

INTRODUCTION

It's a true story; only the names have been changed to protect the embarrassed. Little Tommy attended first grade Sunday School faithfully. He loved his teacher, Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith told great Bible stories, and she would always end the story by saying, "And, boys and girls, the MORAL of the story is ..." Little Tommy enjoyed learning about the morals of each Bible story. But when Tommy entered second grade, he moved up to another Sunday School class, taught by Mrs. Jones. She told Bible stories, too, but she never ended them by giving the moral of the story. After a few weeks Tommy's mom asked him how he liked his new Sunday School teacher. Tommy said, "Mrs. Jones is okay. The only problem is that she doesn't have any morals."

We've been studying the Parables and Miracles of Jesus for over a year now, and I'm glad that the stories of Jesus do have morals, or applications. As we read these words let's remember we're reading about what Jesus did and what He said during the week leading up to the cross. The events we studied in the previous passage took place on what we call Palm Sunday. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and His first order of business was to drive out the dishonest merchants who had set up shop there. During this final week, Jesus spent His days in Jerusalem teaching in the Temple courts. Each evening He would walk to Bethany to spend the night. Bethany was about a mile away on the other side of the Mount of Olives. The Bible doesn't say where He stayed in Bethany, but since Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus lived there, He might have stayed with them. Each morning Jesus and His disciples would walk back over the crest of the Mount of Olives and down into the Kidron valley and then up to the Temple Mount. I've made the same walk many times, and it's a beautiful sight to see Jerusalem as you walk down the Mount of Olives. It was the week of Passover, so the city was full of pilgrims. It's Monday morning and Jesus is heading back to Jerusalem.

Matthew 21:18-22. "Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, 'May you never bear fruit again!' Immediately the tree withered. When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. 'How did the fig tree wither so quickly?' they asked. Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.'"

I enjoy reminding you that there is a parable in every miracle and a miracle in every parable. In our passage today, we're going to briefly examine a miracle that is really a parable—a withered fig tree. And we're going to devote most of our attention to a miracle, moving a mountain, that is really a parable.

1. THE WITHERED FIG TREE: A parable about fruitfulness

Jesus walked up to a fig tree expecting to enjoy a fig breakfast, but while there were leaves, there was no fruit. Of course, Jesus knew that. So He simply pronounced the unfruitful condition of the tree as being permanent, "You don't have fruit and you'll never have fruit." And the tree shriveled up on the spot.

Radical environmentalists are sometimes called "tree huggers" and this incident makes them see a color other than green. They object, "What did it do to deserve that?" First of all, remember Jesus created everything and it was His right to do whatever He pleased with that tree. And second, Jesus was teaching a valuable object lesson to the disciples. Over the next few days Jesus will be in constant debate with the Jewish religious mafia. Outwardly, they were hyper-righteous, but inwardly they were dead. We know this is the immediately application of this miracle/parable because Jesus gives the moral of the story in Matthew 21:43 where He says plainly, "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."

Both Jeremiah and Hosea use a fig tree as a symbol for the nation of Israel. In 70 A.D. the fig tree that was Israel was chopped down when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem but the root of that fig tree wasn't destroyed. In Matthew 24 Jesus was talking about the end of time He said when you see the fig tree putting forth its leaves you know the end is nearing. (Matthew 24:32) We should be paying attention to world events because the fig tree has leaves again. In 1948 Israel became a nation again for the first time since it withered in 70 A.D.

However, beyond that specific application to Israel, there is also a powerful personal Application: **Outward activities (leaves) are worthless unless my life reflects Jesus (fruit).**

A fig leaf represents self-righteousness. When Adam and Eve sinned and realized they were naked, they tried to cover their shame with fig leaves. We always visit a large fig tree in Israel (different from our fig bushes in the U.S.), and I talk about the leaves. On one trip a lady was blushing as she looked at a fig leaf. She said, "I always thought they were larger!" Well, Adam and Eve probably wove a lot of them together. But this covering wasn't adequate, so God covered them with animal skins. The first death in the Garden of Eden was to cover the shame of Adam and Eve. We don't know what kind of animal died, but don't be surprised to get to heaven and learn it was a lamb.

