Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Way of the Fig Tree: Promise Without Performance
Scripture: Matthew 21:18-22
Code: 2352

The Way of The Fig Tree: The Promise Without Performance

This morning, we want to return in our study to Matthew chapter 21. I invite you to take your Bible and do that. If you didn't bring a Bible along, there's one in the pew near you, I trust. Or you might look on with someone nearby. We want to consider Matthew chapter 21, verses 18 through 22...a very wonderful, a very instructive, very dramatic portion of the Scripture and incident in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now remember, as we approach this portion of Matthew 21, Jesus has arrived in the city of Jerusalem. In fact, He arrived on Saturday. John 12 tells us six days before the Passover. He came to the town of Bethany, having left Jericho where He had healed two blind men, one named Bartimaeus and where He had given salvation to a man named Zacchaeus who was a tax collector. He moved up from Jericho to Jerusalem, no doubt around Him a massive congregation of people who had been attracted to Him by His miracles and by His teaching throughout His ministry and Galilee, Peraea and in Jericho.

And as they approached the city of Jerusalem, He on Saturday stops at the little village of Bethany, a village of several hundred people two miles to the east of Jerusalem on the backside of the Mount of Olives. And there He stays in the home of three dear friends--Mary, Martha and Lazarus--Lazarus, whom He has already raised from the dead.

It's Passover time in Jerusalem and so the city is overflowing with multitudes of people. And finding a place to stay is not easy. Many camped outside. And so Jesus, no doubt, enjoys specially the rest that He finds in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

On Sunday morning, a great multitude from the city move out because the word is out that Jesus is in fact in Bethany and so the crowd comes to Bethany on Sunday. And no doubt, He met them there.

Then on Monday morning, a very great event took place. With the breaking of the dawn, Jesus told His disciples to go find a particular animal that was tied in a nearby village by the name of Bethphage, to bring that animal along with its mother and He got on that colt, the foal of an ass, and rode triumphantly into the city of Jerusalem before the hosannas of the people...the palm branches that were thrown in His way, the garments that were thrown down upon which the animals walked. It was

coronation day, at least His earthly coronation. It was the triumphal entry. "The hosannas to the Son of David, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," rang throughout that city as they hailed Him as their Messiah, their long awaited King, the one who could raise the dead and had demonstrated that by raising Lazarus. And whom they believed would now come as the conquering hero to throw over the Roman yoke and liberate the children of Israel from their bondage.

The parade began as He came in the eastern gate. It ended at the temple. And after the conclusion of that procession, He returned to Bethany on Monday night and spent the night in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

On the dawning of the next day, Tuesday, He again entered the city. This time He went directly to the temple. And upon entering the temple, He said, "This is a den of thieves, it should be a house of prayer," and He proceeded to cleanse the temple. As a result of that, the religious leaders began to look for a way to kill Him because He was a threat to their system. And again that night, Tuesday night, He went back to Bethany, most likely, to spend the night in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

On Wednesday, He came again to the city of Jerusalem. And again in the confrontation with the religious leaders, that confrontation is recorded for us in verses 23 and following. But we need to stop at this point because when He came in on Tuesday and when He came in on the morning of Wednesday, on both of those two days there was a fig tree that came into play. Mark tells us the first meeting with the fig tree was on the first day He came in to cleanse the temple. And then the second day when He came back again, there was a second encounter with the fig tree. That's in Mark chapter 11.

Matthew condenses both of those into just one narrative from verse 18 to 22. Matthew isn't so concerned with the chronology as he is with the point, the message of the fig tree. And that ought to be our emphasis as well.

Now keep in mind that Jesus came as King...very important. In fact, you go all the way back to Genesis 49:10 and you will see there that God promised clear back in the first book of the Bible that there would come a King out of Judah and He would have a scepter and that scepter would belong to Him as the rightful heir. And as you study the Old Testament, this is reiterated again and again and again. The promise of the King fills up the Old Testament. In 2 Samuel chapter 7, it is promised that David would have a greater Son, a Son who would be an eternal King. In Psalm 2 and Psalm 45 and Psalm 72, there is the promise of a King coming, the one who would reign supreme. In Psalm 2, the one who would have power over the nations, who would rule them with a rod of iron, the nations being placed under His feet. In Isaiah 9, it says of Him the government will be upon His shoulder. Zechariah 9 talks about His kingliness. And Zephaniah, Zechariah and Micah all tell us also that the King would be none other than God. In fact, in Micah 5:2 it says He would be born in Bethlehem, but

His goings would have been of old from everlasting. So the eternal God would be born a King, coming into the world to establish Himself as rightful ruler.

