

THE POWER OF FAITH

Matthew 21:18-27

Key Verse: 21:21

"Jesus replied, `I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the [fig](#) tree, but also you can say to this mountain, "Go, throw yourself into the sea," and it will be done.'"

In the last passage we learned that Jesus cleared the temple. Thus he showed himself as the God of righteousness. Jesus' clearing the temple was the starting point of challenging the power of sin and death before his death on the cross and his glorious resurrection. These days many people think, "God is love. So it is okay to enjoy sinful pleasures; I can still go to heaven." But we must know that Jesus is not only the God of mercy and compassion, Jesus is also the God of righteousness. In today's passage Jesus teaches his disciples the power of faith---faith that moves a mountain. Without faith one cannot overcome himself. But one who has faith in Jesus can overcome himself and the world. May God give us spiritual understanding when we study about the power of faith.

First, the fig tree withers (18-19). Look at verse 18. "Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry." This verse indicates that after clearing the temple as soon as he came into Jerusalem, Jesus left the city and went to Bethany. Jesus and his [twelve disciples](#) could not stay in a motel in the city of Jerusalem because they had no money. So he went to one of the satellite cities of Jerusalem, Bethany, probably to the house of Mary and Martha. It is obvious that Jesus and his disciples stayed in Bethany and the next morning got up early and were on their way back to the so-called holy city, Jerusalem. There is a strong impression that Jesus and his disciples could not eat any meal the night before. The new day was dawning, and they woke up and went into the city without eating. Look at verse 19. "Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, `May you never bear fruit again!' Immediately the tree withered." It was early summer. The fig tree had abundant leaves. It also looked very beautiful. Jesus came nearer to the tree and saw that the tree had so many green leaves, but it had no fruit. Jesus was hungry and wanted some fruit from the tree. But he found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered. It was natural not to expect fruit from the fig tree because it was not the harvest time. Then why did Jesus curse the fig tree so that immediately the tree withered? In this story we learn two spiritual lessons.

In the first place, a tree with abundant leaves and no fruit is useless. Of course, it was not the season for fruit. Yet, Jesus cursed the tree immediately. This event is associated with the religious leaders in the temple. As we studied, the temple was the place for God's flock to offer sacrifices and to receive the forgiveness of sins. The temple was the spiritual center of Israel. The temple priests and all the other Pharisees and teachers of the law were supposed to be shepherds for God's flock. They looked good outwardly. They decorated themselves with beautiful gowns and moustaches and beards. They looked

like fig trees with abundant and beautiful leaves, but no fruit. When Jesus wanted some fruit for breakfast, the tree didn't have any fruit. Likewise, the temple priests were very hypocritical and fruitless people. Moreover, they were the inventors of evils and a bad influence to God's flock who came to the temple to offer sacrifices. Jesus was not happy with the hypocrisy of the temple priests and the other religious leaders. Because of their hypocrisy, an innocent fig tree was cursed. What, then, is hypocrisy? Hypocrisy is superficial worship of God. Hypocritical people pretend to worship God. But they are all very selfish. They say that they are Christians, but they don't believe in God. They do not serve God. They serve only themselves and their children. They are just like a fig tree with abundant and beautiful leaves but no fruit on it. Men and women of hypocrisy will not be blessed by God. They will be cursed by God as the fig tree was cursed.

In the second place, God made us to bear much fruit. Many people wonder why they are existing. Many people do not know the meaning of their lives. Many people are men and women of vanity and the incarnation of selfishness. But God made us with a clear purpose. It is to bear much fruit for the glory of God. Genesis 1:28 says, "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" In this verse there is the phrase, "Be fruitful." This phrase shows us God's purpose for his creation of mankind. This verse teaches us that God made us the stewards of God's world. Therefore, we must set our life direction in bearing much fruit for the glory of God. You may think that fruit-bearing means to produce many tomatoes and bananas. But the Biblical meaning of it is that one must raise many godly people. How can we raise many godly people? We must be God's servants who care for God's flock of sheep. The best example is Jesus raising twelve disciples. These twelve disciples were country bums; they were amply earthbound and full of marriage problems and they were also men of fantasy. They were bottom-class nobodies. But they all wanted to be the President or the Prime Minister. After conversion, through Jesus' death and resurrection, they became most fruitful people.

God showed us how to bear good fruit. After the Fall, God had to decide to save the world or completely demolish it. God, in his great love decided to save the world. He looked around the whole world to find a man whom he could raise to be a blessing to fallen mankind. God found one person whose name was Abraham. He was seventy-five years old. God told him, "You will be great and you will be a blessing" (Ge 12:2). Primarily, God wants us to be great and to be a blessing. God never wants us to be petty and be a burden to others. God cared for Abraham for twenty-five years until he became the ancestor of faith. When Abraham grew, God tested him to offer his one and only son Isaac as a burnt offering on the Mount of Moriah. He immediately responded to God's request. Abraham took Isaac and was ready to make him a burnt offering on the altar. At the moment Abraham reached out his hand and took a knife to slay his son Isaac, the Lord called out to him from [heaven](#), "Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (Ge 22:11-12). When God took care of him for twenty-five years, Abraham became a good fruit to God, for he was ready to offer his one and only son as a burnt offering.

