

INTRODUCTION

People tend to remember short pithy slogans. If you've heard these, fill in the last word: "A miss is as good as a mile." Or "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." Or "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." Or "Don't put all your eggs in the same basket." Those are so short and pithy that they're easy to remember.

In today's scripture, Jesus is going to provide the best short slogan ever uttered. It only has four words. He says, "Have Faith in God." Will you say that aloud with me? "Have Faith in God."

We're studying the last week of the earthly life of Christ. Each day, Jesus and His disciples walked from Bethany, about a mile from Jerusalem. They walked over the Mt. of Olives and down the trail toward Jerusalem. I've walked on the same trail dozens of times; it's paved now. He would enter Jerusalem for the day and return to Bethany every night.

We're going back to the scripture from the last message to pick up a detail we skipped. So let's pick up the story in Mark 11:12 and remember this is Monday morning.

"The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it."

After this Jesus arrived in Jerusalem and cleaned out God's house of the filth and deception. Now, let's skip down to Mark 11:20 to read the "rest of the story" as Paul Harvey used to say,

"In the morning, (this would be Tuesday morning) as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. 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. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

In this passage there are three great truths to be learned about figs, faith, and forgiveness. As I got into this message I realized I had so much to say about figs and faith that I will wait until the next message to talk about forgiveness. I hope you'll forgive me for that! Jesus knows He will face a cross at the end of this week, so He is using this time for some intense teaching. So, in this message we're going to examine two powerful word pictures: a fig tree and a mountain.

I. A BARREN FIG TREE: A LESSON ABOUT FRUITFULNESS

Jesus was hungry, which reminds us that Jesus experienced the same human needs we have. He walked over to a fig tree to have a fig breakfast. The tree was full of leaves, but there were no figs. The Bible says it wasn't the time for figs, so why was Jesus disappointed? In Israel the fig tree is different from the fig bushes we have here in East Texas.

In Israel, a fig tree produces two kinds of figs. There are small pre-figs that grow when the leaves sprout. These are hard and bitter. But after they fall off they are replaced with larger, riper figs. So even though it wasn't the time for the ripe figs, this tree should have had some of the small pre-figs. This explains Jesus' statement. When He saw a leafy fig tree with no pre-figs, he pronounced a judgment on it. He said, "Nobody will eat figs from you."

The fig tree was guilty of false advertising, leaves but no figs. Of course, being God, Jesus knew all this. He didn't curse the fig tree in anger. He just evaluated it. A fruit tree that doesn't produce fruit can't be called a fruit tree. The judgment Jesus pronounced upon the tree led to it wither overnight. We learn two valuable object lessons from this miracle. One is literal and the other is figurative. No pun intended.

A. A NATIONAL APPLICATION: Israel would soon wither and die

The fig tree represented the nation of Israel. The nation should have been producing fruit for God, but they were all religion, and no life. By making the fig tree wither Jesus was predicting that the nation of Israel would soon be destroyed. Over the next few days Jesus was going to 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 event because Jesus gives the moral of the fig tree 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. Above the ground the fig tree looked dead, but there was residual life in the root of that fig tree.

In fact, in Matthew 24 Jesus was talking to the disciples about His return and He told them there would a sign that should be noticed. Jesus said, "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door." (Matthew 24:32-33) 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. We are living in a time when prophecy is being fulfilled. Beyond this national application there is also a

B. A PERSONAL APPLICATION: Leaves represent outward goodness; fruit represents Christ-like character

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. 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. We learned them in a song a few years ago. Do you remember them? For the fruit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

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." (John 15:5) The best word to describe the relationship of a branch to a vine is dependence. I am dependent on Jesus as the vine to allow His life to flow through me. The branch is just an extension of the vine. Some people reverse that picture and they live like they're the vine and Jesus is the branch—an attachment to us. We have our plans, our goals, our priorities, and we attach Jesus to our lives. Jesus is a part of your life, like your family, your job, and your hobbies. Jesus doesn't want to be an attachment to your life; He wants to be your life.

You and I can no more produce the fruit of the Spirit without Jesus than a branch cut off a grapevine could produce grapes.

And the only way our lives can demonstrate love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control is to be connected to the source of life, Jesus. So is your life more about the leaves of religious activity, or do people see Jesus in you?

II. A MOVABLE MOUNTAIN: A LESSON ABOUT FAITH

Peter was the Dr. Obvious of the group. When they approached the withered fig tree he said, "Lord, here's the fig tree you cursed." Jesus didn't even acknowledge Peter's charge. Instead Jesus answered with the four words of our slogan for the day: "Have Faith in God." In other words, Jesus was using the withered fig tree to teach a larger lesson about faith.

He said that you can speak to THIS mountain and it would move. They were on the Mount of Olives. There is both a literal and figurative application of this statement also. After Jesus comes back to rapture the church, there will be a terrible world war against the nation of Israel. But according to Revelation 19 Jesus Christ will come back and win the battle for Jerusalem. Guess where His touchdown point is?

