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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## That Mountain Moved!

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SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ APRIL 9, 2017

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**F**or our Scripture reading this morning, I have included one passage that I suspect is often passed over because it does not seem to have a lot of information in it. That is always a dangerous thing to do with a passage of Scripture for if it is in the Bible, the Holy Spirit left it there for a reason. Even those boring old genealogies have a reason to be in the Bible, so never take a passage of Scripture for granted. I also include passages of Scripture this morning that I believe to be among some of the most misused and misunderstood; hopefully we will be able to do these verses justice. You will find them in the Gospel of Mark 11:11-14, 20-25.

*And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.*

*<sup>12</sup>On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. <sup>13</sup>And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. <sup>14</sup>And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.*

*<sup>20</sup>As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. <sup>21</sup>And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." <sup>22</sup>And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. <sup>23</sup>Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it*

*will be done for him. <sup>24</sup>Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. <sup>25</sup>And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."*

It is not unusual for Bible readers to assume that after Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the first thing He did was go to the Temple to clear out the moneychangers. One of the reasons why people make this assumption is because in the Gospel of Matthew after Jesus' triumphant entry, it is the next story Matthew chooses to tell. Likewise, in the Gospel of Luke, the main story he chooses to tell next is of chasing off the moneychangers from the Temple.

Mark clarifies the timeline for us. In verse 11, the verse that people tend to pass over, he says that after Jesus came into Jerusalem He went to the Temple where He looked around at everything that was going on. When it got late, He went back to Bethany on the other side of the Mount of Olives where He had come from. It was the next morning that He cleared out the Temple.

The question is: What was He doing at the Temple; at what was He looking? The historians tell us that the first day of the week of Passover was what we might call "lamb choosing day." It was the day on which the rabbis and priests looked over all the lambs that had been provided for the Passover sacrifice and picked the ones that they were going to use. Why did they have to be so particular about which ones they chose? The law said that these lambs must be without blemish, perfect, so they were chosen very carefully. This was done early in the week so they could observe the chosen lambs to make sure there really was not anything wrong with them; they were not sick, or lame or had some other defect that they had not noticed when they were first picked.

You might have had a similar experience when buying a car, particularly a used car. At first glance, it might appear to be in perfect condition; good paint, no dents, upholstery all right, working air

conditioning, radio turns on, and so forth. But, after you have driven it for a couple of days, you might start to notice its quirks. Maybe the air-conditioning is not as consistent as you had thought, or maybe there are little problems with the engine; all things you find out after the fact. The rabbis wanted to make sure that these lambs were, in fact, perfect.

I hope you begin to understand why Mark mentioned this in the Scripture. You see, it was appropriate for Jesus to be there during the lamb selection. It is as if Jesus were saying, "You are choosing these lambs, but Almighty God has chosen Me to be the Sacrificial Lamb. Here I am. You need to be choosing Me!" Which, of course, they did not.

In a way, though, they actually did choose Him without realizing it, because over the next few days, what did they do? They examined Jesus. They tested Him, questioned Him, and tried to trip Him up. And, from where did those lambs come? Those lambs were raised just outside of Bethlehem. From where did Jesus come, where was He born? Bethlehem! The Lamb that Almighty God chose was there in the Temple that night during the lamb choosing ritual.

Before Jesus cleanses the Temple, He has an encounter with the fig tree. The first time I read this story as a child, I thought, "What a sad story! How uncharacteristic of the loving Jesus. Why would He be so cruel to this fig tree?" In verses 12 and 14 in the Gospel of Mark, it says that He was hungry coming back from Bethany, saw a fig tree in the distance and noticed that "it was in leaf." He went to get some fruit from this tree, but there was no fruit because, as the text says, "it was not the season for figs." I wondered, "Why be so mad at the tree; it was just being an ordinary fig tree." But that was exactly the problem. It was just being an ordinary tree. It was as if Jesus were saying to that tree, "How dare you be ordinary at an extraordinary time!" Regardless of the life cycle of the fig tree, the Son of God was there at that moment looking for fruit and there was no fruit! The purpose of the tree was to bear fruit and when the Son of God was standing there, there was not any.

Why was Jesus cursing the tree? The fig tree had always been a symbol for the Nation of Israel, as it still is today. Mark notes that it was full of leaves so the outward appearance of this tree indicates that it was a healthy fig tree, but it was not bearing fruit. What Jesus was saying here is, "Oh Israel, from outward appearance, you look like God's people. You have all the rituals, you have the Temple worship, you are satisfying all the traditions; it would seem that you are acting like God's people, but you are not bearing the fruit for which the Son of God is looking." In cursing the tree and causing it to wither, we are reminded of the ebb and flow of Israel's faithfulness throughout the Old Testament.

