



Clears

Jesus expects His followers to remove obstacles to prayer.

MARK 11:15-25

Many people face issues related to heart disease. One of the most common problems is atherosclerosis, or blocked arteries, restricting the flow of blood. Like blockages restricting blood flow, obstacles can develop in our prayer lives that hinder us from effectively communicating with God. It is important that we recognize these blockages and know how to treat them.

- **What are some warning signs that might indicate a person has an unhealthy prayer life?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

MARK 11:1–12:44

Mark 11 recalls the beginning of Jesus’s last week before His crucifixion on Friday. The week started with what is often called the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which we observe as Palm Sunday (11:1-11). As He approached Jerusalem riding on a donkey, people spread their clothes on the road, a recognition of His royalty. Others waved palm branches, symbolizing Jewish nationalism. They shouted, “Hosanna,” in recitation of Psalm 118:26, asking Jesus to save them. This journey traveled down the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, and into the temple through the Eastern Gate. The people had high hopes concerning Jesus, but were those hopes justified? They obviously expected a Messiah who would overthrow Roman oppression in Jerusalem; they longed for political independence. Even the strongest hopes that are misplaced will not come to pass.

That evening, Jesus went to Bethany, about two miles southeast of Jerusalem, to spend the night (11:11). His friends—Mary, Martha, and Lazarus—lived there (John 11:1). On the way back into the city on Monday, He encountered a fig tree that had leaves but no fruit (Mark 11:12-14). The fig tree was a symbol of Israel, and Jesus would use that symbolism to speak to the barrenness of His people who were rejecting their King during the week of Jesus’s passion.

As Jesus came into the city of Jerusalem, He was incensed at what He saw in the temple (11:15). The temple was a segregated place, with a court for the Gentiles, a court for women, and a court for Israelite men. Greedy leaders had turned the court of the Gentiles into a place of commerce instead of a place of prayer. Approved sacrifices lined the courtyard, and they had to be purchased with temple currency, which was available to exchange with other currency for a price. Tables were set up to change this currency. This provided the setting for Jesus’s actions and thoughts about prayer.

- **As you read Mark 11:15-25, highlight the conditions for answered prayer. Summarize in your own words what these verses teach about prayer.**

EXPLORE THE TEXT

ZEALOUS (MARK 11:15-17)

¹⁵ They came to Jerusalem, and he went into the temple and began to throw out those buying and selling. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling doves, ¹⁶ and would not permit anyone to carry goods through the temple. ¹⁷ He was teaching them: “Is it not written, My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a den of thieves!”

VERSES 15-16

Entering the temple complex, Jesus saw that the thirty-five-acre court of Gentiles had become a place of commerce instead of a place Gentiles could pray. Money changers were exchanging currencies because Jewish men were expected to pay a temple tax of a half-shekel each year (Ex. 30:11-16). The tax could not be paid in foreign currencies, which often had the images of pagan rulers or symbols. So it had to be exchanged for temple currency. Those who had traveled for a long distance needed to purchase an unblemished animal for sacrifice, and the temple courtyard offered this service. Doves were offered to the poor who could not afford the more expensive animals (Lev. 14:22; Luke 2:24). Oxen and sheep were also sold (John 2:14). It has been reported that a single merchant alone sold over 3,000 sheep per day during the times of the festivals. How could the Gentiles pray when such chaos existed in their place of prayer?

Jesus, in response to prophecy of the temple’s cleansing by the Messiah in Ezekiel 37:26-28 and Malachi 3:1-4, took authority that had belonged to the high priest and began to ***throw out those buying and selling***. This is the same word used of exorcisms of demons in other New Testament passages. He removed the blockages to prayer—physically and spiritually—as He cleansed the temple. He also turned over the ***tables of the money changers***, spilling the visible symbols of greed in the temple. Then He overturned the ***chairs of those selling doves***.

John mentioned the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry (John 2:13-17), while the other three Gospels include the cleansing in the last week of Jesus’s life. It is possible that Jesus cleansed the temple twice, but it is equally possible that John placed the cleansing at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry for theological reasons. Both places demonstrate Jesus’s zeal for prayer and for the Gentiles.

