

The Primacy of Prayer

Mark 11:12-25

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Play clip from Jesus Video.

Some struggle with this depiction of Jesus because He seems angry and harsh. After all, how does this line up with the Charles Wesley hymn: “*Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child?*”

This week I conducted an unscientific survey on the Edgewood Facebook page (If you’re not on this page, check it out – over 1500 people are following it). I simply asked this question: “*Do you see Jesus as gentle or as judge?*” I’ll share the results in a moment but first let me conduct the poll right here with a simple show of hands. How many of you see Jesus as gentle? How many view Him as judge? How many of you see Him as both?

We’re prone to pick one and ignore the other but Scripture doesn’t allow us to do that.

Jesus is...

- Truth *and* grace
- Lord *and* Savior
- Judge *and* gentle
- Holy *and* humble
- Powerful *and* patient
- Fearsome *and* friend
- Awesome *and* approachable
- Sovereign *and* sympathizer
- Lion *and* lamb

We need the complete picture of Christ, not just the comfortable caricatures that we prefer. In our penchant for promoting only the characteristics of Christ that we like, we have marginalized His majesty. Some of us avoid those passages where He seems untamable and unpredictable, especially when His words make us wince and His actions make us uncomfortable.

Ok, here's the Facebook poll results – the vast majority of the 40 responses said that Jesus is both gentle *and* judge.

We're going to see today that Jesus not only tips over tables in the Temple, He also curses a fruitless fig tree. Both of these incidents teach us about the judgment of Jesus on the nation of Israel but also serve as a word of warning to us. Jesus is Servant and Savior *and* He is Sovereign.

Our text comes after the events of Palm Sunday. Let's look at Mark 11:11: ***“And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.”*** The phrase ***“looked around,”*** means that as the Lord of the temple, He examined everything closely. That night he left Jerusalem and went to the neighboring suburb of Bethany, where He and the disciples spent the night with Lazarus, Mary and Martha. According to John 11:18, Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem.

Listen to verses 12-14: ***“On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again.’ And his disciples heard it.”***

Did you catch that Jesus was hungry? This shows that He is fully man and fully God – we also know that He experienced thirst, weariness, pain, rejection and loneliness. The word ***“hungry”*** means, *“famished.”* While figs are not all that popular in our country, figs were, and still are, a preferred fruit in the Middle East. Bethany was located right next to Bethphage, which means, *“House of Figs.”*

There are a few things to know about fig trees:

1. The fig tree is a figure for Israel and is mentioned over sixty times in the Bible. Jesus first saw Nathanael under a fig tree (John 1:48).
2. Fig trees grow to a height of 10-20 feet and have very large leaves (Adam and Eve covered up with these leaves).
3. Figs are sweet in taste (I don't care for them).
4. To *“sit under one's own fig tree”* was a saying of peace and prosperity.
5. Fig trees are the most fruitful of all trees, producing fruit as many as three

times a year. Figs were often used as “first fruits” brought to the temple.

6. Fig fruit comes before leaves appear so that a fig tree in leaf would be expected to have some fruit. A fig tree in full leaf in April would have been covered with little nodules that were satisfying to eat. Since this tree had no early fruit, it was a sign that there would be no sweet fruit when the time for harvest arrived.
7. If there were leaves but no fruit it would mean that disease was spreading and death was on the way.

In verse 14 Jesus pronounces a curse on the tree using a double negative: ***“May no one ever eat fruit from you again.”*** Just as the fig tree had the promise of fruit but was only filled with leaves; God’s people had the outward show but had no fruit. Israel looked alive but was actually dead. And because they had failed to be fruitful, Jesus judged them. Some have said that Jesus was angry because He was hungry. Actually, He was angry because He is holy! And because He is holy, He will judge fruitless hypocrites who have every opportunity to bear fruit.

By the way, apart from the drowning of the pigs, this is the only miracle of destruction that we see in the gospels.

After cursing the fruitless fig tree, the Messiah on mission wasted no time getting to Jerusalem. Listen now to verses 15-19: ***“And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them and saying to them, ‘Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.’ And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. And when evening came they went out of the city.”***

When it says that Jesus ***“entered the temple,”*** this means that he was in the large area known as the court of the Gentiles – the *ethne*, or “nations.” This area was where non-Jewish people were allowed to come to pray and to praise Almighty God. This was a walled, marble-paved section to the south side of the Temple and was about three football fields long and around 250 yards wide. Here’s what it looked like [show PPT slide].

The temple was an amazing edifice and was built as a grandiose gift to the Jews and as a tribute to Herod's haughtiness, taking 46 years to finish. It covered an area of some 35 acres. Everything in the Temple symbolized something and was used to help communicate God's power and purposes.

