

The ABCs of Prayer

(Mark 11:20-25)

(preached 8/16/15; Sunday AM)

Introduction

Charles Spurgeon was one of the greatest preachers of all time.

He is someone that you should read about and learn about if you have the time.

He lived in the mid 1800s, preached to an estimated 10 million people in his lifetime, and pastored the same church for 38 years..

He is known as the prince of Preachers..

And he tells the story of a dear friend of his who was very sick...

And one day the doctor visited him at his home and brought along an assistant.

After checking the man over, he whispered something to his assistant and walked out the door.

So, the sick man asked the young boy what he said...

“He told me to stay right here with you that you probably had only 2 hours to live.”

The man face brightened up....

And he told the young man, “Get me out of bed, so that we can get on our knees.”

“I want to spend the final hours of my life in prayer for the Lord’s church and for some friends and family who aren’t saved.”

Upon hearing that, the young man helped him out of the bed and he spent the next 1 hour praying with that man before he died on his knees before the Lord.

That is not a common attitude that even the most committed Christians have about prayer.

Most see prayer as an inconvenience to their day, rather than as an opportunity to communicate with the Lord.

And even among those who do pray, there is often a lot of misunderstanding about it.

How much should I pray?

How long should I pray?

How should I pray?

What should I expect from my prayers?

Who do I pray to?

What should I think while I pray?

Does my life have any affect on my prayers?

Questions abound about prayer...

Some Christians simply pray because that is what Christians are supposed to do.

Some Christians never pray.

Some Christians constantly pray.

Some Christians pray and no one notices.

Some Christians pray so that everyone notices.

Most Christians feel like they could pray so much more.

Many Christians lack a sweet fellowship with the Lord because they lack a consistent prayer life.

Because if you boil down the Christian life to its most essential parts, the two most necessary elements are prayer and Scripture reading.

When people wonder why their relationship with the Lord is stale or lifeless, the cause is either a lifestyle of unrepentant sin or a lack of daily Bible reading and prayer.

In fact, our growth in the Lord and our best defense against the constant attack of the enemy is opening our Bibles and opening our hearts to God daily.

Yet, most Christians neglect those two essentials and still think that they will be okay.

It is like bypassing the gas station and hoping to drive all day.

It is an impossibility.

And it impossible to neglect your prayer life and then expect all things in your Christian life to go well.

Therefore, today we are going to look at the ABCs of Prayer.

And we are going to be taught some things about prayer by none other than Jesus himself.

This is going to a lesson on prayer from the one who intercedes for us at the right hand of the Father.

This is like having Bill Gates explain how to use our computers..

This morning in Mark 11:20-26, Jesus is going to teach the disciples about prayer and we are going to be able to eavesdrop on his lesson...

And in the process, we are going to learn 5 Principles on Prayer...

Now, as we come to this passage, this seems to be a strange place to offer a lesson on prayer.

If you haven't been here, we are in the final week of Jesus' life and ministry.

He is heading to the cross outside of Jerusalem in a few day, where he will be crucified and killed in the place of guilty sinners.

After 3 years of ministry, after healing and teaching and showing so much compassion, Jesus is going to be arrested and then executed on false charges.

This doesn't seem like the greatest time to be offering a nice Sunday school lesson on prayer.

This almost seems out of place in the gospel of Mark.

Yet, it comes at the perfect time, and here is why...

Jesus is preparing to leave the disciples behind.

He will be crucified, resurrected, and he will then ascend to His Father in heaven.

In short, prayer is about to become very important to his disciples.

For 3 years, Jesus has always been right beside them..

If they had a need, he met it immediately.

And though He will be with them forever in a very real sense, they will have to rely upon prayer as a means of communication.

Now, Jesus has talked about prayer before.

He has taught the crowds and he has taught his disciples, but they need a refresher course as he nears his death.

Prayer is about to move from a lesson to a reality in their life, and Jesus wants them prepared.

So, he takes an opportunity here to teach them about it...

So, let me begin by reading this passage to us, and then we will take a closer look at it...

