

Do You Believe You'll Receive?

Praying to Victory:

James 5:13-18, Mark 11:20-26

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We are learning to pray to victory. God is growing in us the prayer life of Jesus. We are to grow to the full measure of Jesus' intimacy with the Father and his fruitfulness in prayer. As a church, *we, first, are sharing with one another answers to prayer or a favorite prayer promise.* As a corporate prayer project *we, second, are praying at noon for our church.* We'd like you to stop at 12 noon (or as close to it as possible) Monday through Friday, take one minute and pray for Bethany's provision and fruitfulness in ministry. We need provision. We also need God to guide and bless the work of our hands. *Third, we are fasting one meal a week.* We are reinforcing with hunger, our spiritual cry for provision and fruitfulness. We've provided a tear off sheet (in the back of the bulletin) for you to post at home. *Fourth, we are exploring in worship how to pray to victory.* God is working with us to show the world what he does when people actually believe.

The key to praying to victory is praying. Honestly, the most important teaching about prayer is to do it.

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8, NIV)

Everything else we talk about equips you to ask.

Last week, I shared how I prayed for a car when I could not afford to buy or insure a reliable one. I asked God for a blue, 4-wheel drive Toyota Tercel. I was given a red Ford that was reliable, and easier to maintain and insure. Red was the favorite color of my car-crazy toddler. I didn't tell you that my wife, Diane, was not praying for a blue Toyota Tercel. She was praying for a reliable car, affordable to maintain and insure. My prayer didn't come to God as an isolated request. It involved other people and so God responded to all our requests. He answered my prayer in a way that responded to all our prayers.

I'll never forget a story told by Tony Campolo. He is one of my favorite Christian professors and evangelists. One day he was scheduled to speak at a location in his home area. In the back room a small group prayed for him. He became irritated because they weren't praying for him. They were praying for Bobby (or George, I can't remember the name. I can't remember the address either, so let me just wing it). They were praying:

Lord, don't let Bobby walk out on his wife. Lord, you know where Bobby lives, there at Oak and Elm, on the corner, in the white house with brown shutters. He's fixing to leave his wife. Don't let him.

They kept that up for a time, and Tony thought, "God knows where Bobby lives. He doesn't need directions to Oak and Elm." After the meeting, Tony picked up a hitch-hiker. Tony wanted to witness to God's love in Christ. He said, "Hi, I'm Tony Campolo, what's your name?" The guy responded, "Bobby." Tony didn't say another word. He took the next exit, crossed the bridged and reentered the freeway, headed in the direction they came from. Frightened, Bobby cried, "What are you doing?" Tony said, "I'm taking you home. You're not walking out on your wife." Without another word, Tony drove to Oak and Elm and parked in front of the white house with brown shutters. With eyes wide-open Bobby asked, "Who told you?" Tony responded accurately, "God!" The next few minutes were fun. Bobby went into the

house, and walked out to the car with his wife. This time her eyes were wide-open. The two reconciled and in time were called to shepherd (lead) a congregation.

Although this is a dramatic answer to prayer, it is not abnormal. The same God who worked with Tony is at work in your prayers. You have so much more influence over the circumstances you face than you think. The two Scripture lessons we read today are all about your impact. You are not a victim. You are not helpless. You are not hopeless. You are not a spectator. You are a player. Let's examine what God says about you and your prayers.

In Mark 11, Jesus' disciples see a withered fig tree. I don't know how shriveled. It was noticeable; and it was a clear sign that in just the 24 hours since Jesus cursed the tree, it was dying if not dead. The disciples pointed to the tree and remembered Jesus' curse with amazement. Here's Mark's record of Jesus' response:

"Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. (Mark 11:22-24, NIV)

In the context of cursing a fig tree, Jesus tells his followers to have faith in God. Human beings were actually made in the image of God and given authority to rule this earth. We need to believe that. We need to believe that our words and deeds create destiny and write history. I've seen flippant, bitter words dry up more than trees. I've seen it sap the hope and life out of people. I've seen ministries and churches wither under accusing words. I've also seen words of hope restore what was lost. Jesus says that if anyone tells this mountain (and I imagine he pointed to it), "'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt... it will be done for him." Jesus is saying that you have great authority, defining authority over creation. He is also saying that you don't define the exact timing and method of your orders. We don't doubt things that

happen immediately upon our request or command. We give up when we don't see results in the timeframe we expect, or when we see opposition. In doing so, we squander the authority God gave us. Jesus then translates our need for faith in exercising authority over creation to faith in praying to our Father. He says:

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. (Mark 11:25, NIV)

Jesus is not giving us a formula here. He is not telling us how to manipulate our heavenly Father, so we get what we want. When I was in college, a few of my Christian classmates prayed for their eyes to be healed. Then, believing they had been healed, they took their glasses off. I don't remember how long they went without their glasses, but I do remember that each of them eventually put them back on. In Christian ministry circles, we call this the *name-it, claim-it* model. (Now, you may notice that I take my glasses off, but I don't do it for healing. I just haven't learned to wear them and talk at the same time without fiddling with them.) Some people have experienced healing with this prayer model, and there is a large number of congregations and pastors that have arisen from that fruit. At least one of my Rochester pastor friends and his congregation holds a theology pretty close to this.

Some members of one United Methodist congregation I led held to this understanding. I witnessed some amazing healing through their prayers; however, I also saw deep hurt as some of my parishioners felt accused of lacking faith when they remained sick. I concluded as a young pastor that people were being healed through their ministry and people were being hurt through their ministry. Obviously, there was something powerful about believing prayer; however, there was also something amiss in their understanding and application of it. These weren't dumb or evil people leaving a trail of healing and hurt. They were genuine followers of Jesus, seeking to

grow into the fullness of who he is. They are your spiritual brothers and sisters whether you claim them or not.

Jesus talked of a positive faith, a confident expectation, not because of the formula, but because of your relationship with your Heavenly Father. Your belief in Christ is to bring you into fellowship with God. As you grow in sync with him, in sync with his heart and will, you partner with your heavenly Father and continue the works of Jesus on this earth. I think that is why Jesus' exhortation on believing and receiving is followed by these words.

And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. (Mark 11:25, NIV)

When you and the heavenly Father are not separated by judgment, specifically your judgment of others, so that you are extending mercy to others as you draw mercy from him, then you are in right relationship, and you can pray with confidence.

That is exactly the message in James. Elijah was no less dependent on forgiveness than you and I are. Connected with God through faith, having the heart of a servant, he controlled the weather and economy of his nation for three years by his prayers. He did it for the redemption of his people... as any child formed by God would.

Through the cross Jesus has reached out to return to you the rights, lost by sin, to live as a child of God. As a child, you are to grow to the full measure of Jesus in intimacy and ministry with God. Jesus calls you to pray. Jesus calls you to an intimate, confident, fruitful life of prayer that reveals his salvation to this world. Go after the improbable. Go after the impossible. Expect to learn God's heart and mind in response to your prayers. Don't give in to silence. You ask until you hear and don't give up. Truly, Jesus bates you to pray. He bates you, so that God can be glorified through answers to your prayers. Pray to victory!