Now, before we get too self-righteous about pointing fingers at ancient Israel, there is a similar teaching for God's church. Early in the Book of Revelation, John is instructed to write a letter to seven churches. As seven is a complete number, the letter is meant to go to the whole Church; he singles out seven churches in Asia Minor. John writes using the symbol of seven candle stands. Remember how Jesus taught not to put a candle under a bushel basket but on a stand to light the whole house? God's church is supposed to be a light in the world and we are supposed to be blessing the world. There are seven candle stands with the Son of God moving around and among them, meaning that Jesus is with the churches. We are not alone; He is with us.

In each one of those letters save one, the Spirit says to John and to the churches, "Listen, you are doing great, but there are a few things I have against you and if you do not repent and go back to your first love, I cannot use you anymore so I am going to remove your candle stand." In speaking to Israel, He is saying, "Remember the covenant that God made with Abraham from the very beginning? What was the whole point of forming this nation? It was so that "all the families of the world would be blessed," as it says in Genesis 18:18. From the very beginning, it was a worldwide mission; it was the way in which God would reach the whole world. If you are not doing what I told you to do, if you are not different from the rest of the world, I

cannot use you.” That is what Jesus is trying to teach through the cursing of the fig tree; the lesson is the same. “If you are not faithful as individuals or as a whole people, I cannot use you.” The Great Commission is to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them all that I commanded you” (Matt .28:19-20) .

For what kind of fruit is He looking in Mark 11? These are not random passages, there is a logic that goes through them. In verses 22 and 23 He says, “Have faith in God.” How often do we say that we believe in God, but then we put our faith and trust in other things? When push comes to shove at particular times in our lives, we trust in ourselves and our ability to do things, to work things out, or to persevere. At other times we trust some leader, the government or some other agency, or some other way of doing things to set things right. But when He says, “Believe in God,” He is saying, “It is the umbrella under which everything else in life must be seen. The way we view the world, the way we view our problems, and the way we view our mission should all be under the umbrella of believing in God.”

Jesus uses the metaphor of the mountain. What is this mountain? It is an example of Jesus speaking **parabolically**. Oftentimes He speaks in a parable; He is not going to waste His teaching on something for which we have no need. We have no need to move the mountain and throw it into the sea. He is not talking about literally moving a mountain, but what He is talking about are the times when there are obstacles in our lives—obstacles that seem as difficult or as impossible to overcome as moving a literal mountain. These obstacles get in our way and impede our ability to follow God’s will for our lives; they weaken our witness as disciples of Jesus, sometimes even causing contradictions. In one breath, we claim to believe what Jesus taught, but then we live out something entirely different. We are supposed to be living the victorious life; we are supposed to have the peace that passes all understanding, but these obstacles rob us of that joy and corrode our hearts. They can deflate our spirit and they can destroy our soul.

But “what is impossible for human beings,” the Scripture says, “is possible with God.” Those things that God calls us to do and to be may seem awfully difficult for us, but they are possible with Him. As He says, “If we believe in our hearts that it is true, then it will happen” (Mark 11:23). You might ask, “Believe what?”

You will notice that the first thing in Jesus’ continuing logic about moving mountains is prayer. As He says in verse 24, “therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer...” We must remind ourselves of what Jesus has already taught about prayer. When we take a passage like this out of context, we tend to make it mean things that Jesus never intended. We must look at what else Jesus said about prayer. He said in Mark 11:24, “Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received and it will be yours.” In Luke 11:1, Jesus’ disciples said, “teach us how to pray” and Jesus said, “pray like this...” He also gives us the Lord’s Prayer during the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6). There is not a thing wrong with repeating by rote the prayer that Jesus gave us, but I do not believe that is the only reason He gave it. He gave it to us because He is trying to model for us how we are supposed to approach prayer even when praying with our own words. He is telling us what we should include in our prayer and the attitude we should have as we approach prayer.

