HAVE FAITH IN GOD

Mark 11:20-25

Key Verse: 11:22

“’Have faith in God,’ Jesus answered.”

In today’s passage Jesus teaches us to have faith in God. When Peter was amazed by Jesus’ power to curse a fig tree, it was a teachable moment. Peter really wanted to learn something from Jesus, especially cursing power to destroy his enemies. However, Jesus taught him faith in God that moves mountains. We face many challenging issues, both within ourselves and without. These issues are more than we can handle by our own strength and wisdom. We really need faith in God. When we have it, we can overcome all kinds of hardships and live a victorious life that reveals God’s glory. Furthermore, we become world changers. How can we have faith in God? Let’s learn from Jesus.

First, faith in God moves mountains (20-23). Since Jesus had entered Jerusalem, many surprising things had happened: Jesus revealed himself as the Lord, claiming to be the owner of a donkey; Jesus entered Jerusalem as a king, riding on a donkey’s colt and receiving people’s welcome as the Messiah; Jesus cursed a fig tree when he did not find fruit on it; Jesus cleared the temple, driving out all the animals and merchants. These things had all happened within a day. Now the religious leaders were planning to kill Jesus (18). It seemed that the world had been turned upside down. To the disciples these things were shocking. They were fearful and confused. They felt powerless. The challenges and dangers before them looked like giant mountains. They really needed power in order to overcome these obstacles. At this moment, in the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots (20). Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” (21) He was really interested in the power of Jesus’ words, especially his cursing power. Perhaps he thought that with this kind of power, they could defeat all God’s enemies and establish the messianic kingdom. He must also have thought that with this kind of power he could be a great leader. Even though he had a big mouth, his words did not have any power. As a top disciple, he wanted to give directions, telling others what to do. But no one listened. He wanted his words to have power, like Jesus’ words. Perhaps he envied Jesus. Not only Peter, but all of the disciples had become ambitious in this way.

How did Jesus help them? Let’s read verse 22. “’Have faith in God,’ Jesus answered” (22). What does it mean to have faith in God? First of all, it means to depend on God alone. Since the disciples had begun to follow Jesus, they had depended on him in every way. This was in accordance with the purpose of his calling, that they might be with him, and later he would send them out to preach as independent gospel workers (Mk 3:14). In the meantime, Jesus led them as their good shepherd. He protected them, guided them, taught them, and fed them. All they really had to do was to follow Jesus and depend on Jesus. This was the first stage of learning to live by faith. But in the course of being with Jesus, from time to time, he helped them depend on the Father God and experience his power. For example, once Jesus fell asleep in the boat during a storm. When they fell into fear, and doubts arose in their hearts, Jesus planted faith in God in their hearts by saying, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” (Mk 4:40). Another time, Jesus challenged them to feed five thousand people by faith in God, saying, “You give them something to eat” (6:37a). Then Jesus fed five thousand people with the five loaves and two fish they brought (6:42). When Jesus took three top disciples to the Mount of Transfiguration, nine disciples failed to drive out a demon from a boy. It was because they didn’t really depend on God alone in prayer (9:29). Once again, Jesus taught them the power of faith by saying, “Everything is possible for one who believes” (9:23). When the disciples heard that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God, they were amazed and said, “Who can be saved?” Jesus said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God” (10:27).  Jesus repeatedly taught them to have faith in God alone.

Now the time had come when Jesus would leave them. He would not be physically present to teach them any longer. Jesus really wanted them to depend on God alone as their source of power and strength. When they depended on God alone they could grow as powerful, independent servants of God. In the book of Acts, we see that faith was planted in the hearts of his disciples as a result of Jesus’ hard labor. They depended on God and became powerful. When Peter delivered the gospel message, at one time three thousand people repented and believed in Jesus (Ac 2:41). When Peter and John entered the temple to pray, a crippled man begged them for money. Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk” (Ac 3:6). Then the man walked and went with them into the temple walking, jumping and praising God (Ac 3:8). When Peter depended on God alone, his words became powerful. He was no longer a man of big mouth, but of real spiritual authority.

