



# Jesus: God's Gentle Servant

Matthew 12:9-21

Text: Verses 15-21

Rev. Jerry Hamstra  
Riverside ARP Church  
August 25, 2019

This morning we saw from Elijah's prayer on Mount Carmel the centrality of knowing God for the life of the people of God. The Christian life is all about having a relationship with God through the salvation that is received through faith in Jesus Christ. And since Jesus is God, this applies to knowing Jesus as much as it applies to knowing God the Father. One of the most important things we can do is to grow in our knowledge of Jesus. That involves things like prayer and living life in relationship with Jesus. It also involves in thinking about Jesus as he is revealed in the Bible. And that is what we will do this evening by hearing the word of God to us from this passage in Matthew's gospel which gives us wonderful insight into the kind of person Jesus is. The title that the translators of the ESV have given to these verses is "God's Chosen Servant." The title that I have given to this sermon is "Jesus: God's Gentle Servant."

The passage that we will look at is surrounded by stories of the rejection of Jesus by the religious leaders of the Jews. Verses 1-8 of this chapter tell the story of the Pharisees confronting Jesus because his disciples were doing something on the Sabbath that they considered to be unlawful. Verses 9-14 tell the story of Jesus healing a man on the Sabbath. That section ends with these words, "But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him." In the verses that follow our text, the Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of "Beelzebul, the prince of demons." These are all stories of rejection of Jesus. And right in the middle of these stories of rejection Matthew has placed this passage which makes a wonderful connection between Jesus and a passage from Isaiah which had foretold of a

coming servant of God who would bring salvation to his people and to the world.

The quotation from Isaiah is given as an explanation to what Jesus did in response to the plot of the Pharisees to destroy him. Verse 15-16 say, "Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all and ordered them not to make him known." Jesus was aware of what the Pharisees were thinking about him and what they were plotting. And his response in this instance was to withdraw, to continue healing people and to tell the people not to make him known.

It is not that Jesus never confronted the Pharisees. In all the stories that surround our text, Jesus confronted the Pharisees with their ignorance of the ways of God. He also made exalted claims concerning himself and the significance of his ministry. In verse 8 he refers to himself as the "Son of Man" who is "lord of the Sabbath. In verse 28 he says, "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." Jesus here was claiming to be bringing the kingdom of God. That means that he was claiming to be establishing the rule of God on earth. The connotation of this claim to the Jewish mind must be understood in the light of the Old Testament expectation of God coming to earth with power to defeat his enemies and establish his rule. The message of John the Baptist gives us a sense of what the Jewish people were expecting in terms of the Kingdom of God.

When John the Baptist spoke of the one who was coming to establish God's kingdom on earth he spoke of one who was coming after him who was mightier than him. And this is the kind of language that he used to describe what the one coming after him would do. Matthew 3:12 "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

In the light of this expectation concerning the kingdom of God, Jesus behaviour as described in our text is quite remarkable. You would expect Jesus to confront the Pharisees with power and majesty and bring the wrath of God upon them. But instead of that he withdrew. And he told the people whom he healed "not to make him known." So

while Jesus certainly did confront the Pharisees with his teaching, he did not confront them with his actions in the sense of somehow overthrowing them and bringing the wrath of God upon them in judgment. He withdrew and he told the people who followed him not to make him known.

So there was a lack of aggressiveness in his actions. He did nothing to directly bring the justice of God upon the Pharisees. And while he did confront the Pharisees with the truth of God, he also withdrew from them and tried to minimize provoking them by telling his followers not to make him known. This kind of behaviour was not what Israel expected of the one who would bring the kingdom of God. They expected him to bring the judgment of God upon the wicked. They did not expect someone who would withdraw in the face of plots against him. They did not expect someone who would be seeking to fly under the radar.

And it is to explain this unexpected behaviour that Matthew makes the connection between Jesus and the words he quotes from the prophet Isaiah. He says that this behaviour of Jesus “was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah:” Matthew is making that point that Jesus is the expected coming deliverer and he is making the point that the fact that Jesus was not going around destroying his enemies by his power was also part of what Isaiah had prophesied about him.

Verse 19 of the quotation from the prophet Isaiah speaks to the behaviour that Jesus was exhibiting. “He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;” These words describe the servant of the Lord whom Isaiah prophesied would come to bring salvation. Though Isaiah, God had said what is recorded in verse 18, “Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.” The word “justice” here is an Old Testament way of referring to salvation. Justice refers to the way things ought to be and that is one of the ways of thinking about the salvation that Jesus came to bring. He came to bring about a world in which things are as they ought to be – a world of peace and harmony and justice. So Matthew by quoting this passage from Isaiah is making the point that

Jesus is the fulfillment of this prophecy. He is God's chosen servant. He is the one with whom God is well pleased. That in contrast with the Pharisees who were obviously not well pleased with Jesus.

