

How many of you have ever prayed? How many of you have ever had a prayer go unanswered/answer no?

- And yet Jesus say, "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask in prayer."
- What is going on here and how are we to understand this?

The text starts with Jesus cursing the fig tree

- We spoke about that last week because it was connected to the previous passage where Jesus is confronting Israel's hypocrisy and unfaithfulness to Him and the mission in the temple
- When Jesus causes the fig tree to wither either He is really *hangry*, or it was a symbolic act of deeper significance
- It was an indictment on Israel's spiritual condition (no fruit)
- But Jesus loved them so much that only days after cursing the tree to expose their sins, He Himself would become a curse on another tree to atone for their sins (the Gospel)

But all that is lost on the disciples in the moment

- They did not necessarily recognize the significance of the sign... but they were **amazed** at the power displayed in the sign (**verse 20**, NIV)
- They were struck by the impossibility of such an action
- So they ask Jesus "How that happened?"
- And interestingly, since they did not ask what it meant, but simply how it was possible, Jesus uses the occasion **to teach them about prayer** (**verses 21-22**, NIV)

This will be the second time that he explains this same concept to them

- The first time was back in chapter 17 when the disciples were unable to cast out a demon and asked why

Jesus replied, "Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say **to this mountain**, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." (17:20)

What is surprising is that when the disciples are struck by their own INABILITIES and faced with IMPOSSIBILITIES Jesus does not simply let them off the hook because they are mere mortals (i.e. "awww, it's a God thing, you wouldn't understand")

- Rather, He actually **hooks them into** the possibility found in **prayer** and through **faith (twice!)**

Let's look at the text again (verses 21-22, NIV)

- If you believe you will receive **whatever** you ask for in prayer

I want to just let the text sit as it is and says what it says and not say anything more about it

- But, anyone who has ever prayed in earnest and not received **whatever** they asked for is compelled to take a closer look at the text
- It is not that the text is **untrue** or not saying what it is saying—rather, we need to see the **full truth** of what it is actually saying

Jesus assumes, on the part of His audience, some shared understanding around (1) the nature of God, and (2) the nature of prayer

- This is not the first or only thing He has taught them on the subject, and they had Jewish prayer lives
- Those assumptions (formed in their Jewish lives and time with Jesus) would necessitate certain **qualifications or conditions** that would help make sense of what Jesus said here

The assumption about the nature of God that applies here is: **God is sovereign!**

= Prayer is not God relegating His sovereignty to us; prayer is God working His sovereignty through us

The assumption about the nature of prayer that applies here is: **God's will be done!**

= Prayer is not the means by which we get God to do our will; prayer is the means by which God accomplishes His will (My kingdom come, my will be done?)

“Whatever you ask for in prayer” has just been refined to “whatever is according to God’s sovereign will”

Now, there will be dissonance in our experience, because His will and ours are not always aligned

- Scripture demonstrates that God does not grant requests that violate His own nature or will or are not in harmony with the purposes of his kingdom
- **It is possible to misunderstand the will of God and try to move a mountain that should not be moved. In that case, the believer will be disappointed.**¹
- **Here we must appeal to another correct assumption about the nature of God: God is Good**

Because part of our prayer experience will be us running up against the sovereign will of God, we must believe that God and His sovereign will are good

- To deny that is to deny Scripture
- Our experience sometimes causes us to feel that God is not being good (we choose Holy Scripture)
- This is part of the **“If you believe”** statement (cf. **“If you have faith”**)
 - Not faith in faith; self; or our experience of things
 - But in God—meaning as He is with His attributes and character (He is good being foundational)

Therefore, when the Christian does not get **“whatever she asks for in prayer”** she is to understand that God must be good, right and true in His “no” response (persistence and timing not withstanding)

Think about the greatest unanswered (no) prayer of all time: **Matthew 26:39**, NIV

- Jesus shared our assumptions
 - **“If it is possible”** is keeping God’s sovereignty in mind
 - **“Not as I will, but as you will”** is keeping God’s purpose in prayer in mind
- God in His sovereignty, according to His will said **“no”**
- Would God have been GOOD if he had said **“yes”**?

It works that way in our lives as well

- **“If you believe”** / **“If you have faith”** does not merely mean if you believe **God is able** (Cf. **Eph 3:20**)
- It also means, if you believe **God is good and right** in the working of His will
- **“If you believe”** / **“If you have faith”** is not about the size of our faith (mustard seed), **it is about the object of our faith**

Look what Paul said about prayer (Paul also knew unanswered/no prayers)

- **Romans 8:26-28**, NIV
- Paul believed that God’s “NO” to him was better than Paul’s yes for himself

The tragedy is not that we may not get something we want, the tragedy is that we may miss something that God wants for us

- **James 4:2c-3**, NIV
 - **“Whatever you ask”** is clearly also qualified by our motives
 - But don’t miss that first part: **“You do not have because you do not ask God”**
 - **There are certain things God will only do in response to prayer**
- **Exodus 32** and **Ezekiel 22**
 - We can miss God’s good will for us in ourselves and others lack of prayer
 - Again, this is not God relegating His sovereignty, this is God working His sovereignty through us
 - The only thing God loves more than working His good will is doing so through His people’s prayers

And His will includes moving some **impossible mountains** in your life

“If you believe you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer” means there are infinite resources available to us in Christ

- **I love the LORD, because He hears my voice and my supplications. Because He has inclined His ear to me, therefore I shall call upon Him as long as I live.** (Psalm 116:1-2, NASB)

¹ Leon Morris, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 449.