When Jesus got to Jerusalem he made a beeline to the Temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. This literally means, "*to eject, to force out with violence*" and is the same word used of casting out demons. While many wanted Him to attack the Romans and set up His kingdom, Jesus launched a surprise attack against "religion." Like an Old Testament prophet, Jesus is acting out a parable – only He's not acting; He's indignant and irate.

This makes me think of Malachi 3:1-2: "***And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple...But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?***"

This wasn't the first time Jesus was angry for we read in Mark 3:5: "***He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts...***" This was also not the first time He had cleansed the Temple. In John 2:14-17, at the beginning of His ministry, Jesus went into the Temple area and used a whip to wipe out the makeshift market. As the disciples watched Him explode with indignation they quoted Psalm 69:9: "***Zeal for your house will consume me.***"

When worshippers traveled from a long distance to come to the Temple they had to pay an annual temple tax but they couldn't use Greek or Roman money because of the graven images on the coins. They would then change their money into Temple currency so they could pay the tax. In addition, because most wouldn't bring animals with them to the Temple they would have to buy what they needed in Jerusalem. All of this was acceptable.

What wasn't acceptable was that the section of the Temple that was supposed to be for Gentiles had been turned into a combination Stock Exchange and flea market. For a long time, these animals were available to purchase on the Mount of Olives but in A.D. 30 the temple hierarchy authorized these sales in the temple itself. On top of this desecration, the exchange rates were exorbitant and the surcharge on the animals was outlandish. While people could buy doves elsewhere in town, the priests would do an inspection and usually declare them unacceptable. In addition, there's evidence to suggest that the priests profited from all this merchandising.

The scale of all this was staggering. According to one historian, a single merchant once offered three thousand sheep for sale in one day. Josephus tells us that in one Passover week, almost a quarter of a million lambs were bought, sold and sacrificed in the temple courts. Think about how loud and chaotic and confusing...and smelly this all must have been. And this is where the nations were to find God through prayer.

These people were being gouged by those who were selling, much like what happened during Hurricane Harvey, when one business in Houston sold a case of water for \$99 and a gas station sold gas for \$20 a gallon. On Thursday night I heard that a family of three paid \$10,000 for airline tickets to get out of Miami ahead of Hurricane Irma. By the way, thanks for being such a generous church as we live out our value of *giving*. In just one week, over \$9,100 has been given to Samaritan's Purse for Hurricane Relief. This is in addition to the \$5,000 that the deacons authorized a week ago.

Incidentally, there is evidence that some were looking for the Messiah to renew and restore the temple from the religious racketeers. Zechariah 14:21: "***And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day.***" Jesus then did three things that demonstrate His zeal for the honor of God.

- **He overturned the tables of the money-changers.** Exchange rates could easily consume half a day's wage for the average person. Jesus had no tolerance for this.
- **He knocked over the seats of those selling pigeons (doves).** While coins are clanging on the marble floor feathers start flying everywhere. Pigeons or doves were one of the few sacrifices poor people could afford (Leviticus 14:22). It's what Joseph and Mary brought when they dedicated Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:24).
- **He blocked anyone from carrying merchandise through the Temple courts.** This sacred structure had become a shortcut to the Mount of Olives.

After preaching this sermon with tremendous visuals, he once again utilized a question to zero in on the main truth: "***Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?'***" Are you aware that Jesus said, "*It is written*" over 60 times in the Gospels?

When the first temple was built, according to 2 Chronicles 7, the glory of God filled it. In this quotation directly from Isaiah 56:7, Jesus is appealing to the purpose behind the temple. Let's pick it up in verse 6 and then I'll read all of verse 7 to get the full impact: ***“And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD...these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”***

We see two main points here:

- **God's house is for prayer.** Prayer must have first place.
- **God's heart is for all peoples.** The Bible teaches that God's people were to be a blessing to the people around them. God had made provision for Gentiles to come to Him because He is a global God. This was to be a place of missionary work, not a market. Jesus is clearing the temple *for* the Gentiles. In a similar way, we must be *for* lost people, not against them. We can't just focus on “us four and no more.”

Jesus then quotes from Jeremiah 7:11 (He really knew His Bible, didn't He?) to show that like thieves these men were extorting and stealing and then finding refuge in the temple: ***“But you have made it a den of robbers.”*** The phrase ***“you have made it”*** is in the perfect tense, suggesting a completed action. The word ***“robber”*** means one who *“plundered violently.”* A ***“den of robbers”*** was where thieves went when they wanted to hide and was also a place where robbers hid as they waited for their unsuspecting victims to pass by. Warren Wiersbe writes: *“It was a place of preying and paying, not praying.”* Jeremiah 7:11 ends this way: ***“Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD.”***

The fact that Jeremiah had preached this same message in the temple of his day would not have been lost on those listening. Those who should have ushered nonbelievers into the Temple courts were terrorizing them and then seeking refuge in the supposed safety of spirituality. No wonder Jesus was so worked up! We need to constantly guard ourselves so that we focus on prayer and on all peoples as well. It's too easy for us to just seek refuge in our rituals and in our religion while those who don't know Christ are prevented from coming close to Him.

