

“All Things You Ask Believing, You Shall Receive”  
(Matthew 21:18-22)

We are by nature a dependent and needy people. We don't have what we need to survive, to make it in this world on our own. We need help. That's the way the Lord made us. We are dependent upon Him. And because He made us this way, He also made a way for us to get the help we need, and that is through prayer. Prayer is such a wonderful privilege. It's not only the way in which we can actually spend time with the most precious and holy person in all the universe, it's also the way God has ordained for us to get His help, to get the things we need, all that we need. But how many of us here really take this avenue of help seriously? How many of us take advantage of it? How many of us are faithful and zealous in our prayers, not just when things seem to be going wrong, but also when they all seem to be going right? The answer is few, very few. We're just not a praying people. Now I'm not saying that we're not faithful in giving the Lord thanks for our daily food, or that we fail to spend time with Him in our personal or family devotions. But what I'm saying is that there are very few who are really committed to a life of prayer, to the kind of prayer that advances the kingdom of heaven, the kind that the apostle Paul exhorts us to -- prayer without ceasing, watching in prayer, praying at all times in the Spirit for all the saints --, and the kind Jesus exhorts us to -- prayer that the kingdom of God would come and that His will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. I imagine that there are very few of us here who ever give more than 10 minutes at one sitting to the Lord in constant and unbroken prayer. Very few of us can pray with someone else without losing our attention after only a few minutes. If the attendance at our Congregational Prayer Meeting shows us anything, it shows us that our desire for prayer as a Congregation is not where it should be. But why isn't it, especially in light of all our needs? Why don't we pray more when we know it is one of the main ways the Lord advances His kingdom? When we know it will make the efforts of our missionaries much more fruitful? When we know it will make the preaching from our pulpit much more powerful in our lives? When we know that the Lord uses it to bring strength and healing into our lives and into the lives of our brethren? Why don't we pray more than we do? One of the answers is that we are not walking in the Spirit as we should. We are walking too much after the flesh. We are seeking our own pleasure too much and God's pleasure too little. Just consider how much you give to God -- how much you think about Him, how much effort you put into doing what He wants you to do -- compared to how much you give to yourself. I think if we would be honest with ourselves this morning we would find that we give by far the greater balance of our time and energy to seeking what we want, rather than what God wants. Very often, our thoughts about Him are only whether or not we can convince ourselves that what we are doing for ourselves is really pleasing to God. This is true of the majority of the church, which is why the kingdom of God is advancing so slowly in our days. We are too earthly-minded and not nearly heavenly-minded enough. But another reason why we neglect prayer is that we don't think it's going to do much good. We don't think the Lord is going to hear or answer. Or perhaps we think that since the Lord has ordained what's going to happen anyway, our prayers really don't make any difference. But this isn't true. James tells us that “the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (James 5:16). But notice that the prayer must be effective, and it must come from a righteous man. This morning, we will want to see what makes prayer effective, and what it means to be a righteous man from our passage.

First, let's look at what Jesus says about who really is a righteous man.

Now first of all, we need to remember that our Lord Jesus never minces words when it comes to the well-being of His people, especially the exposing of our sins. He always tells the truth, because we need to hear it. Last time we were in Matthew's Gospel, we saw a good example of this, when, just after entering Jerusalem, He went into His Temple to clean out the hypocrites. He did this to show His people at that time, and us, how seriously He takes the whole matter of worship. The world had made a home in His house. But the Lord won't allow that to happen for very long, before He cleans it out. We need to understand that today we are the Lord's Temple. God dwells in us. He has made His home in us. And if we allow the world to make it's home in our hearts as well, it won't be long before the Lord returns to throw it out. When He does, it hurts. It feels like He's cutting off our arms and our legs, because the world becomes a part of us. But we need to be thankful that He does. He tells us that we cannot love Him and the world. If we love the world, we will perish with it. But if we love Him, we will live with Him forever.

But Jesus isn't finished with the priests and scribes yet, nor with His covenant people. What they were doing was very instructive, and He didn't want His disciples to miss the lesson. And so we read that as He was returning to Jerusalem in the morning with His disciples, "He became hungry. And seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it, and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, 'No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you.' And at once the fig tree withered" (vv. 18-19). Jesus cursed the fig tree because it didn't have any fruit on it to satisfy His hunger, and it died. But why? Didn't Jesus know what Mark knew, that it wasn't the season for figs (Mark 11:13)? And even if Jesus didn't know this, did this tree deserve to be destroyed merely because it didn't have any fruit on it?

