

Mar. 1, 2015 – Matthew 21:18-22

I Tell You the Truth...Faith Can Move Mountains

There are trees all around us. You probably don't give them much attention unless you need shade, or have to clean up the leaves that fall from them. The Bible mentions a number of trees. Eating from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil brought sin and death into the world. The Bible sometimes calls the cross of Christ a tree, because it was made from a tree (see Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:29, Galatians 3:13, 1 Peter 2:24). By hanging and dying on that tree, Jesus undid the deadly effects of the first tree. And Jesus' interaction with another tree leads to His word of truth that we consider today. It is found in Matthew 21:18-22.

Matthew often arranges events topically rather than in a strictly chronological order. Here he puts together Jesus speaking to the fig tree with the lesson Jesus teaches His disciples from it. Mark 11:12-14, 20-24 give us more detail and tell us that it was Monday morning of Holy Week when Jesus was hungry and approached the fig tree. Jesus and His disciples then went on to Jerusalem and there Jesus cleansed the temple by throwing out all those who were buying and selling in it. In the evening they returned to Bethany. It was the morning of the next day, Tuesday morning, when the disciples saw that the fig tree had withered as they returned to Jerusalem.

Mark also tells us that "*it was not the season for figs*" (Mark 11:13). This does not mean that Jesus was wrong to look for figs on this tree, however. Fig trees produce green figs early in the spring before they produce leaves. While it wasn't the normal time for figs, it looked like this tree was ahead of the rest. It seemed to be growing in a particularly favorable spot for it had already produced leaves and so it should have had some fruit. Jesus, however, found no fruit. So He said to the tree: "*Let no fruit grow on you ever again*" and the fig tree withered away (v. 19).

What was the disciples' reaction to the tree withering? They marveled and asked how it could wither so quickly. They had seen Jesus cast out demons, heal the sick, feed over five thousand people, walk on water, and calm storms, and yet they marveled at the withering of this tree.

What is your reaction to this story? Are you as impressed as the disciples by Jesus' authority? We have heard and read these Gospel accounts so often that the extraordinary can start to seem ordinary. But here we see not only Jesus' human nature, as He was hungry that Monday morning, but also His divine nature which caused the tree to wither with a simple word. What Jesus did is amazing.

And what Jesus said to the disciples is also amazing: "*Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive*" (vv. 21-22). Jesus tells us that faith can move mountains. This seems hard to believe.

I know that I haven't caused any mountains to be thrown into the sea, have you? In fact, if we look at the disciples from this time on, we do not have any record of them throwing a mountain into the sea either. So what is that Jesus is saying here? Don't overlook the fact that Jesus says "*this mountain*." Jesus is most likely pointing to the Mount of Olives on which He and the disciples were standing. He isn't promising us the ability to throw any and every mountain to the sea. He is not saying that we will be able to perform spectacular feats to gain fame and fortune. He is using the image of this particular mountain being thrown into the sea to illustrate the power of faith and the power of prayer.

We can believe what Jesus says here because it is Jesus who said it! Like the disciples we have seen Jesus do the miraculous and demonstrate His divine power over and over in the Gospels.

Here He withers a tree with a word. Jesus' power is the key to understanding the "I tell you the truth" statement He gives us here.

Too often when we hear these words we put the emphasis on the word "you": "if *you* have faith...if *you* believe." We put the emphasis on ourselves and our faith. When we face difficulties and the mountain before doesn't seem to move, we start to wonder if we have enough faith. During these times, Satan wants us focus on ourselves and our faith, or the apparent lack thereof. But Jesus didn't say, "if you have *enough* faith..." but simply "if you have faith." When the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith, Jesus said, "If you had faith as a mustard seed..." (Luke 17:5-6) It is not the quantity of your faith or your devotion that matters, but the object of your faith.

Your faith can move mountains because it is faith *in Jesus*. He is the One who makes this promise and it is His power that makes your faith powerful. It doesn't matter whether Jesus Himself ever caused a mountain to be thrown into the sea – the point is that He can. He is that powerful. As His disciples we, through prayer, have access to that power – the power that created the heavens and the earth.

Isn't that a comforting thought? What a loving thing to teach His disciples in this final week before His death. In a few days they would see Jesus arrested, beaten almost to death, and lead off bleeding from the thorn of crowns on His head and scourging he had received to be put to death on the tree of the cross. Their faith was tested and shaken, but they could go back to this tree and replay this conversation. They could be reminded of Jesus' power and know that Jesus did not die out of weakness or because His betrayer had outsmarted Him, but Jesus had laid down His own life out of obedience to God the Father, according to His plan, so that we could have faith – faith that can move mountains.