Team, that's why we talk so much about our fourth G – *going with the gospel*. We're here to go out there. We gather for services and then we scatter in service to

all nations, tribes and tongues...and campuses like Augie! Because we've experienced grace, we called to extend grace to people of every race.

Let's pick up this living parable again in verse 20 as we come back to the fig tree: ***“As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, ‘Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.’”*** Jesus is tying the tree and the temple together – just as the big leaves concealed the lack of fruit, so too the beauty of the temple concealed the fact that Israel was not bringing forth the fruit of righteousness.

Peter calls the Lord's attention to the tree, pointing out that it was dried up from the roots. What Jesus had done was effectual and immediate, fast and final. According to Matthew 21:19, the fig tree withered at once. This was a miracle in itself that death started in the roots. John the Baptist preached something similar in Matthew 3:10: ***“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”*** Listen. When we stop bearing fruit, the problem is always traced to the root. We could say it like this – *If you have no fruit, check the root. A good root gives good fruit.*

Do you see the two reactions in this section?

- **The religious leaders feared Him.** This means that they were terrified of Him and so they began plotting how to destroy Him. They would succeed on Friday of that week.
- **Others were astonished by Him.** To be *“astonished”* means, *“to be out of one's senses; to be struck with admiration.”*

Jesus uses a tree and the temple to make his point that superficial showiness will be severely judged. And now He transitions to use this as a teachable moment on the power of prayer in verses 22-25.

I've heard from many about how powerful our praise and prayer service was last weekend. How many of you have been using the CHAT (Confess, Honor, Ask and Thank) acronym as a guideline for prayer? Beth and I lead a Growth Group and we took our group through it this past Wednesday. Can I encourage you to use this handout in your personal prayers and in other groups that you're part of?

Listen now to verses 22-25: ***“And Jesus answered them, ‘Have faith in God.’ Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”***

There are three parameters for prayer in this passage:

1. Put your faith in God. We see this in verse 22: ***“And Jesus answered them, ‘Have faith in God.’”*** This can be translated literally as, *“constantly be trusting in God.”* The power is not in prayer itself nor is power found in faith itself. We often hear that we just need to have faith. Actually, we must have faith *in God*. Even faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains if our small faith is placed in a big God!

Having faith ***“in God”*** means that we are submitted to His will above our own. The key, as we learned last weekend is found in 1 John 5:14: ***“And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.”*** Pastor Tim reminded us that, *“We’re to ask according to His will, not according to our wants. The main issue is not what I want but what God wants for me.”* Jesus Himself gives us the model for prayer in Luke 22:42: ***“Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.”***

2. Formulate your requests to God. Look now at verses 23-24: ***“Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”***

- Notice first of all that prayer is for ***“whoever,”*** no matter who you are, what you’ve been through, how long you’ve been saved or how often you go to church. Remember the power is not in the person praying but in the Almighty God we are praying to.
- Secondly, don’t miss that we can pray for ***“whatever.”*** There is no circumstance or situation where prayer is not profitable. As God says in Jeremiah 32:37: ***“Is there anything too hard for Me?”***

Let's be clear that this is not "name it and claim it" or "blab it and grab it" theology. We must put this passage together with other passages on prayer. So what does it mean that a mountain can be moved and thrown into the sea? Here are three possibilities:

- The phrase, "***moving mountains***" was a common proverb that represented that which was very difficult. Some of you are facing a mountain of discouragement or debt or disappointment or difficulty.
- The Dead Sea is visible from the Mount of Olives so perhaps Jesus is referring to this mountain. This may be an allusion to Zechariah 14:4 where we read that when Jesus returns, the Mount of Olives will be split in two. Zechariah 14:10 says that, "***the whole land shall be turned into a plain...***"
- The temple was built on a mountain so it's possible that Jesus is referencing the destruction of Jerusalem and the leveling of the mount, as seen in Mark 13:2: "***And Jesus said to him, 'Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.'***"

These explanations might be helpful but the fact of the matter is that prayer is powerful because God can accomplish the impossible! Let's not forget that Jesus prefaced this with, "***Truly, I say to you...***" Luke 1:37 says: "***For nothing will be impossible with God.***" We must therefore be bold in our prayers because the potential of prayer is as unlimited as God Himself! Matthew 21:22 says, "***And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.***" We serve a miracle-working God!

Some of us don't see answered prayer simply because we don't ask or when we ask we do so with wrong motives according to James 4:2-3: "***You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.***" John 15 adds the importance of abiding in Him before we start asking from Him.