When Jesus says, “Have faith in God,” he really wants us to grow in faith by depending on God alone. Sometimes we feel powerless, especially when we face challenging issues, both within ourselves and without. When we see the increasing acceptance of same sex marriage, and the rapid expansion of pornography and corrupt entertainment, we feel that our nation is plunging down a pathway toward destruction. Changing this trend to become a shepherd nation and missionary-sending nation seems like moving a mountain. Terror activities by Muslim extremists are increasing in frequency. As we know well, they attacked a satirical newspaper office in Paris, trying to instill fear and hinder free speech, and killed 20 French people in the process. After that, another extremist group, Boko Haram, wiped out most of the city of Baga, Nigeria, killing as many as 2,000 women, children and unarmed men—mostly Christians—in a recent attack. When we hear this kind of news, we can become angry, frustrated and powerless. Sometimes, in raising our children, and student disciples of Christ, we face so many obstacles—especially bad influences, the devil’s hindrances, and the power of sin. We feel that we are trying to move a mountain. When we pray for world mission, it seems that we are trying to move a whole mountain range. On top of that, many kinds of temptations, sinful desires and bad habits within us can be another mountain. All these challenges and hindrances drive us to a feeling of helplessness, and later to despair and even depression. We need the power of faith both within and without. Otherwise, we cannot but become a victim of Satan. How can we have the power of faith? We need to listen to Jesus’ words, “Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them” (22-23). Who is God whom we believe? Our God is the Almighty Creator God. When he said, “Let there be light,” there was light (Gen 1:3). All the darkness disappeared and bright light filled the whole universe. This same God made his light shine in our hearts to give us the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ (2 Cor 4:6). When we have faith in God, God empowers us to overcome any kind of challenges, obstacles or problems both within and without. Jesus said, “Have faith in God.” Amen!

There is a person for whom I have a tremendous respect in regards to his faith. When he evangelized American college students in obedience to the world mission command of Jesus, he faced giant mountains. But he was not daunted. He did not shrink back or give up. He depended on God alone. When he had faith in God, God moved the mountains before him and enabled him to establish a fruitful disciple-raising ministry. Many people were influenced by his faith and challenged impossible situations and won great victories. As a result, the gospel spread all over the world. Now, as we face many challenging issues, we need this kind of faith. God said to Zerubbabel, “Not by might or by power, but by my Spirit. What are you, mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground” (Zech 4:6-7a). Let’s have faith in our mighty God! Amen!

Second of all, to have faith in God means to overcome doubts. In verse 23 Jesus said, “… and does not doubt in his heart but believes….” When we try to have faith in God, strangely doubt arises in our hearts: “Is it really possible for my children to be changed?” “Can my Bible student really grow to be a disciple of Jesus?” “Can America really change direction and be a shepherd nation?” We don’t try to doubt, but doubts just pop up. The more we struggle not to doubt, the more doubts arise in our hearts. Where does this doubt come from? This doubt is not a psychological phenomenon. Rather, it is the devil’s work.

In Genesis 3, we see how the devil destroyed man’s happiness. He didn’t use automatic rifles or field artillery. Instead, he subtly distorted God’s word, and planted doubt about God’s love, trying to portray God as a manipulator. This was a more powerful strategy than military action. It was not easy to discern the devil’s work and the woman fell into doubt and disobeyed God. When doubt about God’s love was planted in her heart, all of a sudden, her world-view was changed from God-centered to self-centered. In fact, she was deceived and under Satan’s control. Here we should acknowledge that doubt is Satan’s powerful and deadly weapon. When we begin to doubt God’s word and God’s love, our world-view is confused and distorted and we become powerless. In order to have the power of faith, we need to engage in a spiritual battle against the devil’s weapon of doubt. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood. It is against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph 6:12). How can we win this battle? We must hold on to the love of God in any situation. Paul had this kind of faith and said, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Ro 8:38-39). He said that we are “more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Ro 8:37).