I think it's clear that Jesus cursed this tree as another object lesson for His disciples. It's the same lesson He repeated several times throughout the Gospels, one that we need to remember as well. The lesson is that trees that don't bear fruit eventually end up being cursed. In other words, it's doesn't matter if you say you are a good tree, or a truly saved person, if you bear bad fruit, or if you don't bear any good fruit at all. If that's true of you, you are a bad tree, not a good one. A righteous person is someone who does what is right, not what is wrong. He is one who bears good fruit, not bad, or no fruit at all. What you do speaks louder to God than what you say. Now these priests and scribes believed that they were God's true children. They even thought they were His favorites, even though year after year, when the Lord came to them, He found no good fruit on their branches, but only evil. What they were doing in the Temple showed that they were using the Lord's kingdom for their own gain, and not for His. This will be the reason Jesus will later give for His taking the kingdom away from them and giving it to another nation which will produce it's fruit. Listen to another very similar parable that Jesus spoke concerning Israel. He said, "A certain man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it, and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, *fine*; but if not, cut it down'" (Luke 13:6-9). The Lord doesn't have any use for fruitless trees. Now if they don't bear fruit at first, He is willing to fertilize them with His Word -- to exhort them, to give them time to repent and to do what is right. But He will not be patient forever. There will come a time when He will cut the tree down and throw it into the fire. These priests, scribes and Pharisees, along with nearly the whole nation of Israel, were fruitless. God had sent His

prophets to preach His Word to them for many years, but they would not listen, nor would they repent. Lastly, He sent His Son to speak to them, but they would not listen to Him either. The time was coming when they were going to kill Him and cast Him out of His own vineyard. And when they did, God was going to curse them. He was going to take the kingdom away from them, and give it to a nation which would bear fruit.

But I hope you see this morning that what is true on a national scale is also true on a personal one. If we are righteous, we will bear good fruit. But if we are not righteous, we will bear bad fruit, or no fruit at all, and we will end up being cursed. When John began to preach the kingdom of heaven, he said, “The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:9). Jesus said in John’s Gospel, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit. . . . If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned” (v. 2, 6). Our Lord warns us ahead of time that on the day of His judgment, it is our works that will be judged, not our professions. If we are truly His, the works will be there. But if we’re not, they won’t be. Now is the time to examine our hearts to see if we are truly righteous, and to repent and believe in Christ if we are not. On that day, it will be too late to do anything about it. What is the fruit that the Lord desires to see? The fruit of love toward Him, our brethren, and our neighbors; something that is more than words only, but also deeds; love that will move us to spend time with God in prayer, to sanctify His holy day, to worship and adore Him, and to keep His commandments; love that will clothe the naked, feed the hungry, give comfort to the downcast, show mercy to the offender, and lead those in darkness to the light; love that will conform us into the image of Christ, for this is exactly what He was like and these are the things He did. If these things are in you and increasing, you will have nothing to worry about on that great day. But if they aren’t, then it’s time for you to repent and truly believe on the Savior for the forgiveness of your sins and eternal life.

But this answers just the first question regarding who really is a righteous man, who it is that can pray and whose prayers will be heard. There is still a second question that needs to be asked: If this is true of me, what else is needed to make my prayers truly effective? Jesus now gives us the answer to this.

After Jesus cursed the fig tree and it withered, the disciples marveled more at what happened to the tree than what the withering of the tree meant, and they said, “How did the fig tree wither at once?” (v. 20). So Jesus told them, “Truly I say to you, if you have faith, and do not doubt, you shall not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it shall happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive” (vv. 21-22). You mean all I need to do is believe and not doubt, and I can have anything I want? I can move mountains? I can have all the money I could ever want? I can be cured of any sickness or disease? I can live in perfect safety my whole life and never have to worry about anyone ever wanting to hurt me? No. This isn’t what Jesus is saying. For one thing, this promise is only valid for a righteous man, and a righteous man, as we’ve seen, doesn’t seek after his own pleasure, but God’s. Now sometimes it is God’s pleasure to give us these things, but most of the time it isn’t. David and Solomon were rich, but by far the vast majority of the saints were poor. Some of God’s saints were healed from some of their sicknesses, but many others had afflictions that were never healed. Some lived in safety, but many others lived a life of persecution and suffering. The righteous man realizes this and is content with whatever the Lord brings. He knows how to be content in prosperity or in want, in

health or in sickness, in safety or in persecution (Phil. 4:11-13). He has the Lord and His Word and promise, and for him, these are enough. But there is something else Jesus says here that is often overlooked, that follows along these same lines. He says that we must ask in faith, without doubting. We must believe, or we will not receive. But how can we ask God for anything in faith and not doubt, if we're not sure that it's His will that we have it? The answer is we can't. We must know first that it's His will. John tells us in 1 John 5:14-15, "And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything *according to His will*, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us *in* whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him." We can't ask for just anything in faith. But we can ask for those things we know it is His will to give us in faith. If God promises to give us something, and we ask for it, believing His promise, He will give it to us. But if we ask for something, and we don't know it's His will, then we can't ask believing. In cases like this, there will always be some measure of doubt. And so we must say, even as Jesus Himself prayed, "Lord, if it is Your will do this or that," and the Lord, in His infinitely kindness and mercy, will answer according to His will, according to what is good for us, but not according to what is not.

And so let's be encouraged by these words of Christ to do two things this morning: first, to seek to be truly righteous through faith in His name, seeking abundantly to bear the fruits of righteousness, and secondly, to put on one of the fruits of this righteousness -- namely prayer --, to seek the Lord for all that He has promised to give us through prayer, for the glory of His name, the good of His kingdom, and the good of His people. May the Lord help us all to do so by the power of His Spirit. Amen.