Now Jesus then, on Monday, when He rode in, listened to the accolades and the hosannas and accepted the coronation, fickle as it was. And having been affirmed and inaugurated as King on Monday, He then proceeds immediately to do two kingly things. The first thing He did was cleanse the temple, the second thing He did was curse the tree. Both of those are acts of sovereign authority.

Now the Jews believed that their king would come and would be a military leader, would save the state of Israel, if you will, from Roman bondage, would bring about a prosperity that was promised in the Old Testament. He would not only be a military leader but He would be an economically successful leader. He would be able to bring together all the disharmonious factions of society. He would be able to make it all work out the way it was supposed to. He would create utopia, to borrow a more modern term.

But instead of attacking Rome, He attacked Judaism. Instead of becoming a conqueror, He was a confronter. Instead of talking about revolution, He talked about righteousness. And instead of cleaning out the enemy, He cleaned out His own house. And this was not consistent with what they expected. This was not the kind of King they looked for. And may I add, it still isn't. They are still not interested in the Jesus of the Bible, they are still not interested in the one who is the Son of righteousness. They are still looking for a military leader. They are still looking for an economic deliverer. And that, my dear friends, is why they will be so ripe for the pact that they will make with the Antichrist, as Daniel 9 tells us, because they are still looking for the wrong thing.

The Christians in the land of Israel today are almost invisible. I mean, genuine redeemed born-again Christians, not quote/unquote Christians because they have orthodox heritage in the Greek Orthodox Church or whatever. But the genuine Christian is almost hard or impossible to find. And the state of Israel is not interested in that kind of Messiah. They are not interested in one who will confront them about their sins. They're interested in a political military economic and social savior. So nothing really has changed. They misunderstand the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the Messiah today, as much as they did in the past.

And so, when He comes, just after He's been inaugurated king, He does two things immediately. First, cleanse the temple; second, curse the tree, and they are monumentally significant things. And if you don't understand them, you won't understand why they wanted Him dead.

The first thing, cleansing the temple, was a denunciation of their religion. It was a denunciation of their worship. The second thing, cursing the tree which we'll see today, was a denunciation of them as a nation. So instead of overthrowing their enemies, in a sense He denounces them. And it's inconceivable to them that their own Messiah could come and condemn them. And that is why they

put Him to death. They would have nothing to do with Him and they said it, "We will not have this man to reign over us." This isn't our kind of king. He wasn't like other kings. Pilate even said to Him, "Are You a King? He said, "You said it but My Kingdom is not of this world. I'm a king but not the kind of king you're used to."

So, what you see here are two acts of kingly authority: the cleansing of the temple and the cursing of the tree. He has the scepter and He wields it in these ways. Now we've already seen the cleansing of the temple, dramatic, dramatic scene. Let's look at the cursing of the tree, verse 18. "Now in the morning as He returned into the city, He was hungry." And we'll stop there for a moment.

This is the predicament. Let's call this the predicament. This is a most interesting thing. It is in the morning. What morning? Well, for Matthew it's a combination of Tuesday and Wednesday. He just brings the two together. Mark says the first morning He came in and found the tree, cursed it. The second morning they came in, they saw it withered. Matthew just combines the whole thing to get at the truth. "In the morning, as He returned to the city," that is returning after His coronation on Monday, "He was hungry."

So human...so human. He was hungry. How did He get hungry? Hadn't Mary, Martha and Lazarus provided food for Him? Oh surely they would have. And breakfast in Israel is a big thing, a very big event. In fact, it's so big that it's almost painful. And surely they would have provided that. But it may have been that He had been praying. It may have been that He had been in spiritual battle. It may have been that He had been seeking the heart of God and that had His desire for food had been over ridden by His spiritual hunger and He had preempted any thought of a meal by His time of prayer. And it may have been that now that that prayer time is over, as He walks back to the city, He because of the difficult walk, I don't mean impossible but it's downhill and uphill and maybe He began to feel the hunger that He had ignored earlier. And He was hungry. Oh, what a mystery. The divine God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and He gets hungry. But that is the essency of His humanness.

And along with Him are the ubiquitous disciples, desperately in need of another profound lesson and about to receive one. Verse 19, "And when He saw a fig tree along the way, He came to it, found nothing on it but leaves only." Stop there.