Look at the very beginning of the Lord’s Prayer. What is the first thing that Jesus teaches us about prayer in His model of the Lord’s Prayer? The first line is “Our father who art in heaven.” In this case, “Our father” is the very familiar and loving term “Abba” which is like “daddy” ... one with whom we have a familiar intimacy. And with whom is it we have such intimacy? What is the next phrase? “Who art in heaven...” This implies that we are talking to the Almighty Creator and Sovereign of the universe. What a privilege it is to speak to God in prayer, and sometimes we do it as nonchalantly as if we were talking to the pizza guy. We are talking to the Almighty Sovereign of the universe! What Jesus teaches us is that the very first thing we should do whenever we pray is to have clear in our minds to Whom it is we are talking, because that will color the

way in which we talk to Him. When we realize to Whom we are talking, what is our first inclination? What is the next line? “Hallowed be thy name”—meaning, when I realize that I am talking to the Almighty Sovereign of the universe, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, my first inclination is to fall on my knees and worship. When we pray to God, we worship Him. First, bring praise when you pray. That is the model that Jesus gives. Why does He start this way? It is because, when we realize to Whom we are talking, and realize that this is the One Whom we worship, it should become obvious to us what this conversation is about. Who are we to tell Him what to do!

What is the next line? “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” In other words, what this prayer is about is seeking His will, not telling Him what to do. What this prayer illustrates is that whatever we ask in prayer, in this conversation with God, the whole point is to seek His will. Saying that “prayer works” might not really be the appropriate statement; prayer is not a general formula that is used to get God to do something. “God works through praying people” is the more correct statement. What Jesus is inviting us to do is to engage God in a conversation, to seek His will. When we believe what it is we are talking about, it will happen because God will work out His purpose in our lives. It reminds us, though, that God oftentimes answers prayers in ways which we do not expect.

For a moment of levity, I want to share an image that will hopefully stay in your mind in this regard. God answers prayers in ways which we do not expect. When I was a very young man, a teenager I suppose, I fancied the idea that someday I would be able to own and drive a Mercedes-Benz. I had heard that the engineering was fantastic and I thought they were cool, and that it would be neat to have the income to afford a Mercedes-Benz. I have never gotten one and I never will, but that is beside the point. It has become part of the family folklore now, sort of a continuing joke throughout our family: Steven and his Mercedes. And not just any Mercedes, but a *red* Mer-

cedes! I have been getting “razzed” for decades about someday getting my red Mercedes. Now, taking this passage out of context, if I were to go to God and pray for a red Mercedes, and believe that I would get a red Mercedes, does that mean I would automatically receive one?

A few weeks ago, when I was up in Philadelphia defending my doctoral project, I received a phone call from my wife, Nanette. She said, “Steven, I just wanted to let you know that I’ve arranged for us to have a red Mercedes for \$38 a month.” I exclaimed, “What, what, what! Say that again!” And she repeated, “I got us a red Mercedes at \$38 a month.” “This just can’t be!” I thought. “First of all, this is so out of character; we’re married, we make joint decisions. You don’t just go out and acquire a costly vehicle without talking together about it. Besides, who gives one for \$38 a month! Does this thing have a motor? How do you get a Mercedes-Benz with \$38 a month?”

Well, it was Compassion Sunday ... and our little guy’s last name is Mercedes, and in his picture, he’s wearing a red shirt, and his support costs \$38 a month. Okay, I got my red Mercedes, and for a lot less money than I thought it was going to cost, and much better than the one I had imagined! Obviously, this is a moment of levity; this is a creative coincidence orchestrated by my wife’s imagination, but I hope this imagery stays in your mind. Learn the lesson of the red Mercedes. Oftentimes, God answers prayer in ways in which we do not expect because it will be according to His will and His purpose, not according to ours.

In today’s scripture, what example does Jesus cite as an immovable mountain? Forgiveness. Look at verse 25, “And whenever you stand praying, forgive.” Why does He choose this as the best example? Because it is the most essential element of what Christianity is all about; it is the essence of what Jesus Christ came to accomplish: God’s grace in our lives ... a reconciliation between the Creator and the created. It is also the core of what we are called to be and to do in this world ... a reconciling community. It is a perfect example because it is so difficult. That is why it is so powerful.

All of us have had hurts and traumas in our lives. It is the price we pay for living in a fallen world. We have had to deal with the sins of others as well as our own. We perceive rightly, or sometimes wrongly, who is to blame. How often have we resolved, "I will never forgive"? We say, "It is impossible! I am justified in my anger, and I will not do it!" How many times, even if we have wanted to forgive, have we convinced ourselves that it is still impossible; that we **cannot** do it?