Another weapon in Satan’s arsenal is fear. When Adam disobeyed God’s word, fear was planted in his heart. When he heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, he hid from the Lord God. When God called, “Where are you?” he answered, “I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid” (Gen 3:8-10). Since then men have become slaves of fear. Satan constantly tries to plant fear in our hearts. When fear comes in, we become paralyzed. How can we overcome fear? The psalmist said, “The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? The Lord is with me; he is my helper. I look in triumph on my enemies” (Ps 118:6-7). When doubt or fear comes into our hearts, our relationship with God is broken. That is Satan’s purpose. When we experience hardships, we don’t fully understand what is going on. But we do know one thing: God is good all the time. God works for the good of those who love him in all things (Ro 8:28). God never fails. God is the Sovereign Ruler. Our lives and our nation are in God’s hand. So all we need to do is to trust God, no matter what happens.

Second, faith that prays and forgives (24-25). After telling his disciples to have faith in God, Jesus then said, “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (24). Why did Jesus talk about prayer? How is it related to having faith in God? Without having faith in God we cannot pray. Prayer is how we depend on God practically. So we can say that prayer is the expression of faith. Prayer is not just asking what we want from God. Prayer is coming to God, listening to his words and having fellowship with him. In order to have fellowship with God, we need to acknowledge God as the Almighty Creator, the Sovereign Ruler, and our Father God. We need to be concerned about what he wants us to do. So often, when we pray, we just ask God for want we want. If our prayer is not answered according to our desire, we easily fall into doubt. Then we say, “Well, prayer does not work,” and stop praying. One young man prayed for the recovery of a dying relative, but the person passed away. Then he doubted God in his heart and abandoned God. But during a critical accident, he cried out for God’s help, and God answered him. Then his relationship with God was restored. We need to have a right motive in prayer. James 4:3 says, “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.” When we pray with a right motive, we can have assurance that God answers our prayer in his time. 1 John 5:14-15 says, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.”

Jesus continued to talk about what kind of prayer we should offer to God in verse 25: “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” Prayer is related not only to having a right relationship with God, but it is also related to having right relationships with others. When we pray, God wants us to forgive and be forgiven in order to receive his answer. When we sin against others, basically it is sin against God. In the parable of the prodigal son, the son confessed, “Father I have sinned against heaven and against you” (Lk 15:18). David also realized that sin was ultimately against God and said, “Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight” (Ps 51:4). Here we learn that when we have an unforgiving heart, it is sin against God and this hinders our prayer. In order for our prayer to be heard, we must forgive anyone whom we hold anything against. When we do, we can receive God’s forgiveness freely and know that he will answer our prayers.

But practically speaking, it is not easy to forgive others. Forgiving others is like moving a mountain. Actually, it is impossible by our own effort. It is only possible when we remember Jesus’ grace of forgiveness for us at the cross. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34a). As Jesus forgives us, so we also must forgive others. One young man behaved violently in a Christian community and hurt many people. It became impossible for him to stay there, and he left. But he carried the stigma of being a dangerous person. He felt he was not forgiven and was distrusted and abandoned. So his mentor urged him to return to the church he had left and to reconcile. His mentor also urged the pastor of the church to forgive him unconditionally in order to develop a healthy community. The pastor accepted this guidance and made an environment for the forgiveness and acceptance of the former member. In the course of doing so, he found that in another case, a person who had committed grievous sin was forgiven by the person he hurt most. The power of that forgiveness brought about real change in the forgiven person. Forgiving one another mutually not only brings real change to individual people, but also enables communities to display God’s forgiveness and glorify God. Practicing Jesus’ forgiveness helps us to grow spiritually in the likeness of Jesus both as individuals and as a community.

In his book, “A Call to Spiritual Reformation,” D.A. Carson remarked that many churches in America are active in carrying out programs, but do not produce the fruit of faith and prayer and forgiving love. He calls for American Christians to live by genuine faith in God and to grow in the deeper knowledge of God. What we really need is to have faith in God and to pray and to practice forgiveness. Jesus said, “Have faith in God.”