

YOU

Bible Study

Sermon Series: How to Share Christ

To be used with: Start with Prayer

Sermon Title Possibilities: The Glorious Power of Prayer

Scripture: Mark 11:20-26

Connection with Unit Theme: To complement the small group study How to Share Christ, these sermon outlines will follow the same theme as the small group study, so the pastor can reinforce the study from the pulpit.

Introduction: Several years ago, there was a popular book called Christianity in Crisis. The writer warned about what he called the “faith cult”. He was referring to certain preachers on television who say God wants everyone to be healthy and prosperous. Many of them go so far to say if you’re not healthy and prosperous, it’s because you don’t have enough faith. One of them has said, “Sickness does not belong to you. It has no part in the body of Christ. [God] promises to heal all – every one, any, any whatsoever, everything – all our diseases! That means not even a headache, sinus problem, not even a toothache – nothing! No sickness should come your way!” Another has said, “God intends for every believer to live completely free from sickness and disease. It is up to you to decide whether or not you will.” Such teachings are false. Our bodies are mortal, and thus even Christians are not immune to sickness and disease.

We have to be balanced when we talk about prayer. On the one hand, God is not our servant who bows to our every command. He runs the show and we do not. Because He is sovereign, He does not always do what we want, because what we want is not always in line with what He wants. On the other hand, He’s a big God, and He certainly is capable of doing great things through us and in us and among us. Many times, He does not choose to act until we pray and believe. He does this to test our level of commitment.

A strange scene.

A. Jesus and the disciples passed a fig tree that had withered.

1. Jesus had cursed this tree the day before.
 - a. He was on the way from Bethany to Jerusalem, and He was hungry.
 - b. The tree had no fruit, so He decreed it would never bear fruit again.
2. By this time, the tree was “dried up from the roots”.
 - a. It usually takes at least a few days for a dead tree to wither, but this one had completely withered overnight.
 - b. The tree’s condition made an impression on Peter.
 - According to early church tradition, Mark wrote his Gospel under Peter’s guidance. This incident clearly stuck in Peter’s mind.

B. Why did Jesus curse this tree?

1. The fig tree symbolized Israel.
 - a. Jesus had earlier told them a parable about a fig tree that had borne no fruit

(Luke 13:6-9). Now He was giving the disciples a vivid object lesson of that same truth.

- b. Israel had rejected God's prophets in the past, but now they were rejecting God's own Son.
 - No one – Jew or Gentile – can reject Jesus and go to heaven (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).
2. Jesus told Peter, "Have faith in God."
 - a. Nations come and go, but the Kingdom of God lives on!
 - b. None of us know what the future holds for America, but we can rest assured that God is still in control.

A powerful promise.

- A. Jesus spoke of having faith that "moves mountains".
 1. Did Jesus mean this literally?
 - a. Our God can certainly move mountains if He so chooses, but Jesus was probably thinking of something more practical.
 - b. Old Testament prophets sometimes used mountains as symbols of difficulty and hardship (Isaiah 40:4; Zechariah 4:7).
 2. Why do some prayers go unanswered?
 - a. It could be because of sin in your life (Psalm 66:18).
 - b. Your motives might be wrong (James 4:3-4).
 - c. Sometimes God simply has other plans (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).
- B. We have a big God, so we should pray in faith.
 1. God does not always answer prayers in the way we want, but He certainly won't respond if you don't pray (James 4:2).
 2. Are you praying with a sense of expectation?
 - a. That God will send spiritual awakening to America?
 - b. That He will change the hearts of political leaders who are wrong?
 - c. That He will do a great work in your church?
 - d. That He will give guidance to your pastor and other church leaders?

A word of warning.

- A. Jesus gave a very ominous warning about the sin of unforgiveness.
 1. Forgiveness is a vital part of prayer.
 - a. Jesus included it in the model prayer (Matthew 6:12).
 - b. Verse 26 does not appear in the earliest manuscripts, but Jesus did speak these words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:15).
 2. Why is forgiveness so important?
 - a. Our Lord has forgiven us of much more (Ephesians 4:32).
 - b. He paid a great price for our forgiveness.
 - c. If God was willing to forgive you, how do any of us dare say we are too good to forgive someone else?
- B. What happens when you refuse to forgive?
 1. You receive no forgiveness for your sins.
 2. Your prayers go unanswered (Isaiah 59:1-2).
 3. Your guilt increases with time, and so does your bitterness.
 - Have you ever known a professing Christian who was bitter all the time? Such people are constantly angry at the world and everyone in it. The bitterness has eaten away at them until it has completely taken over their person. I'm convinced

that much of this bitterness springs from a refusal to forgive. Someone has wisely said that bitterness is like drinking a cup of poison with the hope that it will kill someone else.

4. If you never forgive, you may need to examine yourself and see if you truly belong to Christ.
 - The story goes that John Wesley was preaching on forgiveness. After the service, a man came up to him and said defiantly, “I never forgive!” Wesley replied, “Then, sir, I hope you never sin.” ¹

Conclusion: Bertha Smith served as a missionary to China and Hong Kong for more than forty years. One of her colleagues was another famous Baptist missionary, Dr. Charles Culpepper. Both of them participated in the great Shantung revival of the 1920’s. They had their own individual perspectives on how the revival began, but this is how Miss Bertha told it. She said Mrs. Culpepper had a recurring condition called optic neuritis, which caused her to lose most of her sight in whatever eye was affected. It caused her untold frustration. The nearest eye specialist was over two hundred miles away, and there was no way she could get to see him. She and her husband finally asked the other missionaries to pray for her healing. The missionaries did a great deal of soul-searching to make sure their own hearts were right with God. They started confessing their sins to God and to one another, because they didn’t want their prayers to be hindered. They gathered around Mrs. Culpepper and prayed for her. Lo and behold, her eye was healed!

Everyone rejoiced over the healing, but Miss Bertha was bothered. She finally shared her concern with the other missionaries. She said, “What kind of missionaries are we? We’ve been doing all this praying and soul-searching so God would heal the physical eye of one of our own. Shouldn’t we also have been praying that God would open the spiritual eyes of the Chinese people to whom we have been sent?” The missionaries took her words to heart, and they began praying in earnest for the people of Shantung. Before long, churches that were half-empty began to have overflow crowds. People that had previously been unresponsive to the gospel began coming to Christ in droves. ²

There’s nothing wrong with praying for someone’s physical healing. We certainly should continue to pray for people struggling with sickness and various health issues. However, shouldn’t we pray even more earnestly that God would open the spiritual eyes of the people who live in our surrounding community?

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¹ Michael Green, ed., *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989, p. 152.

² Bertha Smith, *Go Home and Tell*, Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995, pp. 37-40.