Hebrews 11:8-10 summarize Abraham's life of faith as follows: "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." Abraham didn't bear much fruit in numbers in his time. He had only one sheep, his nephew Lot. Lot was like a cultural Christian. His cultural life of faith was not blessed, but ended in tragedy. But Abraham's influence has borne much fruit. So we say that we are all descendants of Abraham (Jn 8:33). In this way God showed us how to bear good fruit.

You know Moses. He was a Hebrew, the son of a slave under the Egyptian Empire. At that time the people of Israel so increased that the Egyptian king was threatened by the Hebrew people. So he ordered that all Hebrew baby boys be drowned. Moses was born in such a fateful situation. When he began to cry loudly his mother made a basket coated with pitch and threw him in the river. But the daughter of King Pharaoh of Egypt found a cute boy in a basket. He was picked up by the princess, the daughter of King Pharaoh. He could have possibly succeeded King Pharaoh. But he chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward (Heb 11:25-26). These days many young people want to believe in Jesus in order to have life direction and purpose of life. They also want to have a value system and want to do something good. But they cannot overcome their desire for sinful pleasure. So they cannot commit their lives to God. They say, "Well, from next year I will be a good Christian." But they procrastinate one year after another until they become seventy years old. As a result, they are like sixteen-year-old teenagers in their mentality and philosophy, especially in their behavior. But Moses, by faith, chose to be a child of God rather than becoming Pharaoh's successor, King of Egypt. Later God made him a good shepherd for his chosen people, the Israelites. They numbered 600,000 in the wilderness after exodus. Moses was probably the most fruitful shepherd in history.

Fruit-bearing is not easy. It is a life-giving ministry. There was an international Romeo. Wherever he went, many Juliets followed him. When he lived as an international Romeo, he was powerless and could not maintain his school studies. So he dropped out of his Ph.D. program and became a girls' high school teacher. But he was converted through one-to-one Bible study. And through Bible study he learned the compassion of our Lord Jesus Christ. He also could find his clear life direction to go back to school and finish his Ph.D. Now he is no more an international Romeo, but a good shepherd, who is internationally famous. Of course, he could not become a good shepherd like Jesus all by himself. Behind him was a shepherd who took care of him from the beginning to the end, until he became a shepherd at the international level. In fact, there are many who were once international Romeos in UBF. They were converted through one-to-one Bible study and for the glory of God they studied hard; many obtained Ph.D.s and became Ph.D. shepherds in America.

Why do we have to bear much fruit? It is because God made us to bear much fruit. John 15:16 says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit^fruit that will last." Many people think they chose God; so if they want, they can just abandon God. But they are wrong. We did not choose God, but God chose us and appointed us to bear much fruit. Last week there was a tragic event in which two students shot and killed twelve students and a teacher in a high school in Colorado. We must be responsible for them. We should have sent many one-to-one Bible teachers to Colorado earlier so that this would not have happened. Let's pray that we may send many workers to Colorado.

Second, mountain-moving faith (20-22). Look at verse 20. "When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. `How did the fig tree wither so quickly?' they asked." The disciples of Jesus saw this event and were greatly amazed and said, "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" When Jesus cursed the fruitless fig tree all the abundant and beautiful leaves dried up immediately. Finally the tree was dried up. His disciples wondered how Jesus could have such a mighty power that with a word he dried up such a huge fig tree immediately. They really envied the power of Jesus. Their hearts' desire was to have mighty power like Jesus and do something great. Sometimes they wanted to perform miraculous signs and wonders before the large crowd of people. But all they could do was just hang around Jesus and eat and sleep, snoring in chorus. They set the alarm clock to wake up early and have early morning prayer. But they never made it. They turned off the alarm clock. Sometimes they threw the alarm clock out the window. They wanted to be powerful men. But they were totally powerless, and were lazy men. As a result, they were useless disciples. It was because they lacked one thing. Look at verse 21. "Jesus replied, `I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, "Go, throw yourself into the sea," and it will be done.'" Jesus knew they were lazy and useless. But Jesus taught them that if they have faith they can move a mountain and throw it into the sea. In other words, if they have faith, they can have a mountain-moving power. Practically speaking, to such powerless disciples this was a totally impossible teaching of Jesus. These days we see so many Christians who want to be good Christians, pleasing to God. So many Christians want to live for the glory of God and be a blessing to others, not a burden. Their wishes are good, but their wishes are not fulfilled at all. Rather, they despair and they don't esteem themselves as Christians. This happens because they want to be good Christians by their own moral strength. What is the meaning of having faith in God? In a children's hymn there is the phrase, "We are weak, but he is strong." In other words, we must know that we are weak, but God is strong. We must have faith in God and continue to pray that we can do something great. Then God does it for us. Faith is believing God's power to answer our prayer. So verse 22 says, "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." Faith is prayer. We cannot do anything. But when we have faith in God and continue to pray, God answers our prayers. For example, Chicago UBF wanted to pioneer the Soviet Union in 1985. One of us went to the Soviet Union as a tourist and spied out the land. The Soviet Union was still behind the Iron Curtain. But we prayed that we may pioneer the Soviet Union with the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. It looked totally impossible at that time. But we believed in