So this passage is telling us that Jesus' withdrawing from rather than destroying the Pharisees and telling the people not to make him know is an indication that he had come on a mission of salvation rather than on a mission of judgment. In the light of the whole biblical teaching about Jesus, we know that when he comes the second time at the end of the world, he will fulfill the prophecies of God bringing judgment upon his enemies. But this passage is telling us that the time had not yet come for Jesus to come as a judge. While he warned of the judgment to come, the focus of his mission when he was on earth was on salvation. The point is the same as the point that John makes in John 3:17 when he writes, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

And in the process of making this point in our text, Matthew, quoting from Isaiah, presents us with some of the most wonderful and encouraging words in Scripture about Jesus. Verses 20-21 of our text: "a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory and in his name the Gentiles will hope." These words show us the gentle compassion of Jesus. A bruised reed is a weak thing. If you come upon a reed that is crushed at one point, it can no longer stand straight. A bruised reed is a symbol of great weakness. And so is a smoldering wick. A smoldering wick is a wick that is almost out. There is a little spark that remains, but there is no flame. When you blow out a candle, before it is completely dead, there is a spark and there is smoke. That is the picture here. It is a picture of something that is barely alive.

By these images, the text is referring to people. It is referring to people who are weak, who are struggling, who are broken and who are barely alive. The point is that Jesus deals gently and carefully with people who feel that they are like a bruised reed or a smoldering wick. This can be true of us physically, but also psychologically or spiritually. The assumption here is that sometimes people are very, very weak and any of us may feel this way from time to time or even on a regular basis.

Now the text does not specify exactly what kind of issues the images of the bruised reed and the smoldering wick represent. That lack of specificity means that the images can apply to a wide variety of people and situations. We must of course, interpret them in the light of the rest of the biblical teaching and Jesus' own teaching and behaviour. Jesus, for instance, was very clear about the consequences of refusing to submit to him and repent of sin. Only a few paragraphs earlier in Matthew's gospel we have the story of Jesus' warnings against the cities in which Jesus had done many mighty works, but the people did not repent. In chapter 11:24 Jesus says, "But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the Day of Judgment for the land of Sodom than for you." So the fact that Jesus is described as not breaking the bruised reed, or quenching the smoldering flax does not mean that Jesus affirms everyone and pays no attention to their sin. An important part of Jesus' message was that people who refuse to repent will perish. And we must interpret this saying about the bruised reed and smoking flax in the light of that important theme in his preaching.

But that does not mean that these words have no reference at all to unbelievers. I'm thinking of how Jesus interacted with sinners who were looked down upon by the religious establishment. Just think of the story of the celebration after the conversion of Matthew told in chapter 9 of this gospel. We are told that Jesus was having table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners. Because of this the Pharisees asked Jesus' disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" And in reply Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick... For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:12-13).

This is certainly one of the ways that Jesus does not break the bruised reed or quench the smoldering wick. These people were sinners and needed to repent of their sins, but Jesus was not ashamed to spend time with them. He saw them as people who needed what he was offering. He could have simply condemned them from afar. That would be an example of breaking a bruised reed or quenching a smoking flax. But Jesus did not do that. Instead he ate and drank with them and brought the gospel to them. He was among them as a physician seeking to bring healing to the sick. They were weak. They were sinners. They

were broken people. And Jesus was right there with them to bring the healing that he had to offer them.

So the imagery of Jesus not breaking the bruised reed or quenching the smoking flax speaks to Jesus gentleness in his dealing with sinners. Jesus was less gentle with people who were settled in their rejection of him, but he was gentle and tender toward those who were willing to hear his message and spend time with him. And that is a great encouragement for people today who are willing to hear Jesus' message and who are willing to spend time with his people. These texts that we are looking at show us Jesus' gentleness and compassion towards such people. Instead of breaking the bruised reed, he wants to bring healing. Instead of quenching the smoldering wick, he wants to gently blow on it to cause the flame to burn brightly.

And that must characterize our attitude towards this kind of people – people who are willing to listen to Jesus' message – people who are willing to spend time with us. We must be clear about the truth, as Jesus always was, but we must also imitate his gentleness and genuine love and compassion for sinners.

But there are other ways to apply these words about Jesus not breaking the bruised reed or quenching the smoking flax. He deals ever so gently with his people in their struggles. One thing that is clear from the Bible is that those who believe in Jesus are not immediately transported to a life without pain and suffering and struggle. Christians are not spared many of the sufferings that belong to life in a fallen world and the Christian life itself is called a fight in the Bible. The Bible makes it clear that while following Jesus is the best way to live and there are many profound blessings, it is not a life without suffering and struggle. And so there will be times when we feel like bruised reeds or smoking wicks and the words of our text are a wonderful encouragement for us as well.

One of the comforts is simply the fact that God in the Bible shows an awareness and a deep understanding of how weak and distressed we can sometimes feel. The fact that God in the Bible uses imagery like a bruised reed, or a smoldering wick reveals his sympathy and understanding of how weak and overwhelmed we can sometimes feel.

This is one of the wonderful characteristics of the Psalms. The language used in many of them describes accurately the pain and distress that we sometimes feel. So we read, for instance, in Psalm 6:3, "My soul also is greatly troubled." Or Psalm 34:18 "The LORD is near to the broken hearted and saves the crushed in spirit." Or Psalm 38:4 "For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me."