Coming to a fig tree in Israel isn't that unusual. We saw several of them. One comes to my mind in general, a rather massive one that we saw growing beside an old building in Caesarea on the sea, Mediterranean Sea. But fig trees are very common to that part of the world. But this fig tree was unlike most fig trees. In the first place, it shouldn't have even been there with leaves on it because it was only April and fig trees, though they bloom twice a year, the early fruit doesn't come until May or June. And for a fig tree to have leaves in April was very uncommon. Maybe in Jericho they had already eaten of the figs because everything blooms early in Jericho, the sun is so constant and so intense. But up on the hilltop, it just didn't happen that in April fig trees bloomed and bore fruit.

And so, our Lord in His hunger sees this fig tree. And it says it was along the way, which means it was a roadside fig tree, He wasn't invading someone's private orchard. It was just a roadside tree. And when He saw it, He came up to it and discovered that it had leaves only. In other words, He was attracted to it because it did have leaves. Why? Listen...you have to understand a little bit about fig trees and I know as little as anybody so I'll tell you what I know.

Mark says in Mark 11 that it was not the season of figs. It wasn't fig season. But let me just give you a little bit of a background so you'll understand why he said this. Palestine was a land of fig trees. In Deuteronomy 8:8, you know, when God laid out the beauty of the land, He said it's a land of wheat, it's a land of barley, it's a land of vines, it's a land of fig trees. The delicious fruit of the fig was abundant in the land. The spies in Numbers 13 went into the land, came out and reported that there were fig trees there. And that was a demonstration of the great treasure of that land. In fact, in Zechariah 3:10, I believe it is, the promise is that someday in the Kingdom every man is going to sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree. The fig tree is a symbol of the prosperity and the wealth and the richness of that land agriculturally.

So, the presence of fig trees were the mark of the prosperity of the land. The absence of fig trees, the mark of the judgment of the land. And today there aren't surely nearly the fig trees there were once. They've had to be replanted, you know, that land has been denuded and stripped naked so many, many times that they're having a reforestation project now to put it back to what it used to be. But it was made naked by so many different conquerors who came in and built all their war machines out of the wood. They stripped the woods bare. And then in one period of Israel's history, they made a law that every man was taxed according to the number of trees he had on his land. So everybody went out and cut down all their trees. But the fig trees are coming back to the land. Their absence now may be a mark of God's judgment on that prosperity.

Fig trees can get 20 feet high and they can get 20 feet wide. And they're great shade trees. Nathaniel, John 1:48, may well have been under his own fig tree when called to the discipleship of Christ.

Now fig trees bear fruit twice a year...May, June and then later in the year. And here's the important point. The fruit comes before the leaves. The fruit comes before the leaves. And so, if you see a tree with leaves, what should you expect? Fruit. And when the Lord saw the tree with leaves, it was amazing because in Jerusalem it's too early for that. Oh, maybe this tree was at a very fertile point in the soil. It may have been that that soil had unique nutrients. It may have been that it was near a brook and water was in abundance provided to the roots. It may have been that somebody specially cared for that, or it may have been that God just had that tree bloom a little early. But it should have had fruit because it had leaves.

And so, the Lord came near because He was anticipating having His hunger met by this wayside tree. But when He got there, it says, "He found nothing on it but leaves only." It was too early for the fruit to have died. Just never had any.

It was a diseased tree. It was a fruitless tree. And it became for Him a profound illustration. You see, He is the master of capturing the illustrations out of nature. He uses water, birds, animals, weather, wineskins, trees, flowers. He uses anything and everything to teach spiritual truth. And He does it here, too. So we move from the predicament to the parable in verse 19. And He has a teaching that He wants to convey and He does it in parabolic form.

He comes to the tree, finds only leaves and says unto it, verse 19, in the middle of the verse, "Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward forever." Mark 11 recording the same incident, says Peter said He cursed the tree, Mark 11:21...He cursed it. In other words, He pronounced its destruction, he pronounced its doom, He pronounced its death. He killed that tree with His word. Tree, you're dead from here on. And presently, the fig tree withered away. You compare the passage in Mark on the first day, He cursed it. The second day, when they came back in by the same tree, they saw that it was already dead. It wasn't dying, it was already dead. It had died immediately from His curse, they just didn't see its death until the next day. He cursed it and it died.

Now what is the parable? Oh, it's obvious. The context, the circumstances, the first day He's on His way to the temple and He stops and curses a fig tree because it has nothing but leaves. It has a pretense of fruit but no fruit. And then from there He goes right in and cleanses the temple. Do you think there's a connection? Sure there's a connection. Sure there's a connection. That fig tree is symbolic of Israel. The leaves are symbolic of Israel's religious activity and the fruitlessness is equally symbolic of Israel. They have a form of godliness... right?...without power. They have a zeal for God without knowledge, Paul says in Romans 10:2. Jesus cleansed the temple and thus He denounced their religion. Jesus cursed the fig tree and thus He denounces their nation as fruitless.

