**HAVE FAITH IN GOD**

**(Mark 11:20-25)**

***“‘Have faith in God,’ Jesus answered.” (v. 22)***

Today’s passage is mainly about two things: faith and prayer. It reminded me of Jesus’ Parable of the Persistent Widow from Luke 18. In this parable, Jesus encourages us to pray as persistently as a stubborn widow who won’t leave an “unjust judge” alone until her need is met. Jesus says that our Father in heaven, who is a just Judge, is much more ready and willing to do all that we ask of him. However, Jesus’ final words in this parable have always made me uneasy. He says, *“However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Lk 18:8b).* I believe Jesus said this for us. In a time like ours, what could be more vital than faith? What could be more effective in changing our lives than prayer? If you are anything like me, this way of life is anything but natural. To prepare for Jesus’ coming, we must learn from Jesus’ words in today’s passage.

1. **“Have faith in God” (vs. 20-22)**

Today’s passage takes place on Tuesday morning of Jesus’ Passion Week. On the previous Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem as the humble King, riding on a colt. Then, on Monday, on his way to the temple, Jesus cursed a fruitless fig tree with the words, *“May no one ever eat fruit from you again” (Mk 11:14).* It was perhaps a symbol of God’s impending judgment on the nation of Israel; for like a tree full of leaves, Israel should have borne the fruit of righteousness for the nations. Instead, it was full of corruption, hypocrisy and godlessness. So Jesus entered the temple courts and aggressively cleansed them of those who had turned his Father’s house into a market. By the time Jesus and his disciples left the city for the night, the chief priests and the teachers of the law were seriously plotting Jesus’ murder.

Now look at verses 20-21. ***“In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!’”*** Like a child waking up to find presents on Christmas morning, Peter couldn’t believe his eyes. The perfectly healthy tree he had seen only yesterday was gone. He was awestruck by the power of Jesus’ words. Indeed, there is no greater joy this side of heaven than seeing God’s power manifest in our lives. But we should keep in mind Peter’s inner motives. As we’ve learned, he and the other disciples were continually competing with one another due to their incorrect view of Jesus’ messianic kingdom. It’s therefore likely that Peter had a warped view of Jesus’ miracle. “This power,” he thought, “could be used to destroy all our enemies! Not even Caesar himself will be able to stand against us.” Peter, who had a big mouth, imagined what it would be like if everyone had to do whatever he told them.

Now let’s read verse 22 all together. ***“‘Have faith in God,’ Jesus answered.”*** Jesus’ response seems to be something like, “Yes, of course it withered. I said it would never bear fruit again. Why does this surprise you?” Though he could have taught his disciples many things through this event, the most urgent in his eyes was faith. This is a recurring theme throughout the gospels. When Jesus calmed the storm at sea, he told his disciples afterwards, *“Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” (Mk 4:40).* When Jairus received the news that his daughter was dead and that he should give up hope, Jesus told him, *“Don’t be afraid; just believe” (Mk 5:36).* When a father with a demon-possessed boy asked Jesus if he could do anything to help, Jesus responded, *“If you can?...Everything is possible for one who believes” (Mk 9:23).* And when Peter tried walking on the water towards Jesus and began to sink, Jesus caught him by the hand and said, *“You of little faith…why did you doubt?” (Mt 14:31).* In Jesus’ eyes, faith in God makes all the difference. The question is *why*.

I think this is answered beautifully in Hebrews 11. This chapter begins with a biblical definition of faith: *“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Heb 11:1).* Of course, people can have faith in many things. So what does it mean to have faith in God? Verse 6 of the same chapter says, *“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Heb 11:6).* Faith in God begins with believing he is real and living. But it goes far deeper. For if we truly believe that God is who he says he is, we must believe that seeking what he has promised is the most rewarding life. This goes beyond head knowledge. It is to trust in God. It is to depend on God in all circumstances. It is to surrender ourselves completely to his will and lean totally on him for our salvation. It is to take God at his word absolutely, believing everything he says will happen. It is to put no limits on him, believing that the entire universe was formed at his command (Heb 11:3). Furthermore, it is to believe that God is our merciful and loving Father, who eagerly provides us with whatever we need. The rest of Hebrews 11 is a “Spiritual Hall of Fame”, listing many heroes and heroines of the Bible who conquered impossible odds through their faith in God. These were the ones labeled as “oddballs” by this world’s standards—who were rescued by a flood by building an ark on dry land, who lived in tents in a foreign land because they were looking forward to a heavenly home, who stood up to pharaohs and led a nation through a sea on dry land, whose army marched around city walls and collapsed them with only a loud shout, who took on giants in battle and felled them by faith. These people marched to the beat of a different Drummer; they were seeking a reward and an eternal home apart from this visible world. They are proof that God does exist and that he rewards those who live by faith. In Jesus’ eyes, this is what separates God’s people from unbelievers.