Let's read the words of the prophet Zechariah, "Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south." (Zechariah 14:4-5)

But Jesus was teaching a powerful faith lesson about removing mountains. Until the advent of aviation about a hundred years ago, all transportation was ground based. Horses, chariots, carriages, and then trains and cars all traveled on the ground. So whenever people were building roads or railroad tracks, a mountain presented a challenge. It represented a halt to their progress. The mountain said, "You have to deal with me before you can go any further." So the builders had to either go around the mountain, over the mountain, or tunnel through the mountain.

In the same way, the Lord has each of us on a journey with Him. We should be progressing and growing in our relationship with Him.

A mountain is any obstacle 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 a 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 overcome. Let me share with you three mountain-moving faith principles about how to remove obstacles to your progress.

A. Speak to the mountain not about it

Jesus told the disciples that they could speak to the mountain. We love to talk about our problems and obstacles, but we sometimes never get around to addressing the problem itself. I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases this passage. "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*)

The truth is, 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! Go jump in the lake!"

B. 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. 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!

C. Realize that God may choose to move you rather than the mountain

Go ahead and speak to your mountain. Tell it to jump in the lake. But some mountains are mountains of our own making. It may be a mountain of fear or anger we have piled up in front of ourselves. It could be a mountain created by your bad choices. In some cases, God may move you instead of the mountain.

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

In the next message, we'll talk about powerful praying and forgiveness. But first let me tell you about how I've seen God move mountains. Some of you were with me when we were in Moscow in 1995 boarding an Aeroflot flight to the Crimea, where we were taking supplies, medicine, and a sound system to the churches we were working with there. Corruption was rampant in Russia and one of the airport officials in Moscow boarded our group and luggage but detained our translator and me. Through our translator, Olga, she said told me, "You have excess luggage, so you pay me \$1,000 American cash, or the flight doesn't leave."

I said, "I'm sorry I can't do that because this is God's money." Olga had to ask me twice, but I told her to tell her what I said. We stood there for 45 minutes going back and forth. I was speaking to a mountain who was a Russian Aeroflot official. I kept saying, "This is God's money and you can't have it."

Finally she picked up the phone and said something and hung up. The she told me, "You can board and the flight can leave. But when you land in Simferopol, you must now pay the official \$2,000 or we will claim all your luggage and supplies."

I boarded the plane and told our group what had happened and we prayed all the way on that flight and Aeroflot flights are so bad you pray the whole flight anyway.

So we landed in the Crimea and the jet taxied up on the tarmac. There was no jet way; we exited down stairs onto the pavement of the airport. There were Russian soldiers standing at the single exit that led through the small Aeroflot terminal. Just behind the jet, through the chainlink fence, we could see our Russian pastors and their vans in the parking lot ready to meet our group and transport our luggage. Olga and I walked to the fence and explained our predicament to the lead pastor, Benjamin. We told him that unless we paid \$2,000 they would confiscate all our luggage. He conferred with a couple of the pastors and came back and said, "Nyet problema."

It turned out that two of the workmen responsible for unloading the luggage were members of their churches. The next thing we knew, a gate in the fence was unlocked and the vans came rolling right out to the plane and we pitched in loaded up all the luggage and supplies off the baggage carts into the vans, and they drove out the gate to the parking lot. Then our group filed past the soldiers and walked through the Aeroflot terminal. There was an official there who looked confused when he saw a group with no luggage. I just smiled and him and said, "Do svidaniya." We thanked the Lord that we serve a God who can move mountains!

How's your faith in God today? A boy in Sunday School made a craft to show his mother. The theme of the lesson that day was, "Have Faith in God." So the little boy took construction paper and a glue stick. With great care and concentration he took the glue stick and wrote the word "Have" then he sprinkled glitter on it and blew away the excess glitter. Then he wrote the next three words, sprinkling glitter on them. When he was finished he proudly looked at his masterpiece. It said, "Have faith in God" in glitter letters. This teacher complimented him on his good job. He couldn't wait to show it to his mother.

His older sister picked him up to take to the family car in the church parking lot on the way there, the wind picked up and blew the paper from the little boys hand. He tried to run and catch it, but the wind was too strong. When he arrived at the car he was crying. His mother said, "What's wrong honey?" He pointed across the parking lot to the fluttering paper and said, "There goes my faith in God!"

When the winds of adversity blow into your life is that what happens to you? "There goes my faith in God." When mountains too tall to climb stand in your way and block your progress is that your response? "There goes my faith in God."

Here's the solution for any problem you face: HAVE FAITH IN GOD. Here's the answer to need in your life: HAVE FAITH IN GOD.

If you believe that stand up with me and if you know it sing it with me: "Have faith in God He's on His throne. Have faith in God He watches over His own. He cannot fail. He must prevail. Have faith in God. Have faith in God!" (words by B.B.McKinney)

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