You see, fruit is always the indicator of salvation. You go back to Matthew chapter 7 and our Lord simply says in the Sermon on the Mount, "By their fruits you shall...what?...know them." You go to Matthew chapter 13, the parable of the four soils and you find the good soil and the good soil is seen as good soil because it produces what? Fruit, some hundredfold, some sixty- fold, some thirty-fold. And you go to John 15 verse 5, and it says every branch that abides in Me brings forth much...what? Fruit. Fruit is ever and always the manifestation of true salvation. And what God is saying here is Israel is a nation with a pretense of religion that is unsaved, unredeemed, lost, cut off from God. And He has in mind not only Israel but particularly Jerusalem which demonstrates this holy zeal for God's name, which busily engages in religious activity, all utterly fruitless.

And it is still so. I tell you, you're overwhelmed with that when you're there. You're continually faced with religion everywhere. When we left New York, we were on the plane with a whole lot of orthodox Jews, committed to orthodox performance. And they would stand up at their prayer times in the middle of the aisle in the plane and they would wrap the phylacteries around their head because in Deuteronomy 6 it says, "Bind the law of God on your forehead and on your arm." And so they put the box on their head and they tie the thing all around their head and then they put it on their wrist and they tie it all around their arm and then they drop a big shawl over their head. And they genuflect and bob up and down toward Jerusalem all the way, you know. And it's...they're oblivious to what's going on. The pilate is saying, "Please be seated and buckle your seatbelt, or take your seat in the aisle, we're trying to serve lunch," or whatever. That doesn't matter to them at all. They are doing their thing.

We stopped in Brussels, Belgium and we got out into the airport and they lined up and...mass of them along the windows and they began to do their genuflecting with the little boxes on their head and the phylacteries on their arms. And they were doing just exactly what our Lord saw them do in His day. They were going through their vain repetition, their endless kinds of meaningless prayers, they were doing their religion before men to be seen of men, to be acclaimed of men and so forth. And it was all nothing but leaves because they have denied the truth of God, they have denied the revelation of God in their own Messiah. And they're going through religious motions. And you're just overwhelmed with this leaves without fruit kind of religion. And many of these people, around their waist, they wear the right little tassles that hang down to identify themselves with the law. We went under the area of the western wall which are the footings of Herod's temple, the Herodian temple which stood in the time of our Lord, and we saw them in the very special holy place, the holiest place that they believe they have in their land, the place where they think they have access to the Holy of Holies, the escape hatch where the priests could get out when he got defiled in the Holy of Holies and wanted to get out and get cleansed and get back in without the people knowing. And they think they've found that and they said it's the holiest place in all of Israel. And we watched these people, their heads against the wall doing this and sticking prayer requests in cracks.

We had the privilege of meeting the chief rabbi of all the holy places, the chief rabbi of the state of Israel and the man who was minister of religious affairs. We went down for the sacred lighting of the first candle of Hanuka against the wall. And we watched all of this and all this religion going on all and around and you're just overwhelmed with the fact that it's all without any righteous fruit.

And that's what our Lord saw. And He pronounces judgment. And it has been a patient pronunciation. It could have been done a lot earlier. In Luke there's an interesting use of this same picture in the thirteenth chapter in verse 6. The Lord here speaks a parable, "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came and sought fruit on it and found none. And he said to the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none." I don't know, maybe that has something to say to connect up with the three years of our Lord's

ministry, calling for fruit from Israel. "Cut it down, why let it cumber the ground. And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also till I shall dig about it and fertilize it. And if it bear fruit, well. And if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down." Give it a little more time, Lord.

And so the Lord did. It wasn't just after the three years of His ministry that the fulfillment of that curse came, it wasn't until 70 A.D. when the Romans came and sacked the city and totally leveled the temple. The Lord was patient. But He cursed the tree. It never did bring fruit. It still hasn't brought fruit.

Now people, the cleansing of the temple and the cursing of the tree then you see is very dramatic, don't you? Devastating. And it's little wonder that they reacted by hating Jesus Christ and wanting Him dead. Jerusalem and Judaism is spiritually fruitless, sinful, cursed for judgment. That's essentially the message of Jesus as the King. He is coronated on one day, this is His message the next day...you're doomed. Boy, they really didn't expect their Messiah to come to deliver that word, did they?

But, had they forgotten what John the Baptist said? Clear back in chapter 3, that when He comes, His fan is in His hand, He will purge the floor, He will gather His wheat into the grainery and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. The Messiah would come and he would come in judgment. The acceptable year of the Lord was really over. And He was pronouncing judgment.

