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When You've Stopped Praying Bold Prayers

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Series: Preach
Matthew 21:18-22

BIG IDEA – GOD WANTS US TO CULTIVATE A FAITH THAT BELIEVES HIM FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE

Two Cities Church, my name is Carlos, and I'm your friend. I'm so grateful to be here. I want to welcome all of the campuses right now that are tuning in with us. Of course, I'm so grateful for your pastors and for you.

You may not know this if you're new to Two Cities, but you played a large role in a church being established in the city of Miami, and for that, I just want to thank you. Thank you. There is a church in the 305, as we like to call it, in part because of the faithfulness, the generosity, and the counsel we have received from Two Cities. So, thank you. Come on. Let's give it up to the Lord.

Now, before I read the passage we're going to take a look at today, here's what I want to acknowledge. This passage can be a challenge to both skeptics and followers of Jesus alike, because Jesus is going to make this incredible claim about having a kind of faith that moves mountains. If you're not a follower of Jesus, maybe you hear that and say to yourself, "I've never seen that. How can it be true?"

Maybe you're more like me. You grew up in the church, and you've heard about mountain-moving faith. I grew up in Venezuela. We used to sing this little song about faith-moving mountains. We would go, "*Esa montaña se moverá*," and we'd dance. I grew up in that kind of church. Pastor Kyle told me that's happening at Two Cities coming soon. Okay?

So, I would hear about mountain-moving faith, but even as a 12-year-old, I would realize, "Hey, there are mountains people are praying for that are not moving. There are prayers

that have gone unanswered." How do we make sense of that? How do we make sense of this promise? Is faith more like the Force in *Star Wars*?

Sometimes I would hear a preacher say, "You know what? The reason the miracle hasn't happened is because you didn't have enough faith." So, is faith an energy we have to muster up, and if I have it, then I achieve it? Let's take a look at what Jesus says here in Matthew 21, starting in verse 18.

"Early in the morning, as he was returning to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, he went up to it and found nothing on it except leaves. And he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' At once the fig tree withered. When the disciples saw it, they were amazed and said, 'How did the fig tree wither so quickly?'

Jesus answered them, 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you tell this mountain, "Be lifted up and thrown into the sea," it will be done. And if you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.'"

Would you pray with me for a moment?

Heavenly Father, I pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit you would have your way among us and that you would conform us to be more like Christ. In Jesus' name, amen.

What is the kind of faith Jesus is talking about here in Matthew 21? Friends, wherever you are on your journey of faith, here's what I want you to see. Here's my sermon in a sentence: *God wants us to cultivate a faith that believes him for the impossible*. The question is then…*How do we cultivate mountain-moving faith?* I want to show you three moves we must make.

The first move we must make in order to cultivate mountain-moving faith is we must *reject pretend Christianity*. Watch this one more time here in verse 18. ***"Early in the morning, as he was returning to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, he went up to it and found nothing on it except leaves. And he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' At once the fig tree withered."***

This particular scene in the gospel of Matthew takes place right after Jesus goes into the temple in Jerusalem where he drives out these money changers who were extorting people who had come to worship God. If you've read the New Testament, then you know this is the most visible display of anger that Jesus demonstrates in the New Testament.

Right after he drives out these money changers, he comes out, and he's hungry. He wants something to eat. What we find in the text is that he performs a destructive miracle. Did

you notice that? Most of the miracles in the New Testament are restorative. It's Jesus healing the lame. He's restoring sight to the blind. He's raising somebody from the dead.

Why is it that here in the New Testament (there are only two of these) he performs a destructive miracle? The reason is because the fig tree didn't have any fruit. If you do a deep dive on this particular text, what you'll find is that when a fig tree starts displaying leaves, that's the moment where we know a fig tree will produce fruit or the fruit will be on its way.

So, Jesus, who was fully God, but also, as we find out in the text, fully human… He was hungry. He goes up to this particular fig tree, and all he sees is leaves…leaves and no fruit. The tree has nothing to show for it. It's pure false advertising. The tree is putting on a show.

So, what is Jesus doing here? Do you see where he's going? He's about to give the disciples a very powerful object lesson about pretend Christianity. Here's the lesson he's trying to teach them: *pretend faith is dead faith*. In fact, I'd say it like this.

One of the greatest dangers, perhaps the greatest danger, to your relationship with Jesus is pretending you have one. You can sing the songs. You can know the language, but still, you can be spiritually dead inside. So, this passage is a warning. It's a warning to you and me of the dangers of pretend faith.

Don't you see what's happening? If you step into first-century reality, the people of Israel were spiritually hungry. They had been under Roman oppression for years. They'd lost hope that a savior, a messiah, was coming. But do you know what they still had? They still had the temple, and maybe they thought, "If I could just go to the temple, maybe I could encounter the presence and power of God."

