

The Trouble with Prayer

Micah 7:1-7; Matthew 21:18-22

(Nominated by Barbara White)

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According to Matthew's account, it was Monday of the last week of Jesus' life, four days before his crucifixion, when Jesus gave one of his most perplexing teachings. I want to read it to you from two translations. The first is the New Revised Standard Version, which is what I normally use on Sunday mornings. The other is the older Revised Standard Version, which is what I use for study. This is what Jesus said:

Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what you have seen done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, "Be lifted up and thrown into the sea," it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.

Now here's that last verse from the RSV. Here the emphasis is placed on having faith:

And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.

Barbara White nominated this text. As you might guess, there is a story behind her nomination. With her permission, I'm going to share a part of that story. Her brother, Larry James, became Missing in Action in April of 1973. He was the navigator on a F-4 Phantom jet fighter. He and his partner were performing a bombing operation over Cambodia. His plane was shot down, but Larry was able to eject. Barbara and her family have evidence that Vietnamese forces captured Larry. They believe that he is still a Prisoner of War, and for thirty-six years they have prayed fervently for his safe return home.

Referencing this teaching by Jesus, a woman once told Barbara, "You are not praying as you should. Your brother would be home now if you were."

“Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.” How are we to understand this text? While it seems pretty obvious what the text should mean, the trouble is that many of us have found that it’s not quite that simple. We have asked in prayer. We mustered as much faith as we could. But we *did not* receive what we asked for. Not only did we not receive what we asked for in prayer; we assumed that it was our fault. We must not have had enough faith. You can imagine the guilt this produces.

Two schools of thought have developed around this teaching. The first is found in *The Skeptic’s Annotated Bible*. I didn’t even know there was such a thing. It goes through the entire Bible and places texts like this one into one of several categories. Some texts they place in the category of Absurdity. Other categories are Injustice, Cruelty and Violence, Contradictions, and there are others. This is what the Skeptic’s Bible says about this text:

If your faith is great enough, you can not only kill fig trees but move mountains around, too. (O Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes-Benz?)

The skeptics place this text in the category of Absurdity, and I say that they have failed to take this text seriously.

The other school of thought is championed by television evangelists like Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar, Joyce Meyer, and others. They belong to a rapidly growing movement called the Word of Faith Movement. Central to their teaching is what they call “positive confession.” It involves speaking one’s prayer aloud and then claiming it by faith. Detractors call this *Name It and Claim It* theology or worse *Blab It and Grab It*. It is the belief we can speak our desire, claim it by faith, and then we will receive it. Our desire may be financial prosperity, physical healing, or maybe the return of a brother.

The woman who spoke to Barbara White may not have known it, but she belonged in this category. And I say that the people who hold this position also have failed to take this text seriously.

It was Monday of Holy Week. On Sunday Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. You remember the story. There were great crowds and fanfare:

“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” He also went to the Temple that day and drove away the moneychangers and all the animals they were selling for sacrifices. He quoted the prophets, “My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers.” Matthew says that Jesus then left the city of Jerusalem, went a short distance to Bethany, and spent the night there.

The next morning, Monday, our text picks up. Jesus returned to Jerusalem, and he was hungry. He saw a fig tree in leaf, went and inspected it, and found no fruit. Then Jesus pronounced his only recorded punitive miracle. This is the only occasion when Jesus used his power to curse something or bring its harm. This use of power troubles some people. He said to the fig tree, “May no fruit ever come from you again!” And Matthew says that the tree withered immediately. Of course, the disciples were amazed and wanted to know how Jesus did it: “How in the world did you do that, Jesus?” And that was when he gave them this perplexing teaching about prayer: “If you just have enough faith, guys, if you can name it and claim it, having no doubt, you too can do this and more. In fact, whatever you ask, you will receive, if you have enough faith.”

If these two extreme positions have failed to take this text seriously, then what is a serious interpretation? This text functions as an acted parable. Notice that after this incident Jesus went back to the Temple. Visits to the Jewish Temple flank this story. I agree with Eugene Boring, a New Testament scholar at Brite Divinity School in Texas, who says that the fig tree is symbolic of the Temple and all that Jesus found wrong with the Temple. The Temple was there for all to see—in full leaf—with the appearance of fruit. But when Jesus inspected it closely, he found that the Temple was all leaves and no fruit. When he pronounced judgment upon the fig tree, Jesus was acting out a parable whereby he pronounced judgment upon the Temple and the leaders of Judaism. Like the fig tree, they produced no fruit of righteousness or justice. They had taken a house of prayer and turned it into a den of robbers. Therefore, it was about to wither under the judgment of God.

The statement about prayer also concerns the Temple. The Temple, which was supposed to be a house of prayer, had ceased to be so. It had become a house of commerce, preying upon the thousands of pilgrims who came to offer their sacrifices to God. The pilgrims came with genuine intent. Many chose not to transport the animals needed for the sacrifices

because of the long distances they had to travel. The currency they used in the countryside could not be used in Jerusalem. So bootleg moneychanger set up shop in the Temple. They gladly exchanged the pilgrims' currency using exorbitant exchange rates. Then they even more gladly sold them animals at inflated prices. The pilgrims simply wanted to practice their faith, but they couldn't. The Temple wouldn't let them.

So in this acted parable near the end of his life, Jesus was telling his disciples that something new was coming. Something new was coming that would not be dependent upon going to Jerusalem and the Temple and then having one's spirit thwarted. Jesus called the new thing the Kingdom of God, and it would exist in the hearts of men and women. Prayer, he said, in the Kingdom of God would be different. The house of prayer would be a closet, a place of privacy, where we pour out our hearts to God. Those prayers that rise from honest desire to know God would be filled with great power, he said, power to move mountains.

Now let me say this about Jesus' words about prayer. I believe that Jesus used hyperbole in this description of prayer. Hyperbole is an exaggerated statement or a claim that is not intended to be taken literally.

I can give you an example. My daughters used hyperbole last Sunday, Father's Day. When I arrived early to church, they had placed a poster on the outside of my office door. It's still there because I just couldn't bear to take it down. It reads, "Office of the world's greatest dad!" And each of them signed it.

Now, I know that nobody has done a study to determine who is actually the world's greatest dad. I suspect most homes had one last Sunday. And if someone were to do such a study, I would not expect to be at the top of the list. But my daughters' little antic meant a lot to me. And I think I know what they really meant. I may not be literally the world's greatest dad, but this was their way of saying, "Dad, we love you. We thank you being there for us. And we thank you for providing us with a home, food, a cell phone, an i-pod, and all the rest."

Hyperbole is not a lie. Hyperbole is filled with truth.

When we take this text seriously, we must reject the extreme positions. Jesus was saying that in the Kingdom of God there would be a

new way of relating to God. The Temple had failed. It had become dysfunctional. In the new way, authenticity would be returned to the practice of prayer. The new way would bear fruit, the fruit of righteousness and justice. When pilgrims genuinely seek God, the institution will not get in the way but will be a conduit to help people connect their lives to the life power of God. It may not literally give us everything we ask for, but it will give us everything we need to face our mountains.

Barbara, that is my best interpretation of this difficult text. As your family of faith, we hope with you that Larry will one day come home. In the meantime, you may be released from any guilt that you may have let him down, that you may not have had enough faith. And you too. We all can be released from that guilt. In its place, let us be pilgrims who genuinely seek to connect our lives to the life power of Almighty God.

Closing Prayer

Lord, make our lives into a house of prayer. May we be filled with the fruits of righteousness and justice. Amen.