Notice at the end of verse 19, "Immediately the fig tree withered away." When He cursed it, it died. Mark 11:20 and 21 indicates the next morning when they came by it, it had died from the roots up, it had dried up. And they were awed by that. Verse 20, "When the disciples saw it, they marveled saying, How soon is the fig tree withered away." It died that fast. The next day they came by, it was already dead. What a symbol of what was coming to Israel.

It's reminiscent of Old Testament passages. It's reminiscent, first of all, go back with me to Deuteronomy chapter 28, Deuteronomy chapter 28, this whole section here from 27 on deals with whether or not Israel's going to be blessed or cursed, whether they're going to be in the land or out of the land. And here it comes down to very clear focus. In chapter 28, "It will come to pass if thou shalt hearken diligently to the voice of the Lord thy God to observe and to do all His commandments, which I command thee this day, that the Lord thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth." In other words, if you're obedient, God will bless you. "And all these blessings shall come on thee and overtake thee if thou shalt hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God. Blessed shalt thou be in the city, in the field, the fruit of thy body, the fruit of the ground, the fruit of thy cattle, the increase of thy cows, the flocks of thy sheep, thy basket, thy kneading trough. Blessed shalt thou be when thou comest in, when thou goest out." And further blessing is pronounced all the way down to verse 14.

Then in verse 15, "But, it shall come to pass if thou wilt not hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes which I command thee this day, that all these curses shall come upon thee. Cursed shalt thou be in the city, in the field, thy basket, thy kneading trough, the fruit of thy body, the fruit of thy land, the increase of thy cows and the flocks of thy sheep. Cursed shalt thou be when thou comest in, cursed shalt thou be when thou goest out. The Lord's going to send on you cursing, vexation, rebuke," and it goes on and on and on clear to the end of the chapter, that's verse 68. Verse 49 says, "The Lord's going to bring nation against you from the end of the earth, as swift as an eagle, a nation whose tongue you don't understand." And all of that is curse. Now listen, you obey--you're blessed. You don't obey--you're what? You're cursed.

In Isaiah chapter 5 you have a similar kind of passage where the Lord says, "I planted a noble vine," that's the nation Israel, "in a very fruitful hill," that's the land of Canaan. "I took all the stones out, removed all the enemies. I build a moat around it, insulated it with a protective ceremonial system and social system. I gave a winepress," that's the sacrificial system, "what more could I have done to My vineyard. And the answer is nothing more and I looked for it to bring forth grapes and it brought forth sour berries, I will curse that people." And then in chapter 5, it's curse, curse, curse, curse, curse, curse...six times. And they're cursed.

It was all established in Deuteronomy 28, you obey--you're blessed. You disobey--you're cursed. And they disobeyed and they disobeyed and they disobeyed and they disobeyed and they are continuing today to disobey. And Israel today is still under a curse from God. That's not a very happy message to give them. But that's the fact because they continue to reject the Messiah. They continue to demonstrate a religion that is leaves without fruit. It's religion without reality. And they're cursed. They are preserved but they're not blessed. They're preserved because God will redeem them in the future when the Messiah comes. What we're seeing now in Israel is not the regathering of the nation prophesied in the Bible, that regathering is going to be done by the Messiah in a redeeming work. What you're seeing now is just some preliminary activity. And they're regathering themselves on a political basis, they're not be regathered redemptively or Messianically. In fact, there are some orthodox Jews in Israel who do not recognize the state of Israel. We saw some of them. They don't recognize the state of Israel, therefore they trade only in the American dollar, they won't use Israeli currency because they believe that only the Messiah can restore the true state of Israel and until that time, any attempt to do that is a false attempt.

Well, in their own way they're right. What has been created is a political state, but they're still cursed. They know no rest. They patrol their borders constantly. Everybody's on a constant state of alert. Everywhere you go there are soldiers who are armed with machine guns, all over the place. In fact, it becomes commonplace. You don't think anything of it. You go..we'll be traveling along in the Jordan Valley and jets are zooming a thousand feet over the ground, up and down they can only find three minutes in any direction without being over one of their borders. That's how small and how isolated.

And they believe that the whole Arab world at any moment would like to put them out of existence. Several times they said, as we visited the Holocaust Museum, and that's what our enemies want to do to us again. That's what our enemies want to do to us again, remember that. And all they're waiting for across those borders is for Allah to say we're to fight Israel. You see, the Arab world they say says whatever Allah says, we do it. If Allah says we have peace with Israel, we have peace. If Allah says we have a holy war, we have a war. So they don't know what Allah's going to say. In fact, they don't know who represents Allah. But if somebody stands up like Khomeini or anybody else and says, "Allah says war with Israel," then they know war will break out. And they're in a constant state of vigilance. Life for them is reduced to the basic things, survival and defense.