There are plenty of references in the New Testament like this besides our text. In the last verses of chapter 11 of Matthew, Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." In 2 Corinthians 1:8 Paul speaks of a time when he was "so utterly burdened beyond [his] strength that [he] despaired of life itself." In Romans 7:24 he cries out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

All of these verses show that God understands the discouragement and sense of defeat that his people sometimes feel. It may be because of suffering of some kind. It may be because of depression or discouragement. It may be that we are overwhelmed by our continuing sinfulness. For one reason or another we can feel crushed in spirit or greatly troubled or that the burden of our sins is too heavy for us. For one reason or another we can labor and feel heavy laden. For one reason or another we can feel that like a bruised reed or a smoldering flax.

The words of our text are a wonderful encouragement at such times. Jesus will not break the bruised reed or quench the smoldering wick. He is not harsh or lacking in empathy and sympathy. He is gentle and nurturing and encouraging. There is another verse in Isaiah that conveys the same sentiment about Jesus using the imagery of a shepherd. Isaiah 40:11, "He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young."

This is what Jesus is like to those who are struggling and who are looking to him for encouragement and strength to go on. He deals gently with us in our weakness. He binds up our wounds. He speaks words of encouragement and love. And he assures the doubting of his grace and

his mercy to the chief of sinners who is looking to him for forgiveness and acceptance.

Now this characteristic of our Lord comes at tremendous cost to him. We must understand this to get a more accurate measure of the greatness of his love and mercy. For Jesus is God. Jesus is divine. And what that means is that he must punish sin. Our sins cannot be just ignored. Notice that our text speaks of salvation in terms of justice. The salvation that Jesus came to bring involves justice. And justice means that our sins cannot just be overlooked and ignored. If anyone's sin was just overlooked and ignored, there could never be a world of justice and peace and harmony. And what that means is that for Jesus to not break a bruised reed or not quench a smoldering wick, he himself had to absorb the just penalty for sin. For Jesus to be gentle and nurturing to us in our weakness and sinfulness, he had to pay the penalty for our sins. That is the meaning of the cross. Apart from Jesus dying for our sins on the cross, his justice, the justice of God, would require that he gives us what we deserve. And if Jesus would give us what we deserve, there would be no place for gentleness and sympathy and compassion. If Jesus would give us what we deserve, all we could expect would be condemnation for that is what deserve. And that would be the case no matter how much we were suffering or how awful we felt.

So you see, it was incredibly costly for Jesus to be able to refrain from breaking bruised reeds and to refrain from quenching out smoldering wicks. It meant that he had to absorb the penalty for our sins. It meant that he had to bear the wrath of God against our sins. It means that he had to satisfy the justice of God by receiving the punishment that we deserve for our sins. And that increases the wonder of his sympathizing gentleness exponentially. Jesus' love was so great that he was willing to do whatever it took so that he could justly be gentle and compassionate to us in our great weakness and need.

And not only Jesus. We must never think that Jesus' paid for our sins so that the Father would love us. That is the completely wrong way of thinking about the Father. As John 3:16 tells us, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...." Going to the cross was not just Jesus' idea. It was the Father's idea as well. God in his love sent his Son to the death

of the cross so that we might be forgiven and justly embraced in love and favor.

We see this in our text as well. In verse 18 God says, “Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.” The characteristic of Jesus that we are considering from this text is shared by each of the three persons of the Triune God. God the Father chose Jesus to be his servant. Central to that mission was the cross. God the Father also put his Spirit upon the human nature of Jesus to equip him for the great assignment he had given him. So it is also by the Spirit that Jesus is so gentle and compassionate. The three are one. And the one is three. That is the mystery of the Trinity. One God. Three persons. And since they are one, the three are on the same page. The three share the same attitude of love and mercy towards sinners.

This is all a great encouragement to us when we are down; when we feel discouraged; when we are overwhelmed with sickness or our sinfulness, or depression. Everything can look so hopeless. And we can wonder how we can go on. Life can be wonderful. But it can also be hard. And there are times when we are overwhelmed. Then this characteristic of Jesus that is highlighted in these verses is what we need to dwell upon.

“He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench.” This is what we need to cling to when everything seems dark.

What a blessing it is that God is so aware of our struggles and that that awareness is reflected in his word. The Lord is high and lifted up. Jesus is Lord of all. All power and authority has been given to him. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. And yet he cares about our struggles and sorrows and discouragements. He knows what we have to go through, and he gently brings healing and relief. Not always in the way of physical healing. But the healing of our crushed spirits and broken hearts.

And the healing is mostly the knowledge of his love and mercy. The clear testimony of Scripture is that he does not always take away our

difficulties in this life, but that he gives us hope and encouragement and joy by revealing his love and compassion to us by his word and Spirit. He is the encouragement when we are discouraged. His love is what soothes our troubled souls. The characteristic of Jesus that has been our focus this evening is what gives us hope in our weakness, sinfulness, and suffering. Jesus cares. Jesus is gentle. Jesus heals bruised reeds and fans into flame smoldering wicks. And he does it by opening the eyes of our hearts to see his love and mercy. And so this is where we must focus our prayerful attention – on Jesus the gentle servant of God who does not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick.