

Unclogging Spiritual Pipes

One of the things they tried to teach me at seminary is that a parable has one meaning and one meaning only. I have to admit that my professors failed to convince me. Although I agree that the principle they taught is a good deterrent against the temptation to make parables say anything one wants them to say, sometimes the Scriptures themselves apply parables in different directions, and give them different applications depending on the circumstances. I've found, for instance that a parable explained one way in, say the Gospel of Mark, may be applied somewhat differently by Luke or Matthew. Illustrations are like that. They can often be used in different ways to emphasize different points. I've done this in my preaching and in witnessing to others: a same story can be told and applied in different ways as the Holy Spirit leads.

The beginning of our Scripture lesson this morning is a good example. Last Sunday I told you that the cursing of the fig tree in Mark 11 is a parable revealing God's judgment on the religious leaders among the Jews at the time of Christ. Because of their spiritual disobedience and rebellion against God the religious establishment of that day had become like a fruitless tree, good for nothing except to be cut down and burned in the fire. It's rather clear, given its context in Scripture, that the story of the cursed fig tree serves this purpose. It means this.

But then, beginning at Mark 11:22, Jesus turns around and gives the event an added meaning. Starting at verse 21 and reading through verse 24 we read, "Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

Jesus transforms the parable of the fig tree from a judgment on Israel to a lesson on faith and prayer. "Look!" says Peter, "the fig tree you cursed yesterday has withered." Jesus responds, "Have faith in God," and proceeds to teach on prayer. That's the direction I want to go in this message this morning. I want us to think about prayer and the power that can be loosed and the miracles that can occur through prayer. Clearly, the Bible, that we have pledged to receive as the inspired word of

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God and to take as our rule of faith and practice in daily living, is a record of wonder working prayer. It is a record of divine assistance and intervention on behalf of people in response to their prayers. Frankly, it's hard to reconcile the lack of prayer and the lack of power and the lack of miracles we typically experience in the church today with what we see in the Bible. Either the Bible is false or there is something amiss with us. We find ourselves fulfilling the prophecy of II Timothy 3:5, where Paul warns Timothy about people who have a form of godliness but deny its power." Something is wrong.

In our Scripture passage today, we are given some clues as to what may be wrong. The image that came to me as I was thinking about this is that of "clogged pipes." If God stands ready to answer our prayers and do many mighty things among us, and if we are not receiving those answers or if only a trickle of blessing is getting through, then what's clogging the pipes? What do we need to get rid of, clear out, or turn from in order to remove the clogs and allow God's grace to flow freely? How do we unclog our spiritual pipes?

The first answer to this question as suggested by our Scripture this morning is that we need to address our doubt and unbelief. Peter is impressed with the withered fig tree. Jesus has cursed it and the next day it is dead. Obviously this is a miracle. In most cases it takes years for a tree to die. Trees don't just die overnight. Peter wants to know about the power of Jesus' word--where does such power come from? Notice Jesus' response: "Have faith in God." "If anyone (don't miss the significance of the word "anyone")--if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

According to Jesus--and He should know--answered prayer flows to us through the pipeline of belief. Conversely, lack of faith and unbelief are the number 1 clogs which prevent us from receiving the miracles God would do among us, for us, and through us. James 1:5-7 puts it this way: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should

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not think he will receive anything from the Lord."

Of course the million dollar question here is how can we remove doubt and unbelief from our lives? At first glance, it doesn't seem like we should have much control over what we believe and what we doubt. We either do or we don't and there isn't much we can do about it one way or the other--or is there? Apparently there is something we can do about it because Jesus commands it. It would make no sense for Him to command us to do something if we had no say in the matter, if we had no choice. Apparently, we can choose to obey; we can choose to have faith. But, how do we express that choice?

First, we pray. The first step to learning how to pray effectively is to pray. Paul says, "Pray without ceasing," and "pray about everything." James says, "You have not because you ask not." Start asking God for what you need; Jesus said, "ask and it shall be given you." **The best way to learn how to pray, is to pray.**

The second thing I would say we can do to increase our faith and remove doubt and learn how to pray is to hang out with others who pray: Jesus encouraged group prayer--He says in Matthew 18:19, "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. In some respects, faith is another word for courage. You see, we go out on a limb to pray, don't we? We can't see God. Most people never hear an audible voice. It takes courage to rely on someone who is invisible and usually silent. To pray is to risk looking foolish in the eyes of the world. That's where a second or third person, or a whole church full of other people can really help. It is easier to believe when someone else is praying beside you. If you don't trust your own faith, you can draw from theirs. **We gain courage in prayer when we pray with others.**

A third thing we can do to choose faith and to increase our effectiveness in prayer is to read the Bible. The Bible says, "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God." In other words, when we read the stories of God's great interventions in the past, when we see how He answered the prayers of Old and New Covenant Saints, when we read God's promise to answer prayer, our faith grows and as our faith grows our prayer potential grows with it. It is also helpful to read church history and the biographies of church leaders and missionaries from the past. We can gain confidence in God and in the power

of prayer by hearing about and reading about the experiences of others.

If we want to get rid of doubt and unbelief and experience power in prayer, we need to pray, pray with others, and resource ourselves with the word of God and with the testimonies of the saints. **We can rid ourselves of unbelief if we have a mind to.**

A second spiritual "clog" suggested by today's Scripture is anger toward others, especially anger that we hold on to over time. Holding grudges and vendettas against others is a great barrier to receiving God's gifts. Notice Mark 11:25: Jesus says, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." Notice the all-inclusive phrase: "if you hold anything against anyone"--no exceptions. It's interesting how this works, but God has wired us in such a way that we cannot believe God for blessings as long as we know we are holding some grudge against another. Un-confessed anger, grudges, ill-will toward others is spiritual sludge in our pipeline to and from God. So if you are holding on to any of this stuff or if it's holding on to you, get rid of it. I John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." If you need more help, obey James 5:16: James says, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." Would you say, "to have power in prayer," "we need clean pipes."

If we would position ourselves to receive more from God, if we would be effective in prayer, and become vessels God can use to bless others, we need to get rid of the clogs of doubt and unbelief, and grudges against others. A third major clog to receiving miracles in answer to our prayers is willfulness, wanting to be captains of our own destiny, wanting to call the shots in our own lives, or a refusal to recognize the Lord's authority.

Mark 11:27-33 say, "They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you authority to do this?" Jesus replied, "I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am

doing these things. John's baptism--was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men' . . ." (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.) So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." The religious leaders in Jerusalem could not receive the Lord's blessings because they would not yield to His authority. They wanted to be in charge. They wanted to run the show. They would accept no Messiah who would not jump through their hoops.

Some of us have a real problem at this point, don't we? We insist upon being in the driver's seat, hanging on to the TV remote, criticizing others and telling others what to do. We will have our own way, or there is going to be a fight. If I'm talking to you at this point, don't miss this opportunity to change your mind and repent. In I Peter 5:5-6, Peter says, "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. **When we insist on calling the shots, and being in control, it leaves no room for miracles.**

In closing, I would simply ask the question: Where's the clog in your life this morning? What's standing in the way of you praying down God's miracles? Is it doubt and unbelief? Is it hard feelings toward others? Is it the need to be in control? Do you want the spiritual pipeline between you and the Lord to be unclogged so that His blessings can flow to you and through you to others? Let us ask the Holy Spirit to come now and clean our pipes.

The Fourth Street Church of God

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601
942-1007/946-4110

Sermon for November 10, 2008

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Mark 11:21-33

Jon R. Neely, Pastor