But when they get there, what they encounter is a beautiful building with all of these ornate structures and really tall columns, an incredible design etched onto the ceilings and walls. It had all of the trappings of religion, but it was dead on the inside. And not only dead. The priests had corrupted the worship of God with this pretend, fake faith.

Jesus is angry, because maybe the greatest danger to someone's relationship with God is pretending they actually have one. You know this, don't you? Sometimes the same thing can happen in our lives and in the church. We can be like that fig tree. It's a bunch of leaves. You put on a show, but there's no visible fruit. There's no fruit to show for it.

You can look one way on the outside. You can project an image of a kind of Christian who is alive with God while you know there's no fruit in your life. We can pretend to be men of God on Sunday and live like atheists at work on Monday and at home. You could be a

woman who's so caught up in the culture of Christianity, and you can attend every event and be at every gathering and read all of the things while still having no fruit in your life, no intimacy with God.

You could be a student who grows up in the church and learns to almost Christian code switch at church. Do you know what I'm talking about? You know exactly what to say and what moment to say it in the church, but the moment you go to school and you step outside of this building, you know there is no real relationship. You are faking it.

Jesus is warning you. First of all, it's not only a warning; it's an invitation. It's like, "Hey, I don't want to save the pretend you. The pretend you cannot experience mountain-moving faith; therefore, take off your mask and let the real Jesus come and minister to you." Friends, don't you want mountain-moving faith? The only way we're going to get there is if we reject pretend Christianity.

By the way, pretend Christianity is not just dangerous for you; it also hurts the witness of the church. That's why when I talk to somebody who maybe doesn't know God, and they tell me the reason they don't go to church, they say something like, "Hey, I don't go to church because they're a bunch of…" You've gotten that too. They're talking about pretend faith.

Now, of course, you know what we say. "Hey, there's room for one more." You're not fully consistent in your life. Yet at the end of the day, friends, God wants you to experience the real thing, mountain-moving faith. That's the first step. The first move we must make is to reject pretend Christianity. Listen. Are you pretending? Are you here? Are you putting on a show?

Here's the second move: *we embrace wholehearted trust in God*. Look at the text in verse 20. ***"When the disciples saw it, they were amazed and said, 'How did the fig tree wither so quickly?' Jesus answered them, 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you tell this mountain, "Be lifted up and thrown into the sea," it will be done.'"***

One way of reading this text is by trying to take it as a technique to manipulate God to get him to do things for you. Preachers have used this text sometimes to treat God as though he was a genie who just wants to grant you wishes. Some people may look at this text and say, "You know what? If you just muster up enough internal energy, then the mountain will move."

The problem with that is if you take that interpretation, everything depends on the intensity of your faith. Everything rises and falls on you. So, if you don't get the healing, it

means you didn't have enough faith. You didn't get the child you prayed for? Oh, you must not have enough faith. You didn't get the job? You must not have enough faith.

This kind of theology is harmful. It's harmful because it produces Christians who are filled with guilt and shame. They simply do not know whether they've mustered up enough faith in their own heart and in their own life. Friends, listen. I want you to hear this. Faith is not a force that makes reality change. Faith is not the same thing as manifesting your thoughts; faith is wholehearted trust in the God who can change things. It's trusting in the character of God, in the promises of God.

In fact, let me show it to you this way. I want you to imagine… Maybe for some of you, spiritual warriors, you're the kind of person who if people were to describe you, they'd be like, "Dude, that's a person with really strong faith." I want you to imagine that right here on this stage there was a broken chair. Let's say you had really strong faith that this broken chair was going to hold you up. Does it matter that you have intense faith in a broken chair? No! You're going to be on the floor.

Now, on the other side, let's say you have weak faith in a really strong chair. The chair is going to hold you up, but you're just a little weak. You don't have that strength, that intensity other people have. Does it really matter? Will the chair hold you up? Do you see where I'm going with this? The main point of faith is not your own intensity; it's where you place that faith. It's the object of your faith that matters most.

Friends, listen. We don't have faith in our faith; we have faith in God. Don't place your trust in your own internal capacity. Place your trust in the God who can do the impossible. That's part of what we're learning in this text. When we approach a text like this with such astounding promises, we have to ask ourselves the question "Is my faith based on the Word of God, the character of God, and the promises of God or is my faith just based on my idea, on my own imagination?" We have faith in God, not in faith.

Then Jesus takes it up to another level. Here's what he says. He adds the phrase, "If you have faith and do not doubt, then you'll be able to talk to that mountain." There are two words for *doubt* in the Greek New Testament. This particular word is the same word that's used in James, chapter 1. We learn we should ask for wisdom and pray with faith, not being double-minded.