Mark 11:20-26

20 As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. 21 Being reminded, Peter *said to Him, “Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered.” 22 And Jesus *answered saying to them, “Have faith in God. 23 Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. 24 Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you. 25 Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. 26 [f]But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.”]

From this passage in Mark, let's look at 5 Principles of Prayer this morning.

You can see all 5 in the outline on the screen this morning, but let's take a closer look at them in the verses before us this morning.

The first principle we see is in verses 20-21, and it is this...

I. Prayer Looks the Past (20-21)

As I said before, we are the final week of Jesus' life and ministry.

This scene before us most likely happens on Wednesday.

On Monday, he entered Jerusalem.

On Tuesday, he entered the temple and pronounced a curse on it and the Jewish religious system.

He illustrated that curse in a lesson about a fig tree.

On Tuesday as they entered Jerusalem and headed for the temple, Jesus approached a fig tree that look like it should have figs on it.

Yet, as he got closer, he found no figs.

The tree like the temple looked good from a distance, but the truth is that it was empty of fruit.

So to illustrate the curse that he is going to place on the empty religion of the temple, he curses the fig tree and commands that it bear no more fruit.

After the tree is cursed on Tuesday, Matthew tells us that it began to die.

The disciples and Jesus then went into Jerusalem for all of Tuesday...

They probably wouldn't have noticed since it may have been dark when they returned Tuesday night...

But now it is Wednesday morning and they are headed back into Jerusalem, and the sight of the dead tree catches Peter's eye...

And he turns to Jesus and says, ***“Look the fig tree your cursed has withered.”***

Jesus responds to Peter and to the other disciples very simply by saying, ***“Have faith in God.”***

Now, how is that teach us about prayer?

And the very simple explanation is this..

We go to God in prayer based upon what he has already done in our lives in the past.

Jesus answer to Peter is this, “I told that tree that it would never bear fruit again.”

So Peter, shouldn't you expect the tree to die and be withered up?

And that is why Jesus says, “have faith in God.”

It is reminder to them to trust God to do what he says...

And that trust comes from God, it is also based in the fact of what God has done in the past.

We all understand from a human level..

If you have dealt with a person in the past who can't keep his word....

You are less likely to trust him the next time.

And just the opposite is true as well..

If you dealt with someone who did what they said, they are more likely to trust them the next time.

Jesus had commanded that tree to never bear fruit again.

So, there should be no expectation of fruit ever again on that tree.

If God says it, it happens just as he says it would happen.

And our prayers to God today are in part based upon the fact that he has heard our prayers in the past.

Now, God doesn't answer every prayer that we ask, and we will talk about that in a minute.

But he has answered your prayers at times in the past, and that gives us confidence to continue to go to him in prayer today.

Jesus cursed the tree the day before.

To see it withered from the roots up the next day simply proves to the disciples that God is trustworthy in what he says.

So, principle #1 is that ***Prayer Looks to the Past...***

Principle #2....

II. Prayer Looks to the Lord (22) - Trust

Now obviously, all of our prayers look to the Lord in the sense that all our prayers should go to Him.

But what we need to see here is this...

All of our prayers need to look to the Lord's best interest above our own.

This is maybe the most important principle of prayer and probably the most abused principle as well.

When Jesus says, "Have faith in God," it is a reminder that the disciples and we need to trust God in our prayers...

And here is what I mean...

Many prayers offered to God show trust in ourselves, not trust in Him.

For instance, "Dear God, I know this is the job for me. Please let me get hired."

Instead of, "Dear God, I believe this is the job for me. However, you know more than me. If it is the job for me, please let me get hired. If it not for me, please don't let me get it."

Do you see the difference in those prayers?

The first prayer is based on the fact that that person trusts their own judgment over God's judgment.

They trust themselves; they just want to bring God in on the process to be nice.

The second prayer doesn't trust their judgement; they trust God's judgment.

So many times in our prayers, we rely on our own judgement and desires and simply ask God to rubber stamp our already-made decisions.

However, Jesus words should sound in our minds as we pray...

Have faith in God.