They're under a curse...the curse that our Lord pronounced upon them, the curse that Isaiah pronounced upon them, the curse that's pronounced upon them by God in Deuteronomy, it's the same thing. You disobey Me, you are under judgment. And they're under that. God preserves His people in an unblessed situation. And someday they're going to enter into that blessing, someday they're going to look on Him whom they have pierced and mourn for Him as an only Son. Someday the people are going to be redeemed and then they will know what it is to be at rest from their enemies, then they will know what it is to be at peace. But until then, they're so paranoid about that, that they're set up in a perfect condition to accept a contract with the Antichrist who will bring them a moment of deliverance, a moment of prosperity, a false security. They're still a cursed people.

So, the parable is understood. Powerful. But remember I said the Lord has disciples with Him? And the Lord wants to use this to teach them something also. So we turn a little corner as we come to verse 21 and let's call this the principle. And here the Lord moves from the parable to the principle. And this is the principle for the disciples. The first principle we could say is the obvious truth that profession without reality is cursed. That was something they must have learned from this. That it doesn't do any good to profess to be religious if there's no fruit, that's a profound lesson. And while it is a national illustration in the parable, it certainly has individual implications. And I warn you that if you're life is a life of leaves without fruit, you are cursed and doomed just like the nation Israel was. God's going to judge the religious. God is going to damn to eternal hell those people who had a show of religion without the truth. That is the first principle. And so if you are living a lie, if you are masquerading as one who is religious but there's no fruit in your life, you're damned, you're cursed.

But there's a lesson He wants to give to His disciples. There's a principle that they need, too. And so He takes this illustration and He turns it to a spiritual principle for them. And the principle I want you to see, because He points it out, is in verses 21 and 22.

"Jesus answered and said unto them," now He turns to His disciples, "verily," and this is here for emphasis to affirm the certainty of what He says, "I say to you, if you have faith and doubt not, you shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also if you shall say to this mountain, Be thou

removed and be thou cast into the sea, it shall be done." Stop there.

You say, "Well, that doesn't seem to be connected with the lesson." Well, it really isn't connected with the lesson of the parable but it's connected with their response to the lesson. Their response to the lesson is in verse 20, "They were amazed and they marveled," it says in verse 20, "how soon is the fig tree withered away," they said. Boy, how fast that thing died. What power, right? That's what they're saying. What power. I mean, He cursed that thing and it was dead. What power.

So, He says to them, "Let me tell you something, men. If you have faith and don't doubt, you'll not only be able to do things like that, but you could say to this mountain...and that would no doubt refer to the Mount of Olives...be cast into the sea...and the sea that was on the backside of that would have been the Dead Sea, 4,000 feet down... you could say to this mountain, dump yourself into that sea and it would be done."

Now obviously that's not literal. That's a picture of power. I don't know if you know it but in Jewish literature, a rooter up of mountains was a metaphor for a great spiritual leader. It's in the Babylonian Talmud that they call the great rabbis "rooter up of mountains". In other words, people who could remove great obstacles, people who could solve great problems, people who express great power. "Rooting up mountains" became a metaphor for dealing with difficulty, dealing with impossible situations. And the Lord is saying, "Look, I want you to know that you have this power and this power is available to you through faith. If you would believe and not doubt, you can see God's power." It's like recorded in the gospel of John in the upper room when the Lord said to them, "Greater works shall these...than these shall you do because I go to My Father." In other words, there's great power available. John 14, He says, "Whatever you ask in My name, I'll do it." And in verse 22 He sums it up by saying, "All things, whatever you shall ask in prayer, believing you shall receive."

This is a tremendous thing. They're saying, "Lord, what power, You wished that tree dead and it was dead." And He says you've got the same power available. You've got the same power. And He turns it into a lesson about prayer for them, that you can see the same power working if you believe.

Now let me tell you what He means by this. Faith is not faith in nothing. And faith is not faith in things that you think ought to be, and faith is not faith in you or your ideas or your dreams or your ambitions. Faith is placing your confidence in God. All right? So when it says if you have faith, it doesn't mean nebulous..."Well, I believe in believing...well, I believe because I believe." Faith is placing confidence in something you know that is true. It is believing in God as God has revealed Himself. So to say if you have faith and doubt not is to say if you believe that God is able and will do what He says He will do, then you can see it done. Okay?