Leaves represent religious appearance and activity. Many professing Christians have an abundance of leaves, but no fruit. What is fruit? Fruit is the outward expression of an inner nature. When you see an apple hanging on a tree you know it's an apple tree; the fruit reveals the nature of the tree. And the fruit of a Christian is the life of Jesus revealed in your life. The fruit of a Christian includes those nine character qualities mentioned in Galatians 5:22, which are printed above the doors entering the Worship Center here. But also the fruit of a Christian is another Christian. If I plant an apple seed, I'll get another apple tree with apples on it. Have you ever been responsible for another person becoming a follower of Jesus? The key to a fruitful life is found in John 15. Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." (John 15:5, 8)

I can't produce fruit any more than a branch from an apple tree thrown on the ground can produce apples. I can only bear fruit that the vine or trunk sends my way. As my friend Ron Dunn used to say, "We're just a fruit rack where Jesus can display His life." My job is not to try to be good and imitate Jesus. My daily job is to stay firmly connected to the Vine, Jesus. As I do

that, His life-giving sap (the Holy Spirit) flows into my life and the result is the life of Jesus seen in me.

2. THE MOBILE MOUNTAIN: A parable about faith

As in the case of the withered fig tree, there was a literal application of the words of Jesus. Notice Jesus said the disciples could speak to "THIS mountain and it would be thrown into the sea." Jesus was walking down the Mount of Olives when He said this. The prophet Zechariah predicted when Jesus returns for the final climatic battle for Jerusalem that the Mount of Olives will split in two sections, with one half of the mountain moving north and the other half moving south. (Zechariah 14:4). That's what I call a mountain-moving experience!

But Jesus wasn't just referring to prophecy. He told the disciples they could speak to a mountain and it would move. This is such an amazing prediction we're tempted to simply spiritualize it and move on. Some people think His words are only symbolic, not literal. However, there have been times in history when God literally moved a mountain. Let me give you a historical example.

I'm always careful to research illustrations, because there are so many historical and urban myths floating around. But both of these examples have a long history of verification. It took place over 1,000 years ago in a land still in news today: Egypt. As you know, God has a long history of performing miracles in Egypt. There was a Muslim majority then, as now, and the Caliph, Al-Muiz, decided to challenge group of Christians on their claim that Jesus was God. The Caliph called in the lead Pastor Anba Abram and gave him an ultimatum. The Caliph read this verse where Jesus said faith could move mountains. He challenged the Christians to prove the words of Jesus by moving a mountain. If they failed to move a certain mountain, they would be given a choice to either be killed by the sword or forced to convert to Islam. The Christians prayed and fasted for three days.

According to the story, which some of course, call a legend, there was an earthquake that day and the mountain moved and split. As a result of that miracle, many Muslims converted to Christ, and a church started meeting in the chasm that was created by the earthquake. What proof do we have today? One, Coptic Christians in Egypt still fast for those three days in memory of that miracle. Second, the name of the Mountain on the outskirts of Cairo is Mokattam, which is Arabic for "split in two." And third, a strong church has been meeting in this same location for over 1,000 years. It's called Cave Church. Just Google Cave Church and you can read about the miracle and see images of a space where over 12,000 Christian worshippers gather on a regular basis. (<http://cavechurch.com>)

I have no doubt God can literally move mountains, but if that's all He meant, we can't apply it here, because we don't have any massive mountains here in East Texas. But don't ignore this promise because there is a powerful personal application: **When you face a mountain of challenge, faith (in God) can move it.**

Mountains come in all shapes and sizes. One of my favorite movies is The Sound of Music. Who can ever forget the wise Mother Superior singing, "Climb Every Mountain?" Peggy Wood

played the role of the Mother Abbess and received an Academy Award nomination for her role. However, she wasn't actually singing the song. The voice of Margery McKay was dubbed over her words. Those words are so inspiring, "Climb every mountain; ford every stream; Follow every rainbow, 'til you find your dream!"