God that he would pioneer the Soviet Union through us in ten years. From that time on, one of us sang "Moscow Nights" more than 500 times. From that time on, we ate Russian bread and drank Russian tea during the break every Friday night at our Leaders' Meeting. Many of us thought it was nonsense. It was because the Iron Curtain was too strong to break. It was because we were afraid of the cruelty of the Russian KGB. But God soon opened the door through Russian President Gorbachev and we could pioneer Moscow State University, which was known to be number one among universities in the world. Now we have around three hundred Russian shepherds and sheep in Moscow and other chapters in Russia. We also have ninety-eight missionaries in Russia. When we thought about pioneering Russia, it seemed impossible. But many of us have been to the Moscow conferences and have seen with our own eyes that our Russian UBF is growing slowly and steadily. Faith produces miracles. But fear paralyzes man's heart.

The disciples of Jesus saw that the fig tree was cursed and immediately dried up. Their surprise was at the immediate drying-up of the fig tree. They wondered how it could happen. But Jesus told them to have faith in God, then they could do the same thing. The disciples finally learned faith through Jesus' death and resurrection and they conquered the world. Right after Jesus' ascension, there were around 120 members who were praying in an upper room. They believed that Jesus would come back to them very soon. They believed that they could conquer the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. They could not see Jesus' coming back to them with their eyes. But they spread all over the world. There is a legendary story that once the doubter, Thomas, went to India and evangelized Indian people. Thomas might have said, "Eat meat, fellow Indians, and work hard for the glory of God. Have faith in God and bear much fruit." It is tearful to hear the story of Peter and Paul's coming to Rome in the hope of evangelizing the whole world through Roman military roads. It is said that Peter was crucified upside-down during the time of shepherding the flock of God's sheep there. We don't know how Paul died in the name of Jesus. But it is obvious that he was martyred. Martyrdom sounds very fearsome. But to those early Christians who had faith in Jesus, martyrdom was honor to them for the glory of God. They were happy to die anytime as martyrs. At that time the Roman Empire was the world power; it was very immoral and violent. But humanly weak people of God conquered the Roman Empire and made it a Christian nation.

We must have faith in God that moves a mountain. When we think about American history, God intended to make this nation a shepherd nation for the whole world. But we find that this country does not have a clear identity as a Christian nation, while Muslim people have a clear identity that they are Muslim people. We must have faith in God and pray persistently so that this nation may restore school prayer and Bible study. And as a result, this country may claim that America is a Christian nation, established as a shepherd nation for all the nations. Christian history records that America once sent one million missionaries to the whole world. They were men and women of faith and they were men and women of God. But these days America sends mostly temporary missionaries to foreign lands, and many Christian tourists are counted as missionaries. By this way of counting, America is number one in sending missionaries. But in reality, it is not true. We must pray that we may again raise many who have faith in God and send

another one million missionaries at the beginning of the 21st century. Why do you look surprised when I say we will send another one million missionaries? Don't be surprised. If one has faith in God, he can even grab a mountain and throw it into the sea. So we are.

Third, Jesus made the Pharisees speechless (23-27). The Pharisees also envied Jesus' almighty power and performance of miraculous signs before many people. They wondered how he could be so powerful. The religious leaders should have believed in Jesus as the Son of God who came to this world to save men from their sins. But they did not believe. Out of their jealousy they wanted to kill Jesus. So they asked, "By what authority are you doing these things?" "These things" mainly implied clearing the temple. In this way they wanted to trap Jesus and put him in jail. But Jesus did not answer their question. Rather Jesus told them, "If you first answer my question, I will answer your question." Jesus' question was very simple. In verse 25 he asked, "John's baptism^where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?" The religious leaders were greatly frustrated to give him a proper answer. It was because if they said his baptism was from heaven then Jesus would say, "Why didn't you believe him?" If they answered, "His baptism was from men," they were afraid of people rioting and stoning them because the people believed that John was a prophet, a man from God. So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things" (27). There are many who doubt Jesus' authority. There are many who think that marriage by faith in Jesus is doubtful. They are just like the religious leaders who wanted to trap Jesus by their tricky questions and put him in prison. This part tells us that the religious leaders were a necessary evil, existing to destroy the Son of God.

In this passage we learn that we must ask God to give us faith in Jesus more than anything else. These days many people ask in their prayers for many worldly things. But we must pray that we may have faith in Jesus. May God grant you faith that moves mountains. May God make you a blessing when you have faith.