This is the idea of doubt that Jesus is conveying here in this text. He's talking about a kind of internal hesitation. He doesn't want you and me to pray with this kind of double-mindedness, this insecurity about who he is and what he's able to do. He's saying, "I don't want you to lack confidence in me when you pray."

Now, I want to say something about this, because when I was growing up in the church, I didn't know how to wrestle with having questions and the idea of doubt. I grew up in a beautiful church, but one of the things I encountered was that anytime I brought up genuine questions, I kind of got the stiff arm, like, "You've got to have faith. You've got to have faith." I'm like, "Dude, I have faith; you have fear."

Praise God, we don't have to be afraid of questions in the Christian life. Listen. You don't have to check your brain out at the door. At any campus today, I don't want you to come in thinking, "Okay. I have to not ask questions of Jesus." Friends, if you do any history, if you do any reading, what you'll find is there is millennia of intellectual tradition that has shaped even the morality of the West that came from Christian thinkers.

It was Christians who established some of the greatest universities in the world that had some of the greatest scientists on earth. Do you know this? We don't have to be afraid of questions. Yet at the same time, we live in a day and age where it feels like we've swung the pendulum, and now the idea of being a Christian who is always doubting can be seen as a form of spiritual and intellectual virtue.

Haven't you found that people now romanticize doubt? Christians could talk about doubt like this: "Yeah, bro. Jesus is so cool with your doubts. Yeah, you're doubting all the time? Ah, Jesus is okay with that." And they'll say, "Why don't you take a look at John, chapter 20. There you're going to find Thomas the doubter." And it's true. You *can* bring your questions and your doubts to Jesus.

But do you know what he also says in John, chapter 20? Do you know how he ends that passage? He says, ***"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."*** Friends, it's possible to hide behind the idea of doubt so you don't land strongly on clear biblical convictions. It *is* true. Wherever you are today, God welcomes your doubts, but he is attracted to faith.

If you've always been in a season of doubt, God doesn't want you to stay there. I've had seasons, even as a pastor, of crippling doubt where I have prayed that prayer, "Lord, help my unbelief." But he does not want you and me to stay in that place. He wants to move us to a place of wholehearted trust, abandoned in the character and the promises of God. Now, maybe you find yourself in that place of great doubt. Part of what I'm praying for you today is that God would remind you that he has so much more for you. He has so much more for us.

I pray that God will increase your faith. When I say, "Increase your faith," here's what I mean: that he will increase your assurance and confidence in the promises of God; that he will increase your reliance and your resting on the gospel of Jesus Christ; that he will

increase your consistency and obedience; that he will increase your clarity on the object of our faith.

Friends, God wants you and me to cultivate mountain-moving faith, and the way we do that, first, is we reject the mask of pretend Christianity, we embrace wholehearted trust in God, and thirdly, he tells us how to do it. What does it look like? He wants us to *pray for the impossible*. When was the last time you prayed for the impossible? Look at the text with me. Here's the last verse: ***"And if you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."***

Prayer is the visible representation of faith. In the New Testament, faith is not just understood in your brain. When Jesus encounters people in the New Testament, the centurion, for instance… Do you know what the text says? It says Jesus saw his faith. He didn't *hear* it; he *saw* it. Faith has to be shown. Faith has to be demonstrated. We don't earn our way to Jesus with our works, but we demonstrate that he's real by the way we live.

The primary way you demonstrate whether or not you have faith in your life is through prayer. Prayer is a visible representation of faith, a faith that prays with boldness. So, when Matthew uses that metaphor of moving mountains, that's a Semitic metaphor that essentially means impossible things. Jesus invites you and me to pray for impossible mountains to be moved.

Now listen. I'm not talking about the kinds of prayers… Sometimes people hear this kind of message, and they just want to increase their material possessions. "God, give me that Ferrari. I believe." Is that what he's talking about here? No! Matthew, chapter 21, is part of a larger context. Jesus already taught his disciples how to pray in Matthew, chapter 6, the Lord's Prayer.

He teaches us that when we pray we align our hearts to the will of the Father, to the kingdom of God. We pray for the things that please the heart of God, for the kingdom of God, kingdom-oriented dreams. It still includes your daily needs. It includes the desires of your heart. We also learn that God likes persistent prayer. All of this is found in the greatest sermon Jesus ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount.

Maybe you hear "Pray for impossible prayers…" You're watching this at one of the campuses. You're like, "Carlos, listen. I have faith in Christ, but something happened along the way, and I just kind of stopped praying bold prayers." Maybe the reason you stopped praying this way is because when you prayed an impossible prayer, God said "No."