We see that the disciples did not always remember this truth. Peter denied Jesus three times that night. After Jesus' death they all huddled in a locked room afraid for their lives. But their fear did not change the truth of Jesus words: "*Assuredly, I say to you... if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea, ' it will be done.'*"

When we face difficulties, it is easy to focus on the problem – to focus on ourselves and on the mountain before us – rather than on the One with the power to move that mountain. We naturally want to solve the problem ourselves and be in control. When all our efforts seems to fail, you sometimes hear a person say, "well, there is nothing left to do now, but pray." But shouldn't prayer be the first thing we do? Jesus encourages us here to look to Him and remember His power. The power to shrivel a tree, and the power to move mountains. He encourages us to come to Him in prayer. He has all authority in heaven and earth; He is better at solving our problems than we are.

This is illustrated so well by the season of Lent. During this time we focus on confession and repentance. We think about our many sins that caused our Savior to bleed and die on the cross. This time reminds us of the seriousness of our sin. And it shows us how great the love God that has for us really is, for while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. But as we consider our many sins, we can fall into despair. Our sins can pile up into a great mountain – one we cannot get rid of or sweep it the rug. The devil tries to convince us that the death of One Man could never pay for them all, and that we must do something; but we can't ever do enough! He wants us to think that there is no hope.

But this is one mountain that you can tell to be thrown into the sea, for that is what God has done in Jesus. In fact, God said through the prophet Micah that He "*will cast all our sins into the depths of sea*" (Micah 7:19). No matter how big a mountain your sins may be, God has thrown

them all away through Jesus' death and resurrection. He has removed your sins from you and they are no longer in His sight. He has plunged them into the depths of the sea. It is already done. Anything else we may face pales in comparison! If God has removed our biggest mountain, we can have faith and not doubt that He will take care of the smaller ones too.

Even though the mountain if your sin is gone, you may be troubled by the image of this fig tree. Here Jesus illustrates in real life a parable He told earlier of a man who planted a fig tree in his vineyard. For three years it did not produce fruit and the man wanted to cut it down. Why should it just take up space? The keeper of his vineyard asked him to give it one more year and said that he would dig around it and fertilize it. If it still did 't bear fruit, the owner could then cut it down (Luke 13:6-9). And a couple times Jesus said plainly, "*every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire*" (Matthew 3:10, 7:19, Luke 3:9).

Does this lead you to wonder if you are producing enough fruit? The devil wants you to answer "no" and be discouraged. He wants you to fear that you will be cut down and thrown into the fire. When we look at our lives, it may seem that we find nothing but empty leaves – a disappointment to our Lord and Savior.

But again, don't focus on *yourself* and *your* fruits. Jesus said, "*I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing*" (John 15:5). Just as it isn't our power or our faith that can move mountains, so it is not *our* effort that produces fruit. It is Jesus' power that makes you a good, fruitful tree. Without Him we can do nothing. If you feel a lack of fruit, don't try harder, pray harder.

That brings us to last thing that Jesus says here: "*whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive*" (v. 22). It sounds like Jesus is giving us a blank check, or a magic lamp will grant us whatever we ask for, so long as we believe that we will receive it. This isn't the only place that Jesus says something like this. In Matthew 7:7-8a Jesus said, "*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives...*"

There are some preachers today, especially on TV, who will say just that: God promises you whatever you want, so long as you believe hard enough. Just name it, and claim it! If you don't receive the money (or whatever earthly blessing you seek) it is because you didn't believe enough. But as we've seen, Jesus does not point us to our faith, but to Himself, the object of our faith. He points us to the power He has to move mountains and answer prayer.

I think we would agree that Jesus isn't promising that He will give us anything and everything we ask for. James warns us both about failing to ask for things and also about asking for inappropriate things. He writes: "*Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures*" (James 4:2b-3). God will only give us good gifts – things that are good for us. He is better at moving mountains than we are, and He knows better than we what we need.

We should also not forget the context of these words. Jesus was preparing His disciples for their mission to be His witnesses. The promises He makes are for them, and for us, as we carry out this mission. When we focus is on Jesus and on making His name known, the things that we ask for will be different from what we would ask if we were focussed just on ourselves. It is the things that glorify His name, that we ask for in His name, that He promises to give us. We can trust that Jesus will move the mountains that hinder the Gospel and give us the things we need to help us to spread the good news of the Jesus death and resurrection. And along with these things He will give us everything else we need for this life.

We face many mountains in this life. They can weary us, make us doubt, and even make us afraid. But no matter how we feel, that does not change the truth that Jesus here tell us: “your faith can move mountains”, because your faith depends the One who has tree-withering, death-defying, sin-erasing, Satan-destroying power. When we see all that Jesus can do, even to a simple tree, may it lead us to be amazed. And may it lead us to pray. Amen.

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