3. Grant forgiveness to others. There's one final parameter for prayer found in verse 25: "***And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.***" For some of us, the mountain in our lives is an unforgiving spirit. Are you living on "Mount Grudgemore"?

Ray Pritchard makes several points about forgiveness:

- Christianity is supremely a religion of forgiveness.
- God only has one solution to the problem of sin – the act of forgiveness.
- God himself has shown us how to forgive – we’re to do for others what He’s done for us.
- There’s a direct connection between our own spiritual health and our willingness to forgive those who’ve sinned against us.

Let me add two other points.

- Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling. If you wait until you feel like forgiving, you’ll never forgive.
- Forgiveness is not fair; it’s an act of mercy. Perhaps you’ve thought something like this, “*So and so doesn’t deserve to be forgiven.*” Exactly. No one deserves forgiveness.

At its core, forgiveness is releasing someone from the debt of ever having to pay you back. The various biblical authors use a variety of words to communicate the concept of forgiveness. One word means “*to blot out*” and another means, “*to lift and carry away.*” One Greek word refers to, “*showing grace to one who has sinned greatly.*”

An unforgiving spirit can be a roadblock to our prayers because a forgiving spirit is evidence that our hearts are right with God. Psalm 66:18: “***If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.***” James 2:13 adds, “***For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.***” Forgiven people forgive and unforgiven people nurse grudges.

When Jesus gave us a pattern for prayer that we call The Lord’s Prayer, we’re urged to pray in Matthew 6:12, “***And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.***” At the end of the prayer Jesus adds: “***For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.***”

We can learn a lot from how one four-year-old tried to quote the Lord’s Prayer: “*And forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets.*”

Don't let grudges keep you from God! A root of bitterness can lead to the failure of fruit in your life and can keep your prayers from being answered. You and I have a choice to make – we can hold a grudge *or* we can see God answer our requests. We can't have both.

Probing Questions

A message like this can invoke feelings of guilt and a spirit of conviction. That can be good if it motivates us to repent. If Jesus were to examine Edgewood and our individual lives like He did the tree and the Temple, what would He see? We started by taking a survey that was pretty easy to answer. Here are some more difficult questions that come to mind:

1. Are all nations and nationalities welcome at Edgewood?
2. Do we flee to church to hide from our sins or to confess them?
3. Are we just going through religious rituals?
4. As temples of the living God, are we clean or have we compromised?
5. Would he find fruit in your life?
6. If all of your prayers came true this week, who it that would be converted, whose marriage would be restored, what great gospel advance might there be, and what missionaries would be sent out? (Thanks to Kevin DeYoung for this question)
7. Are you ready to meet Him as judge?

There's a lot of unsettledness in our world right now. Hurricane Harvey hammered Texas and Louisiana. Hurricane Irma is unleashing its fury in the Caribbean and Florida and Hurricane Jose is right behind it. Wild fires are raging out west. An 8.1 magnitude earthquake hit Mexico on Friday, the strongest in a century. North Korea continues to make threats and Monday is the anniversary of 9/11.

I've been pondering Mark 13:7-8 this week: ***“And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.”***

Friends, while there's still time; come to Jesus as the gentle Savior. If you don't you'll meet Him as judge. I was intrigued to hear the Governor of Florida make this statement on Thursday night: "*We can't save you when the storm hits.*" There is a point at which it is too late.

The judgment of Jesus will be fast and it will be final.

I appreciated something Erwin Lutzer said recently, "*Natural disasters remind us that severe judgment is coming.*"

In fact, Jesus likened a future judgment to a natural disaster. He ended the Sermon on the Mount by telling the story of two men: one who built his house on the sand, and the other who constructed on the rock. On a beautiful sunny afternoon they looked identical. But a natural disaster revealed the difference between the two. "***And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock***" (Matthew 7:25). The other house could not endure the storm, "***and great was the fall of it***" (Matthew 7:27).

Lutzer reminds us that the Titanic went under with 1,522 people going to watery graves. At the White Star office in Liverpool, England, a huge board was set up; on one side was a sign titled: **Known To Be Saved**, and on the other, the words: **Known To Be Lost**. Hundreds of people gathered to watch the signs. When a messenger brought new information, the question was: *to which side would he or she go?*

Although the travelers on the Titanic were in either first, second, or third class, after the ship went down, there were only two categories: the saved and the drowned. Likewise, in the final Day of Judgment, there will be only two classes: the saved and the lost. There is only heaven and hell.

After describing a couple other disasters Jesus said these words in Luke 13:5: "***Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.***" Run to Him now and find a gentle Savior or face Him later as judge. It's your choice.

Invitation

For believers: *Repent and Return*

For unbelievers: *Repent and Receive*