BIBLE SKILL: Observe when and for what purpose a New Testament passage includes an Old Testament quotation.

Identify the Old Testament passage quoted by Jesus in Mark 11:17. Read the quoted passages in their Old Testament context. Then search for answers to these questions: Why did Jesus use the quoted passage? What factors are different in the old and new contexts? What factors are the same or similar? How does the quoted passage help you better understand Jesus's teaching?

VERSE 17

The disciples, no doubt, wondered why Jesus would take such action, unlike any they had seen to this point, in cleansing the temple. Therefore, Jesus **was teaching them**. He quoted from Isaiah 56, a passage that spoke of foreigners who would “join themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to become his servants” (Isa. 56:6). The only place these people were allowed to pray and worship was in the court of the Gentiles, and the merchants were preventing them from exercising that privilege. Mark alone included the words from Isaiah, **for all nations** (Isa. 56:7). As a Gospel to the Gentiles, this would have encouraged Mark’s readers greatly as Jesus made space for them to pray and worship.

Jesus also quoted Jeremiah 7:11 (**But you have made it a den of thieves**). That passage was originally addressed to those who were breaking the commandments of God and acting unjustly toward one another, yet still came to the temple to participate in their religious rituals (Jer. 7:9-10). The verse Jesus quoted was followed by a warning that God would judge them for their callousness toward true worship (7:12-15). Jesus was both clearing space for prayer and reminding those involved in the administration of the temple that they would be judged for robbing the Gentiles of their right to pray.

- How do the things that keep people from worshiping God today compare to what Jesus removed?
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KEY DOCTRINE: *The Scriptures*

Scripture reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. (See Isaiah 40:8; Hebrews 4:12.)

JEALOUS (MARK 11:18-19)

¹⁸ **The chief priests and the scribes heard it and started looking for a way to kill him. For they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was astonished by his teaching.** ¹⁹ **Whenever evening came, they would go out of the city.**

VERSES 18-19

The cleansing of the temple was a direct threat to the Sanhedrin, made up of *the chief priests and the scribes*. When they heard that Jesus had driven out those selling sacrifices and turned over the money changers' tables, they sought *a way to kill him*. This was not the first time in Mark's Gospel that a group had conspired to kill Jesus. After Jesus had healed a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath, "immediately the Pharisees went out and started plotting with the Herodians against him, how they might kill him" (Mark 3:6). In that case, Jesus had threatened their man-made rules concerning the Sabbath; in this case, Jesus threatened their man-made rules concerning the temple. However, this time it was costly financially in addition to a challenge of their authority. The religious leaders' jealousy clung to their own authority and power, and it blinded their eyes to the truths of Scripture Jesus quoted.

- What is the connection between jealousy and human pride?
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○ How can jealousy get in the way of prayer?

People reacted to Jesus in two ways. The religious leaders were *afraid* of Him. They feared how the *whole crowd* would react if they harmed Jesus. On the other hand, the crowd was *astonished by his teaching*. This had been the disciples' response to His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:28). This was also the response of the crowd when Jesus refuted the Sadducees' doctrine in Matthew 22:33. In Mark's Gospel, crowds had been astonished by both the teaching and miracles of Jesus (Mark 6:2). The cleansing of the temple was both an active demonstration and a clear moment of teaching. Though the people were still processing what it meant, the religious leaders were afraid of the consequences of harming Jesus at this point.

When *evening came*, Jesus left Jerusalem. As He had done the previous night after the triumphal entry, He returned to His friends' home in Bethany. Bethany was where He was staying during the crowded Passover season in Jerusalem. It served as a place of hospitality, not a refuge from danger for Jesus. Out of jealousy, the religious leaders may have feared Jesus, but He did not fear them. He cared more for the spiritual condition of the Gentiles than He did the man-made rules of the chief priests and scribes.

DID YOU KNOW?