So while Jesus’ four simple words, ***“Have faith in God”*** may seem painfully obvious at first, no message could be more vital for us to hear today. Our increasingly secularized culture is doing everything it can to push God to the fringes of daily life. The underlying worldview is not “Have faith in God” but rather “What do we need God for?” Advances in science and technology have given people a false impression that we are in control and can solve all problems ourselves. Having a spiritual life is therefore viewed as nothing more than an optional add-on that should be suited to our personal preferences; it’s no longer a living relationship with the God of the universe on his terms, a matter of life-and-death. As much as we might hate to admit it, we Christians are influenced by this culture. If not careful, we become what some church leaders refer to as “practical atheists”: those who profess gospel faith yet live out their actual lives without any consideration of what pleases God. There are signs we can look for. When we set out to complete some task, whether big or small, is it our habit to consciously give it over to God? Do we prayerfully ask for his help in doing it? Or when we day-dream about our ideal future for us and our families, does it involve seeing God’s vision being realized in us and through us? In other words, if someone summarized our daily lives, would they say that we believe that God exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him? Would they say that we are looking ahead to a different home? Jesus tells us that we cannot experience God’s grace and power in our lives apart from faith. But there is joy—*exceedingly great joy*—in store for us if we live by faith and experience God’s power in our lives!

Father, please protect us from the trap of believing in you with our lips but not with our hearts. Teach us to have faith in you above all else, overcoming the unbelieving environment we encounter daily. Help us to be different, for your glory. Amen.

1. **The secrets to obtaining God’s power (vs. 23-25)**

Look at verse 23. ***“Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them.”*** These words must have caused the ears of Peter and the other disciples to tingle. The power of God which Jesus used to wither the fig tree is freely available to anyone! Because no mountain is too big for the Almighty, no mountain is too big for anyone with access to God’s power. God’s divine intervention should not be shocking to us, but a constant experience in our lives! What is the secret to laying hold of such awesome power?

The only qualification Jesus mentions is that a person ***“…does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen…”*** This may sound simple, but is it? Hardly a day goes by in which we are not defeated by lesser kinds of “mountains”. To some, the immovable mountain may be a personal weakness or disability they are forced to bear. It may seem so large that it blocks their view of anything else. For others, the mountain may be a huge pile of responsibilities or an enormous debt weighing down on their backs due to work or school. These can leave a person paralyzed. Other people struggle in their relationships with family members or coworkers. The person they want to change may seem as set in their stubborn ways as a mountain. Even faithful servants of God must come face to face with the challenges of their mission field. An increasingly indifferent or even hostile spiritual climate combined with widespread acceptance of sin makes preaching God’s word and raising disciples seem impossible. If we claim to believe in a God that can pick up Mount Everest with his smallest finger and toss it into the ocean, why do we doubt that God can help us overcome the mountains staring us right in the face?

The reason is that we have far too low of an opinion of God. We underestimate either his omnipotence or his willingness to help us. Both are utter foolishness. Is God’s arm too short? Has God not done enough for us already through Jesus’ cross and resurrection to prove his love for us and his power to do the impossible? The problem is not the problem; the problem is how we view the problem. From the foot of the mountain, the mountain looks so big; it’s all we can see. But God is bigger! If we only trust in God’s power and his love for us, we would see our mountains crumble before us, one by one. The prophet Zechariah once received God’s message through an angel: *“This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD Almighty. What are you, mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel, you will become level ground” (Zec 4:6-7a).* God cares for each and every one of us with the same affection.

Therefore, the limiting factor in this whole equation is frankly our reluctance to ask God for what we need. Look at verse 24. ***“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”*** Jesus seamlessly connects his teaching on faith to the power of prayer. This is because prayer is “faith in action”. The one who consistently brings all their needs before God in prayer shows by their actions that they believe God is both willing and able to supply all they need. The one who easily ignores prayer shows their unbelief. They don’t pray because they don’t believe it will make any difference.

But Jesus’ promise is clear, ***“whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”*** *Whatever* we ask! Anything! It can be ours if only we believe. But then there’s that little voice inside of us that says, “What’s the catch? There’s always a catch!” Though there isn’t a catch, there is an implied stipulation here that Jesus doesn’t mention. That stipulation is that whatever we ask for must be in accordance with God’s will. This is spelled out clearly in 1 John 5:14-15. *“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have received what we asked of him.”* The importance of this condition is obvious once we take a moment to think about it. Would God ever do anything that goes against his perfect plan? How awful it would be if God answered every request of every evil dictator who called on his name! How awful it would be if God had given us every desire of our hearts in our youth! This stipulation should not cause us to give up on prayer; it should encourage us that God will withhold from us no good thing.