But some mountains are too tall to climb and too wide to go around. Jesus has a better idea than climbing a mountain. He says you can move a mountain! I love the way *The Message* paraphrases these words of Jesus: Jesus said, "If you embrace this kingdom life and don't doubt God, you'll not only do minor feats like I did to the fig tree, but also triumph over huge obstacles. This mountain, for instance, you'll tell, 'Go jump in the lake,' and it will jump." (Matthew 21:22 *The Message*)

Mountains come in all shapes and sizes. A mountain is something that blocks your path and stops your progress; it blocks your view of God. Is there a challenge you're facing right now that looks like huge mountain? You may be staring up at a financial mountain—it seems as if you'll never get out of debt. You may be facing a relational mountain—your marriage is on the rocks, or you are so lonely you think you'll never find the right one. Or you just can't seem to get along with some family member—it seems like an insurmountable mountain. Others of you are facing a physical mountain—there is sickness that you can't seem to whip. Or maybe you've been trying to lose weight for years and it seems as if you'll never get in shape.

Let me give you some practical mountain-moving tips:

(1) Speak to the mountain, not about it

Jesus said we could *say* to the mountain, "Jump in the sea!" I wonder how many of you have ever spoken to your mountain and told it to go jump in the lake? Oh, we talk *about* our problems *ad nauseam*. We even pray about them, and prayer is important. But Jesus didn't say talk about it or pray about it, He said to SPEAK to it.

Now you might feel a little foolish speaking to a real mountain, much less an invisible mountain. But Jesus often spoke to things some would think are foolish. He spoke to demons and commanded them. He spoke to the wind and the waves. He spoke to a fig tree. You may be thinking, "Well, yes, but He's God." But remember, Jesus told the disciples that the same thing He did to the tree, they could do to a mountain.

In fact, the more you talk ABOUT your mountain, the bigger it gets. It grows and grows until sometimes you really do turn a molehill into a mountain. And if you don't speak to your mountain it will speak to you—it will taunt you, "Look at me! You can't get past me! You'll never be healthy! You'll never get out of debt. You'll never kick that habit!" So try speaking directly to the mountain; you don't have to yell. Just say with faith, "Mountain, there's not enough room for both of us in this life, so you gotta go!"

(2) Focus on God's power, not the size of the mountain

The Bible is full of stories of people who faced mountains. Sometimes mountains are disguised as difficult people. When David was a teenager, he brought food to his brothers who were soldiers on the front lines against the Philistines. There was a mountain of a man who challenged the Israelites. His name was Goliath. He insulted and taunted the God of Israel and the armies of Israel. Nobody spoke to him—they were all too afraid. But everybody spoke *about* him. And the more they talked about the size of the giant, the more impossible he seemed to beat.

But little David spoke *to* the giant. As David approached the giant, Goliath started talking to him. He joked, "Why did you send this runt to me? Am I a dog that you think you can chase with a stick? I'm going to tear this scrawny kid to pieces and feed his flesh to the birds." Pretty scary, huh? Mountains try to scare you away. But David spoke *TO* the giant. He said, "You come against me with a sword and spear, but I've got something better, big guy! I have a NAME! And this hill isn't big enough for both of us. I come against you in the NAME of the Lord God of Israel. And this day the Lord will hand you over to me and I'll knock you down and then I'll cut off your ugly head from your fat body. And I'm doing this so everyone will KNOW that there is a God in Israel and the battle is the Lord's! ... Now, Mountain, outta' my way!" And you know the rest of the story.

David wasn't focusing on the size of the mountain; he was focusing on the size of His God. The other soldiers said, "Look how much bigger Goliath is than me!" David said, "Look how much smaller he is than God!" The other soldiers said, "Goliath is too big to fight!" David said, "He's too big to miss!" Are you complaining to God about the size of your mountain? You should be telling the mountain about the size of your God!

(3) Consider that if God doesn't move the mountain, He may move you

When you speak to a mountain, it might not move immediately. So keep on talking to it. It may take time. But there are some situations when you face a mountain of your own making. It may be a mountain of fear or a mountain of anger. It might be a mountain formed by your bad choices.

Or at other times, God may not remove the mountain; He might move you to a different viewpoint about the mountain. For instance, in every case, God may not remove the mountain of sickness, but He will move you to a place where it doesn't block your view of His grace. Sometimes we drive ahead blindly and blame God for a mountain in our way, and we're not even on His way anymore.