The fig tree is mentioned nearly sixty times in the Bible. Its leaves are first mentioned in Genesis 3:7. In the Middle East, the leaves of the fig tree develop in April and May, and ripe figs are present from June until November. An early crop of small, green figs could be found in March even before leaves appeared on the tree.

MIRACULOUS (MARK 11:20-25)

²⁰ Early in the morning, as they were passing by, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. ²¹ Then Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." ²² Jesus replied to them, "Have faith in God. ²³ Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, everything you pray and ask for — believe

that you have received it and it will be yours. ²⁵ And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven will also forgive you your wrongdoing.”

VERSES 20-21

As Jesus and His disciples returned the next morning to participate in Passover festivities, they passed by the same fig tree that He had cursed in verses 12-14. The **fig tree was withered from the roots up**, which was astonishing to the disciples because previously it had leaves (v. 13). Jesus had cursed the tree, and it had withered on the vine. Peter, calling Jesus **Rabbi**, sought understanding by noting that the tree had withered after Jesus **cursed** it.

The meaning of the encounter with the fig tree was clear. The religious system of Israel had leaves but no fruit. As a tree with no figs cannot satisfy the physical appetite, neither can a fruitless religion satisfy the spiritual appetite. Even though the figs were not in season when Jesus cursed the tree, the meaning was the same—fruitless religion was parallel to a fruit tree that had no fruit.

VERSES 22-23

Though it may appear at first glance that Jesus’s words in these verses do not connect with the account of the fig tree, they fit nicely. Jesus encouraged His disciples to **have faith in God**. Many people had placed their faith in the withered fig tree—the temple and its observances—and had forgotten that the temple was to point them to God. The religious leaders had let them down. God—not the temple—should be the object of their faith.

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Jesus demonstrated the power of faith by announcing that the one who did not **doubt in his heart, but believes** could speak to the mountain and cast it into the sea. A mountain was symbolic of difficulty. On a clear day, one can stand on the Mount of Olives and look all the way to the Dead Sea. The imagery was picturesque in terms of the geography accessible to all in that moment. Perhaps Jesus was referring to the Temple Mount as being that mountain cast into the sea. In that case, Jesus was emphasizing the importance of faith over empty religious ritual. Faith in God would make the temple rituals obsolete, and that is exactly what happened when, at the death of Christ, the temple veil was torn into two pieces (Matt. 27:51).


VERSES 24-25

Jesus stated that faith is indispensable to answered prayer. The self-centeredness of the religious leaders had hindered the Gentiles' prayers in the place God had designed to meet with them. Jealousy of Jesus's influence over others had hindered the prayers of the religious leaders, who decided to kill Jesus rather than listen to Him. Miraculous faith, given to the believer by God, would be the element that opened those blockages to prayer in the lives of individuals. Verse 24 is not a plea for people to pray for God to change what is in His plan. Rather, it calls for a passionate pursuit of God by faith that allows us to see His plans accomplished in us. **Believe** and receive is not a blank check or a genie in a bottle but rather a call to tune our hearts to the will of God.

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In addition to faith, forgiveness is a prerequisite to answered prayer. Those who pray should examine their hearts to see if they are right with others (Matt. 5:23-24). Those who are forgiven will embrace a spirit of forgiveness toward others. Those who have experienced the grace of God cannot continue to harbor bitterness toward others. God's grace is undeserved; thus, we should realize that forgiveness must be freely granted to others and not earned by them.

 What prerequisites exist for God to answer a person's prayer?

 What is the role of faith in prayer? What is the role of forgiveness in prayer?

APPLY THE TEXT

- + Believers should seek to remove distractions from prayer, both for themselves and others.
- + Believers must be diligent to make sure their prayers are not hindered by jealousy.
- + Believers should pray with faith out of a forgiving heart.

As a group, identify actions can you take to make prayer a significant part of the group experience. Share ways you can pray for one another. Is there anything about your group that would create an obstacle for newcomers seeking God?

What is the biggest hindrance to your prayer life? How can you remove the obstacles that keep you from praying more effectively? What are your greatest prayer needs right now?

PRAYER NEEDS