I remember a certain event as a young child. I met my best friend Chris after church one Sunday afternoon, his eyes bright with excitement. “Guess what we learned about at church today?” he smiled. “Jesus said that if we have faith as small as a mustard seed, we can move mountains! We can ask God for *anything* and it will be ours!” [the “mustard seed” reference is from basically the same lesson in Matthew 17:20]. A smile spread across my face as well. We had figured out the most precious secret in the universe. Video games, baseball cards, new bikes, super-soakers, pet dogs…everything was soon going to be ours simply by asking God! Unfortunately, we didn’t understand the concept of asking according to God’s will. After failing to get any of the new toys we prayed for, we soon forgot Jesus’ words. When I grew older, I was blessed to begin a personal relationship with God and learn his will through the Bible. When I newly received Jesus’ promise in today’s passage, I could understand his intentions. There’s just one problem: by this time, the child-like faith and enthusiasm I had as a child had been lost. My dreams today are very pragmatic and ordinary. I’ve refocused my life’s direction on serving God’s will as a Bible teacher and shepherd for others, but I try to do it all under my own power rather than simply asking for God to do the hard work by his Spirit. How foolish we are! If only we combined a child-like faith in God with a mature understanding of our Father’s will…God would be so pleased! So children, I urge you, learn what God’s will is and pray according to his will! For those of us who are older, we need to relearn what it means to have child-like faith, praying with enthusiasm for God’s will to be realized in and through our lives!

There is one more important lesson Jesus gives us here, as if he can’t help but mention prayer without it. Look at verse 25. ***“And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”*** One hindrance to prayer that often goes overlooked is an unforgiving heart. This is because sharing a right relationship with God is inseparably linked with our sharing right relationships with others. How can we expect to be forgiven of our sins if we are holding on to our grudges? As Jesus makes clear in Matthew 6:15, *“But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”* A forgiving spirit is evidence that we have received God’s grace in Jesus. It shows that our hearts are right with God and he will be quick to hear all our petitions. But a guilty conscience full of hatred grieves God’s heart and cannot act in faith. God will close his ears to us, no matter how hard we plead. Someone may pray, “Lord, please forgive me for this one sexual sin I committed.” God may respond, “After you gossiped about Meghan’s sins last week? You must first forgive her from your heart.” Someone else might plead, “Lord, please help me to earn all A’s this semester so I can get into grad school!” God may respond, “I can’t hear your over the piercing sound of your unforgiveness towards Jonathon. First be reconciled to your brother, then come back with your request.”

However, forgiving others might seem like an immoveable mountain in its own right. How can we forgive those who have unjustly wronged us? It is impossible under our own strength; but it’s possible when we remember the example of our Lord Jesus by faith. When we remember the one who prayed on the cross, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34a)*, we’re reminded that no sin against us could ever be too great. Jesus, who paid the price for all of our sins in full, demands that we freely forgive, just as we were freely forgiven. A heart clean of hatred enjoys assurance of its own forgiveness, right relationships with others, and most importantly, unhindered fellowship with the Father.

It’s almost impossible to talk about faith-filled prayer without being reminded of George Mueller. Mr. Mueller was born in Prussia in 1805. Though he did many amazing things for the Lord during his 63 years of ministry work, he is perhaps best remembered for his efforts to feed and shelter over 10,000 orphans. Mueller raised over 7 million dollars (over 100 million dollars in today’s currency) in his lifetime for his orphans. The shocking part? He never asked even a single person for any of it! Not a dime. Mueller brought every request to God with the simple principle, “If we believe, we shall receive.” The following story comes from a captain of a ship whose life was forever changed by his encounter with Mueller.

Mueller tapped the man on the shoulder and said, “Captain, I have come to tell you I must be in Quebec by Saturday afternoon.” “It is impossible,” said the captain. “Very well,” said Mueller, “if your ship cannot take me, God will find some other way—I have never broken an engagement for 52 years. Let us go down into the chart-room and pray.” The captain wondered which lunatic asylum Mueller had come from. “Mr. Mueller,” he said, “do you know how dense this fog is?” “No, my eye is not on the density of the fog, but on the living God, who controls every circumstance of my life.” Mueller then knelt down and prayed simply. When he had finished the captain was about to pray, but Mueller put his hand on his shoulder, and told him not to. “First, you do not believe He will; and second, I believe He has, and there is no need whatever for you to pray about it.” The captain looked at Mueller in amazement. “Captain,” he continued, I have known my Lord for 52 years, and there has never been a single day that I have failed to get an audience with the King.  Get up, captain, and open the door, and you will find the fog is gone.” The captain walked across to the door and opened it. The fog had lifted. He became a Christian shortly afterwards.

This is just one of many such stories from Mueller’s life. Based on the detailed prayer journal he kept, Mueller later testified to receiving God’s answer to 50,000 prayers during his lifetime!

What about you? Do you agree that if you believe, you too shall receive? What then can you start praying for with greater urgency? What promise of God can you claim right now? Remember, the real issue is not the size of your mountains but the size of your God. The secret to a spiritually powerful life is summed up in 4 simple words: ***“Have faith in God.”***