In other words, the faith that we must have in prayer is not faith in our ideas, is not saying, "Well, you know, I'd like to have that and if I have enough faith I'll get it." No, no, no. That's that ridiculous stuff

that you hear being propagated today. "Well, if you have enough faith, you can have everything."

I heard about a pastor yesterday who claimed a whole piece of property for his church. And he told his people if you have the faith to do it, and just claim it, it's positive confession faith, you claim it, it's yours. And he claimed it and it fell through. And this is his whole message constantly to his people. So how is he going to recover from that? So he says, "Well, we had one guy on our board who didn't have the faith and he blew the whole thing."

That isn't what He's talking about. Having faith is trusting in the revelation of God. In other words, if I know that something is consistent with God's mind, if I know it is consistent with His will, if I know it is consistent with His purpose, if I know it is consistent with His desire, then I believe that and I can see that come to pass. It is faith in God as God is and God as God has revealed Himself to be.

And how is that appropriated? Verse 22, by prayer. Our faith is activated in petition...petition. And as we ask in prayer, believing...we receive. Oh, not that we may consume it on our own lusts, because James 4:3 says we won't get those kind of things. Not because it's our will, but because 1 John 5:14 and 15 says it has to be His will. Not because we ask in our name because John 14:13 and 14 says it has to be in Christ's name. But as we ask consistent with God's revelation of Himself, consistent with the name of Jesus Christ and His purpose, consistent in an unselfish way to the glory of God, we can know we'll receive it.

This is similar to Matthew 17:20, turn back for a moment. The disciples came back, they couldn't do a miracle they wanted to do. He said you couldn't do it because of your unbelief. You couldn't do it because of your unbelief. "If you just had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you'd say to the mountain, Move from here to yonder place and it would move and nothing would be impossible." You didn't have enough faith, you should have had the faith of a grain of mustard seed.

You say, "Now wait a minute. Faith of a grain of mustard seed, that's the smallest seed there is." Well, yes, but that's not talking about small faith. The faith of a grain of mustard seed is this, a mustard seed's a small seed that produces what? a very large bush. And the idea is if you have faith that starts small but gets larger and larger and larger and larger, you're going to see God work in power. That's what He's saying. So you start out small and if it doesn't happen, you don't say, "Well, I give up...I asked the Lord to do it and He didn't do it." But your faith grows and strengthens and strengthens and strengthens, it's like the same kind of faith that is illustrated to us in the gospel of Luke chapter 11, gospel of Luke chapter 18, both of which give us the stories of persistent...persistent people where the guy gets his answer because he knocks and knocks and knocks and knocks and knocks. And where the lady gets her response because she begs, and begs and begs and begs.

In other words, the Lord is saying if you believe in God enough to be persistent in your prayers and to start out small and keep praying and keep praying and keep praying, let that faith strengthen and

strengthen and strengthen, then God's going to respond to that.

Now some people will always come along and say, "Oh well, but God's going to do what He's going to do anyway. And what about God's sovereignty and we can't ask for stuff that's out of His will. And how does He know if He wants to do it?" So forth and so on, and you can get all tangled up in the sovereignty of God and then you can make your prayer life literally impotent. I don't understand those relationships anymore than I understand that I must come to Christ for salvation and yet it's all of His sovereignty. There are paradoxes in the Bible that I don't understand and I know God has a sovereign will and I know God answers prayer sovereignly and I know God is in charge of everything and I know He does exactly what He wants to do but I also know the Bible says that I'm supposed to pray persistently and I'm supposed to pray faithfully and I'm supposed to pray believing that what God says is what God wants. And what God says He's able to do is in fact what He is able to do. And if my faith will grow and grow and persist and persist and persist, I'll see the power of God.

And some of you are not seeing God work in your life simply because there's no persistence in your prayer. There's no continuance in your prayer. There's no strengthening. You don't get an answer so you quit. And it's not mustard seed, it's something else. Mustard seeds start small, gets big.

Boy, when I see a verse like 22 of Matthew 21, all things whatever you shall ask in prayer, believing you shall receive, that's a pretty dynamite promise, folks. And if you understand that that means all things in the will of God, it doesn't hurt it, it just makes it all the better, right? Because what do you want? You only want what God wills, right? I want whatever God wants for me. I want the best that God wants for me. I want the best that God wants for you. I want the best that God wants for this church. I want the best that God wants for this ministry, whatever it is, I want that with all my heart I want that. And here the Lord says if you really believe God wants that, and God can do that, then let's see the exercise of your faith in persistence. And some of us have not received the blessing of God in our lives simply because we have not persisted in prayer.