Friends, I want you to know I've lived through that same experience of praying for the sickness of a loved one to go away with faith, with people, and God still said "No." I don't know the *noes* you have gotten in your life, but here's what I know: the Enemy wants you to remain in a place of prayerlessness so you don't get *yeses* on the other side of your prayers.

Part of what I've been praying for you is that maybe, for some of you, if you've gotten noes and it has broken your heart… Maybe there has been a sense of a fracturing of your faith. Friends, God wants to renew that in you today. God wants to lift you from that place of faithlessness and prayerlessness and once again to come back to this place of wholehearted faith.

I remember when I was going through that kind of a journey in my own life, I would ask the question, "God, I serve you. I love you. I give. I do all of these things you've asked me to do. Why are you not coming through on this promise?" And through the tears, through the doubts, through the pain, God took me to the place where I had to ask myself the question, "Where does my help come from? I lift my eyes unto the hills."

In those places of pain, Jesus met me with his truth. One of the truths I learned is that God is for me, but life is not about me. Friends, you know this, right? God is for you, but life is not about you. I read the New Testament, and I saw that even Paul did not get some of his prayers answered. You know that, right?

Listen. The Bible is not false advertising. People suffer here. You know this. John the Baptist didn't get his prayer answered. He was beheaded for his faith. But what you see in men and women of the Bible who have mountain-moving faith is that even when they get a *no*, they're still praying, because God is still good, and he's still on his throne, and there are many *yeses* that have yet to be answered.

So, friend, let me ask you… Have you stopped praying impossible prayers? This is what God wants for you. Maybe today what you need to do is to begin to once again pray for impossible things, for God to move a mountain. I don't know what kinds of mountains you brought in here with you today at all of our campuses.

Maybe there's the mountain of a broken relationship that needs to be restored, but it feels impossible. Maybe it's that prodigal child who you've stopped praying for because it feels impossible. It's the forgiveness for the hurt somebody else has caused you that feels impossible. What are the mountains you've brought in here today that you need to pray about?

There's the mountain of seeing the city love Jesus, for God's power to come down in such a way that every heart will be transformed. That is an impossible prayer. Friends,

wherever you are today, I want to invite you. I want you to see that Jesus is inviting us to lift up our eyes, take them off of ourselves, and behold this great God of impossible things.

See, the reason we can approach him, the reason we can pray these prayers, is because God already moved the greatest mountain. What is the greatest mountain? It was the mountain of sin and death and the grave, the mountain of your sin and mine, the things we have done, the things we have thought, the shame we can carry because of the things we've done or the things that have happened to us.

It says in the text in the Scriptures that nails were driven through his hands, he was hoisted up onto a cross, and a crown of thorns was put on his head. He shed his blood so that all of that sin and all of that shame would be wiped away clean and so you and I could become sons and daughters. And when the disciples had lost all hope, Sunday came. The greatest mountain of all was moved because Jesus rose again.

Friends, listen. If you believe in the resurrected Jesus, if you believe in the God who did the impossible, then why wouldn't you come to him with impossible prayers? Why would you come to him with a half heart? Don't you see? We live this life by faith. Do you believe this? Do you believe in the risen Savior? It's he who wants you and me to cultivate mountain-moving faith for the impossible.

A.W. Tozer, who was a famous writer, wrote this: "Unbelief says: Some other time, but not now; some other place, but not here; some other people, but not us." Here's a paraphrase of what he then says about faith: "Faith says: Anything he did anywhere else he can do here, anything he did any other time he can do now, and anything he ever did for other people he can do for us." Do you believe this?

Friends, here's what we're going to do now. We're going to pray for impossible things. At every campus in just a moment, I'm going to invite you to come to the kneelers, wherever they may be, and we are going to exercise, to put into practice what God is teaching us in this text, because he wants to cultivate in you the kind of faith that believes him for impossible things. Would you pray with me?

Heavenly Father, I thank you for your Word. I thank you for the promises you have given us, Lord. Right now, by faith, we receive them, and we say "Yes" and "Amen" to what you have said. I want to pray specifically for any person who is listening to this message who feels like their faith has been fractured.

Friend, maybe it was you who got a very difficult *no* in your prayer life, and today, God wants to restore your faith in him. If that's you, I want you to receive it.

Heavenly Father, in the name of Jesus, I pray for those whose faith has been broken, God, that you today would restore their hearts once again. I pray that today they would experience the love of the Father inviting them to come back home with a wholehearted faith. God, I pray for those who are here and at all of the campuses who maybe have been pretending.

Friend, if that's you, I want to invite you to take off your mask, turn from your sin, and embrace real faith in Christ.

Finally, Lord, we bring our mountains to you, these impossible prayers. Father, please increase our confidence in you. Give us boldness to pray impossible prayers for ourselves, for our families, for this church, for this city, and for our world. We declare now we believe in your power. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.