Paul was a man of faith who moved many mountains, but in Acts 16 he faced a mountain that didn't move. Paul wanted to go into Asia Minor, but he faced a mountain of opposition and difficulty. In this case, God didn't move the mountain, He moved Paul. Instead of going in that direction, Paul took the Gospel to Greece instead of Asia. This was the first time the gospel penetrated into what we call Europe. Those of us who have a European family background should be glad God moved Paul instead of moving the mountain!

CONCLUSION

There have been many times in my life where God moved what seemed to be an insurmountable mountain in front of me. In 1995, about twenty of us were on a mission trip to the Crimea after the Soviet Union crumbled. We had established partnerships with three churches in the Yalta area on a couple of previous visits. We had asked if there was anything we could bring them, and they had requested medicine and a portable sound system so they could preach the gospel on the streets—something that had been outlawed under Communism.

Our group arrived in Moscow and we transferred to the domestic airport to board an Aeroflot flight to Simferopol. Our group checked in and all the medicine and sound system made it on the airplane. The medicine and sound system components were part of their checked luggage. All the other members of our group had boarded when an airport official called me aside and escorted me to a dark office. There was a female official there who had an interpreter who spoke just a little English. The official looked at my passport and asked, "Americanski?" I nodded and she said through the translator, "Too much luggage; must pay fee." I asked how much, and she and another official talked and then said, "One thousand dollars, U.S." I knew there was widespread corruption and bribery was a way of life there, and I realized I was being targeted because I was a "rich American." But instead of arguing or negotiating, I just said, "I'm sorry, I can't do that because this is God's money and I can't give it to you." When the translator shared that, the official looked at me like I was either crazy, or a prophet, or both. She kept demanding \$1,000 and I kept politely refusing and claiming this was God's money. I was speaking to that mountain woman in front of me. This went on for 45 minutes as she brought other officials in to demand the payment. Meanwhile the Aeroflot flight was sitting on the tarmac waiting to take off, because they hadn't gotten the go ahead from this official.

Finally, the official picked up her phone and talked for a few minutes in Russian, and she allowed me to get on the plane. She explained that she had called the airport in Simferopol and the Aeroflot personnel in Simferopol would not release ANY of our luggage until I paid the \$1,000, and any other fee they might charge.

As I boarded the airplane I explained the situation to our group and asked them to pray. Of course, flying Aeroflot will make you pray all in itself. I'm convinced there were more people on the plane than there were seats. As we sped down the runway to take off, some people were standing up holding onto the luggage compartments like a bus!

When we landed about two hours later and taxied in, I knew there was another mountain that blocked our path. There was a tiny old terminal, and there was no jet way; we deplaned by stairs onto the tarmac. Through the fence I could see our Russian pastors and their vans ready to transport us. Our translator, Olga, and I walked over to the fence and explained the situation to one of the pastors. We said the Aeroflot people were going to confiscate all our luggage. Pastor Pavel jogged off and talked to one of his friends who worked refueling aircraft. Pavel came huffing back and said, "Nyet problema." The next thing we know, a gate is opened onto the ramp and Pavel and two more vehicles are driving right out to the airplane where the luggage is being offloaded. The fuel guy speaks to the luggage handlers and we point to our luggage and Pavel and his friends load all it onto their vehicles. Then they drove back through the gate and waited for us in the parking lot. As we walked through the terminal with no luggage I smiled and waved

at the Aeroflot people and said, "Dasvidaniya." And I thanked God He is a God who can move mountains!

So have you got any morals? Do you know the morals of these two stories? Make sure your life is bearing FRUIT—not just displaying the leaves of religious appearance. What's the moral of the mountain? Speak to your mountain. Say, "Mountain, go jump in the lake! Mountain, go jump in the lake!" The mountain might still be there for a while, but if you can speak to it you don't have to be afraid of it! Faith can move mountains, but mainly faith will move you!

OUTLINE

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Personal Application: Outward activities (leaves) are worthless unless my life reflects Jesus (fruit)

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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