Now my job is not the harmonia...harmonize all of that with God's sovereignty. God does that part. I can't do that. But my job is to respond in faith and simple trust to the confident statement of verse 22, that if I ask in prayer believing that God will do what He will do and is able to do what He says He will do, that I'll see His power.

I just...I get tired of impotence. I get...I'm weary of a church without power. I'm weary of a life without power. I'm weary of people without power. I'm weary of not seeing the hand of God in an almighty way. I want God to be at work. And I know that the plan here is given very clearly, if we ask in prayer...not doubting.

And, you know, a lot of folks start their prayer all on great faith and they don't get an answer in the next 24 hours and...phist. That's not mustard seed, that's not getting stronger and bigger and larger.

You keep pursuing, keep persisting, keep knocking, keep crying out. Christ when He prayed in the garden cried out to the point where He sweat, as it were, great drops of blood because of the soul anguish that was poured out in His prayer. We throw...we throw superficial shallow little prayers at God that are so trite, lack so much intensity and so much passion that they dishonor God by even being offered. We think that God builds His church by better programs. We think God builds His church by better plans, by better ideas. And we fail to realize that where God really wants to reveal His power is through persistent prayers of His people.

Now I'm committed in my own heart to a greater commitment to the life of prayer and less involvement in trying to think up better ways to do things. And when I see a problem that I can't solve, instead of running up the street and trying to get the next best counselor that I can find in line to help the person, to take the person to prayer and let God do the things that He wants to do through His own power. And maybe we'd be a greater help to each other if we spent more time in prayer than more time in giving advice.

Verse 22 is a dynamic verse. You ought to put a circle around it in your Bible and see if it is being applied in your life. I mean, when's the last time you saw some mountain moved into the sea because you didn't doubt God but you persisted in prayer?

Well, very dramatic event. Jesus is the King. And the King does what the King wants to do because He's the King. And what He wants to do is show to Israel the nature of His kingliness. And it isn't political and isn't social and it isn't military, first of all, it's spiritual. And so He does what must be done. He cleanses the temple. He curses the tree. And He says to them, "Your religion is corrupt and your nation is corrupt and they are doomed to judgment." Sad day. He laid the axe at the root of the tree and He did it because there was nothing but leaves, nothing but leaves.

Somebody wrote, "Nothing but leaves and the Spirit grieves over a wasted life. Or sins committed while conscience slept, promises made but never kept, hatred, battle and strife, nothing but leaves. Nothing but leaves, no garnered sheaves of life's fair ripen grain, words, idle words, for earnest deeds, we sow our seeds low, tares and weeds we reap with toil and pain, nothing but leaves. Nothing but leaves, memory weaves no veil to hide the past, as we retrace our weary way, counting each lost and misspent day, we find sadly at last nothing but leaves. And shall we meet the Master so, bearing our withered leaves, the Savior looks for perfect fruit, we stand before Him humble mute, waiting the words He breathes...nothing but leaves."

I trust you examine your own heart in that regard. And if you find in fact that you are one of His own and there is fruit there, may it be that it's the fruit of persistent prayer and that you learn the lesson those disciples needed to learn that all the power the Lord had when He cursed the tree and more is available to the one who calls upon Him in faith. And may we go to prayer on behalf of each other and the purposes of our Lord and His glorious Kingdom. Let's pray.

Lord, if there are some in our fellowship, and we know there are, who have nothing but leaves, whose lives are devoid of fruit, who shall meet the master bearing their withered leaves while He looks for perfect fruit, and stand before Him humble mute waiting the words He breathes, nothing but leaves, O God, for those we pray. Save them. Infuse into the deadness of their life Thy living power through Christ that they may bear fruit and not be cut down and cast into the fire like so many Judas branches.

And then, Lord, for those of us who are fruit-bearing Christians but who have never really been faithful to persistent prayer and therefore never seen Your power the way we could see it, call us, O God, by Your Spirit to a more faithful prayer life, to a greater diligence. And may we not eliminate the power that is ours through prayer by reasoning away things, by developing a theology which says You're going to do what You're going to do anyway, so why bother? But, O God, may we leave the resolution of things that we can't understand to You and may we obey what we do hear and understand. And may we pray for mountains to be cast into seas. And may we accept the fact that all things, whatever we ask believing, we shall receive in prayer. We can experience as we pray in Your name, consistent with Your will, Your purpose, Your Son and with persistent faith. O God, we pray that You release Your power in this place in our lives in this church and around the world because we've become people of persistent prayer. Work in every heart this day and we'll praise You in Christ's name. Amen.

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