learned, and some unlearned. Some of them were Episcopalians, some Presbyterians, some Baptists, some Independents. Some were Calvinists, and some Arminians. Some have loved to use a liturgy, and some to use none. But one thing, I see, they all had in common. They have all been men of prayer.

Jesus here and elsewhere gives extravagant promises regarding prayer. Why do we not pray? Paul Miller gives this explanation in “A Praying Life:”

American culture is probably the hardest place in the world to learn to pray. We are so busy that when we slow down to pray, we find it uncomfortable. We prize accomplishments, production. But prayer is nothing but talking to God. It feels useless, as if we are wasting time. Every bone in our bodies screams, "Get to work." When we aren't working, we are used to being entertained. Television, the Internet, video games, and cell phones make free time as busy as work. When we do slow down, we slip into a stupor. Exhausted by the pace of life, we veg out in front of a screen with earplugs.

But perhaps the deepest answer to why we don't pray as we ought is that it is very hard work.

C. Our prayers are conditioned by forgiveness (v.25)

James says, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." (4:3). The psalmist says, "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." (66:18) Here Jesus teaches us that lack of forgiveness hinders our prayers and thwarts our spiritual powers.

Discussion Questions

1. What types of sinful human behaviors are caused by our feelings of powerlessness? Why would Peter have felt powerless? Why would Mark's readers have felt powerless? Why do we sometimes feel powerless?
2. What are some of the conventional suggestions we hear for how to remedy our feelings of powerlessness? What's fundamentally wrong with these suggestions?
3. What is the biblical remedy, in this text, for human powerlessness?
4. How is this biblically-sanctioned power best exercised?
5. What most often keeps us from exercising godly power effectively?
6. How do you explain Jesus' promise in verse 25 in light of your experience that you do not always get what you ask God to give you?

Going Deeper

1. What are the main ways in which you sometimes try to exercise worldly powers instead of the power God has given you through faith, exercised in prayer?
2. How can you grow in these areas of your life?