Trust God to do what he says.

Don't simply offer up what we think should happen and call it prayer.

Offer up our prayers and submit to what God says is best.

Now look, this leads to difficult prayers.

Hears how a typical prayer may go...

“Dear God, I was diagnosed with cancer today. I don’t want to be sick. Why did I get it? Please take it away.”

How about this prayer instead.

“Dear God, I was diagnosed with cancer today. You know that already. I don’t want to be sick. But if you are going to use this sickness to glorify You, so be it. Help me to suffer well.”

I think the main point of principle #2 is to seek God’s purposes in all our prayers above our own.

Trust God when you pray, don’t trust yourself.

That is why I have such a hard time with men who get on TV and tell people to name and claim in their prayer life.

You want money?

Claim it in the name of Jesus.

You want health?

Claim it in the name of Jesus.

Guess what? You may want those things for yourself, but the Lord may not want them for you.

We trust God to give us what we need when we need it.

We don't trust ourselves and our desires...

We trust God.

Like Jesus says here, We should have faith in God when we pray, not faith in ourselves.

Listen to what James says in relation to men who tell others to name it and claim it in Jesus name..

James 4:3...

3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask [c]with wrong motives, so that you may spend it [d]on your pleasures

And that is really a great summary to Principle #2...

Don't look to fill your selfish desires when you pray, look to fill God's desires in your life and in the world..

Prayer Should Look to God's Interest...

#3...

III. Prayer Looks Like Faith (23) - Believe

In verse 23, Jesus uses a shocking analogy to provide us with our next principle in prayer, and it simply this...

Believe that the Lord can answer your prayer...

Jesus says, if you tell this mountain to be uprooted and cast into the sea, and believe, it will happen.

Now pages and pages of ideas have been written on what mountain this was...

I simply think Jesus was talking about the Mount of Olives.

They are the way to Jerusalem from Bethany, and the fig tree was most likely on the Mount of Olives..

And Jesus simply uses that mountain to make a point...

Now, there's no point in tossing a mountain into sea.

Jesus never did that in ministry, and you will probably never have that need in your life...

Unless you buy a piece of property and a big hill stands between you and the ocean...

And even then, you would violate James 4 because you would want that mountain moved for selfish purposes...

The point is not the mountain and the sea and the big wave that would create...

The point is that an important principle of prayer is that you believe that God can answer your prayer when you pray...

Listen to the book of James again...

5 But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and [h]without reproach, and it will be given to him. 6 But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, 8 being a [i]double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

The principle here is that prayer must be offered to God with belief that HE can answer.

That is why prayer is like faith..

Faith believes when it cannot see, and so does prayer.

Your faith is evidenced by your prayers, and your prayers are prompted by your faith.

Believers pray, and people who pray believe.

When you strap a parachute on your back, you are saying that you believe it will get you safely to the ground.

But when do you actually believe in that parachute?

When you dive out of that plane!

You can lip service prayers where you say something real nice and it sounds really good, but in your heart you are still in the plane.

Jesus is saying that effective prayer happens while you step out of the door of the plane.

Now obviously, this is not a guarantee that any prayer will be granted if you believe.

But Jesus is saying that if have faith in God but trusting His will (v22) and believe (v23) when you pray..

It will be answered even if it seems as impossible as a mountain being hurled into the sea.

That is an incredible promise from our Lord...

So, we need to pray based on what God has done in the past..

WE need to pray seeking the Lord's glory and trusting his wisdom and not our own..

We need to pray and believe...

And then we find a 4th principle in verse 24...

IV. Prayer Looks Ordinary (24) - Ask

If you look at v24, it is simply a summary of these principles, but there is an important word that we need to take note of...

And that word is ask..

Often times, we forget that prayer doesn't have to be filled with fancy words...

It doesn't have to be long...

IT doesn't have to be full of Bible verses...

In fact, prayer can look very ordinary but if desire a prayer to be answered, you need to ask.

James 4:2...

You do not have because you do not ask.

Do you know why prayer looks ordinary?

