

**Title:** ENCOUNTERING PRAYER

**Text:** Mark 11:12-25

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**Mark 11:12-25 (ESV)**

*On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. 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. And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it. And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. And when evening came they went out of the city. As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. 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. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 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."*

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## CONVERSATION STARTER

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- If you could talk with any influential performer, business person, or celebrity, who would it be and why? Why do you think access to influential people is usually difficult to gain? What are some historical examples of the Christian church denying certain people access to God? What are some contemporary examples?
- Read Mark 11:12-25. Why do you think Jesus curses the fig tree? Why do you think Jesus is so outraged about what is going on in the temple? Why does Mark place the temple scene in between two stories about the fig tree? What role does forgiveness play in one's prayer life according to Jesus?
- Read John 2:13-22. What differences and similarities do you see between this temple account and the one in Mark? Why is it significant that Jesus declares his own body to be the temple?
- Read the excerpt below. According to Yancey's description of the high priest below, what steps were required to approach God in the Old Testament temple system? How does Jesus fulfill these requirements? How should Jesus' role as the High Priest affect our sense of intimacy with God?
- Share some ideas about how we, as contemporary Christians, might extend access to God more intentionally. What roles do forgiveness and faith play in our access to God through prayer?

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**EXCERPT FROM:** *Disappointment with God*

**BY:** Philip Yancey

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From Greek philosophy, [Augustine] had learned about a perfect, timeless, incorruptible God, but he could not fathom how an oversexed, undisciplined person like himself could relate to such a God. He tried various heresies of the day and found them all unsatisfying, until he met at last the Jesus of the Gospels, a bridge between ordinary human beings and a perfect God.

The book of Hebrews explores this startling new advance in intimacy. First the author elaborates on what was required just to approach God in Old Testament times. Only once a year, on the Day of Atonement – Yom Kippur – could one person, the high priest, enter the Most Holy Place. The ceremony involved ritual baths, special clothing, and five separate animal sacrifices; and still the priest entered the Most Holy Place in fear. He wore bells on his robe and a rope around his ankle so that if he died and the bells stopped ringing, other priests could pull out his body. Hebrews draws the vivid contrast: we can now “approach the throne of grace with confidence,” without fear. Charging boldly into the Most Holy Place – no image could hold more shock value for Jewish readers. Yet at the moment of Jesus' death, a thick curtain inside the temple literally ripped in two from top to bottom, breaking open the Most Holy Place. Therefore, concludes Hebrews, “Let us draw near to God.” Jesus contributes at least this to the problem of disappointment with God: because of him, we can come to God directly. We need no human mediator, for God himself became one.