Friends, like prayer, the subject of forgiveness is large enough that it is a whole sermon for another day. But for the moment, it is enough to point out that a generous, forgiving spirit is natural fruit of a born-again disciple of Jesus; one who is transformed from the inside out. It is as if that generous inclination to move toward reconciliation were in our DNA.

We need to understand what forgiveness is and what it is not, but for today here is the part that I want to focus on. The stumbling block, the mountain, the obstacle that often stands in our way and which remains unmoved, preventing us from being able to forgive, is very often the fact that we have not fully embraced or fully experienced the full extent of God's grace for us! That is what Lent and Holy Week are about. They are to give you another opportunity to embrace, to the depth of your soul, what God has done for you in Jesus Christ.

Perhaps one of the reasons why a person would not fully embrace this is because he holds onto the illusion that there really is not much to be forgiven. After all, he says, "I am basically a good person. What is all the fuss about? I live a good life, I am not like that other person." As if "that person" were the standard by which we are being judged. "I am basically a good person. What do I need with all this forgiveness? But that person who hurt me, that is a different story! Did you see what that guy did?"

Perhaps another reason why we do not fully embrace God's grace is that, although we may want it to be true, we just cannot believe that

God is that good. We just cannot believe that God could be that gracious and forgiving. Perhaps, even if we accept that maybe God could be that gracious and forgiving, we stubbornly choose to hold onto our own burdens because we insist that we cannot forgive ourselves.

Now friends, if any of these, or any other scenario, describes you, you must understand that when you hold onto those attitudes, you deny the Gospel of Christ. First, for the one who thinks, "I am okay," you must understand that the Bible reveals that Almighty God is a God of holiness and justice who will not and cannot tolerate sin, and He certainly will not tolerate it in His presence. He will not let sin go unanswered. So, when we understand the full extent of His righteousness, which is the standard by which we are judged, we understand that we are all under His condemnation. There is something at stake, my friend, and the Scripture says in 1 John 1:8, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." No amount of self-righteous striving will satisfy God's judgment. This is ultimately a good thing because it tells us that ultimately there is justice in the world, but understand that this justice applies also to us. The second thing the Scripture reveals is that God's most outstanding characteristic is that He is a God of love and He has not left us alone; He has, in fact, provided a way to deal with our sin problem.

This brings us back full circle to the first passage that we looked at this morning: Jesus Christ is the Lamb that Almighty God has chosen to solve our sin problem and to satisfy His justice. Jesus Christ paid the price so we did not have to when He was put on that cross and experienced unspeakable suffering to satisfy God's justice. We all must understand and hear this. Jesus, being God in the flesh, being all-knowing and omnipresent, as He hung on that cross and suffered that unspeakable pain, had you and me in mind. Your name, your face and who you are, were in his mind. He said, "I am willing to obey my Father and suffer this because I want to spend eternity with [you]!" Yes, God is that good! Before He gave up His last breath, Jesus proclaimed, "It is finished." Jesus accomplished what He had come to accomplish.

For those of you who say, “Okay, I will accept that. That is what God did. But, you know what I have done, Steven?” I do not have to know what you have done, but I do know what He did. “But,” you say, “I can never forgive myself.” Well, if that is true for you, I must ask, “Why do you want to take God’s job?” Ultimately you do not have the authority to forgive sins; that is God’s job. Secondly, if you were to presume to do that, are you telling me that you have a higher standard than God does? You say, “God can forgive me, but I will not.” If you insist on that, you deny that Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was sufficient.

When we can fully embrace what God has done in Jesus Christ, it is then and only then, that we will be enabled to hear God’s call to go and do likewise. To live a life of grace and to share hope, love, and reconciliation, whether the other person chooses to participate or not, is what Jesus calls us to do. What is in your heart? What do you represent? Who are you? What fruit are you going to bear?

As witnesses to God’s grace to which we have committed our deepest faith, we can begin to see that the mountain **can** move! When Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, works out His purpose in our lives, that mountain **will** move, and we can be freed from the prison of bitterness and hate that poisons our hearts and corrodes our souls as we witness to the love of God in this world. That is the fruit for which the Son of God is looking ... not only for us to believe the reconciling love of God, but to live it and to love others, even as He has loved us. That is why, my friends, after so many centuries, we are the ones who stand at the foot of the cross of a condemned man who became sin, and outside the empty tomb of that condemned man, and with a palm branch in our hand declare with every ounce of our being, “He is my King! He is my Savior! He is my Sovereign Lord!”



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