Because people make requests everyday in their lives..

To their bosses, to their children, to their spouses, to their parents...

Everyone in here has asked for something at one point in their lives...

From the simple...

“Can I borrow a pen?”

To the serious..

“Will you marry me?”

And one thing that asking does to us is that it puts us in a place of submission to who we ask...

You ask the right person because that person has the power to grant your request.

One important principle in prayer is to place in the right place in relation to God...

He has authority over your life...

And it is not that he is demanding God by replying..

“Well, you need to ask me nicely.”

But He is a God that desires you to recognize and acknowledge His power over all things...

And asking is apart of that acknowledgment...

A prayer is simply you admitting that things are beyond your control and that you need help.

God desires you to come to Him and ask.

And when we do, our prayers are heard by Him...

And then v25 offers our final principle of prayer....

V. Prayer Looks Inward (25) - Forgive

This has become a very difficult verse for some people, but it shouldn't be.

This verse does not teach that you have to forgive in order to be forgiven...

If that were the case, we would have a works salvation based upon our work of forgiveness.

We know that is not the true gospel, so what is going on here?

The forgiveness that God is withholding is not the forgiveness of sin that comes with salvation...

When a person is saved, forgiveness is granted immediately....

Past, present and future sins laid on Jesus at the cross.

However after salvation, we still sin.

And though those sins are forgiven, they do interrupt our fellowship with the Lord at times.

Yet, if we confess those daily sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us those sins and cleanse us....

So in regard to those sins, we keep the lines of communication with the Lord open by living in constant confession.

A great illustration in the Bible is the time when Jesus was preparing to wash Peter's feet, and Peter objected to Jesus doing it...

And Jesus told him if Peter didn't allow him to do it, Peter had no fellowship with him...

So Peter said, "Well if that is the case, then wash my whole body."

And what did Jesus say?

"Peter if you have already bathed, you don't need to wash your whole body, you simply need to wash your feet to stay clean."

And the point of that was that Jesus was saying that there must a constant cleaning of our lives after salvation.

If you have taken the whole bath of salvation, you only need to keep your feet clean...

If all your sins have been forgiven in repentance and faith alone in Jesus, they are gone.

You are clean from head to toe forever, but sin will still accumulate on our feet from day to day as we live to day...

And you need to constantly confess and God will be faithful to forgive..

But if you don't forgive, then don't expect God to forgive those daily sins that harm your relationship with him.

The point in relation to prayer and the principle is this...

Prayer looks within first...

When you go to pray...

Make sure you aren't living a life filled with bitterness, anger, and unforgiveness toward someone else...

How can you ask God for anything in prayer when you will not grant forgiveness to someone else?

One one hand, we are saying we need something when we pray..

But on the other hand, we are withholding forgiveness for someone else..

You got one one open because you want something...

But your other hand is tightly closed holding on to unforgiveness.

In that case, don't expect to offer very effective prayers to God.

You need to forgive and then you need to pray...

Conclusion

There are 5 Principles of Prayer for you form this text.

This is not the whole alphabet on prayer, but it is certainly the ABCs of prayer..

Prayer Looks to the Past in that you need to pray knowing that God does what he says He will do.

Prayer Looks to the Lord in that you must not trust your own wisdom in your prayer, but you must trust the Lord's wisdom.

Prayer Looks Like Faith in that you must believe when you pray.

Prayer Looks Ordinary in that it is asking God to do something in our lives.

And finally, Prayer Looks Within in that we must not withhold forgiveness form someone else and yet ask God to grant our requests...

If you had to narrow these principles down to 5 word, I would say that effective prayer is based on...

Remembering, Trusting, Believing, Asking, and Forgiving...

Since I began with a Spurgeon story let me end with a Spurgeon quote on prayer...

“When you stand before men, it is better to ask for little, and expect even less.

But when you stand before God, it is better to ask much, and expect even more.

We cannot all preach, but we can all pray;

We cannot all be leaders, but we can all be pleaders;

We cannot all be mighty in power, but we can all be persistent in prayer.”

Let us pray.