GOD’S CHOSEN SERVANT

Matthew 12:1–50

Key Verse: 12:20

“A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory.”

Abraham Lincoln said, “Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.” Power is a scary thing. People tend to use it to dominate and control others. Often, those who represent large institutions use their power over individuals who are vulnerable and have no connections. But, as Foucault said, “Power is everywhere,” and it “comes from everywhere.” In everyday life people use whatever power they have to force others to conform to what they want. And people can abuse power in all kinds of ways. The old use their power over the young, the young over the old, men over women, women over men, the rich over the poor and the poor over the rich. Whenever people abuse power over others, it hurts and wounds. But Jesus is so different. He has the most power, but he uses it not to crush, but to heal.

In chapters 8–12 Matthew has been describing Jesus’ healing ministry. It illustrates that Jesus is the God of mercy. In his great mercy he invites all those who are weary and burdened to come to him and find rest for their souls (11:28, 29). But the religious legalists are critical, because Jesus isn’t doing things *their* way. Moreover, they see him as a threat to *their* positions, *their* power, *their* authority. Today Matthew quotes a prophecy to show that Jesus is God’s chosen servant, doing what the Messiah was supposed to do. In this world, when people are wounded, usually they’re ignored or run over by the strong. But to Jesus, wounded people are precious. He’s so patient with them. He works until they’re vindicated by God. As we reflect on today’s passage, let’s try to find in what ways we too may have been wounded. Let’s pray to experience Jesus’ gentle and tender healing. And let’s pray to grow in Jesus’ image, so that we won’t be hurting others, but healing.

Look at verse 1. Here Matthew emphasizes how hungry the disciples were—so hungry they couldn’t help themselves. It might look like they were stealing. Actually, God had taught his people not to harvest everything but to leave some, so that the poor among them could come and have it (Dt23:25). The problem here was that the disciples were taking leftovers on the Sabbath. The Pharisees were strict about the Sabbath. God had said to do no work on that day, and the Pharisees created an entire system of rules about it. In their system there were 39 categories of work on the Sabbath, and each category had many sub-categories. So they had thousands of Sabbath rules. People could walk only a certain number of steps on the Sabbath, or write only a certain number of letters on the Sabbath. The Pharisees thought they were being zealous for God’s law, but in real life, their system was crushing people. Look at verse 2. They were so excited to catch Jesus’ disciples doing something wrong. What the disciples were doing made Jesus look bad, like he wasn’t training them properly, like he didn’t care about God or about his law or about being holy or about the Sabbath.

How did he respond? Look at verses 3,4. Jesus said, “Haven’t you read…?” In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus says this often. These people thought they knew the Bible so well, but Jesus knew it better. The Bible story of David and his men eating the consecrated bread shows that God is not legalistic; God cares more for people than for rules. Look at verses 5,6. In the Bible even priests had to work on the Sabbath in serving the ministry at the temple. To the Pharisees, the temple was the holiest place. Jesus says now, something even greater than the temple is here—meaning Jesus himself, our true temple (Jn2:21). Read verse 7. Earlier, when they were criticizing him for eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus said, “But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’” (9:13). He was quoting Hosea’s prophecy. “I desire mercy, not sacrifice—God himself said this. But these Pharisees, though they knew many rules and laws and were so zealous and strict, didn’t know the heart of God. God has a heart of mercy for weak and sinful human beings. He’s our loving heavenly Father who wants to give us good things. The religion God wants us to be learning is the religion of mercy. Micah 6:8 says, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” We all have our own kinds of legalisms—what we think people should and shouldn’t be doing. When we don’t love God’s mercy, we tend to become hyper-critical and condemn innocent people with our nit-picky legalisms. On the other hand, Jesus defended his disciples at their moment of weakness in the strongest possible way.

Read verse 8. Jesus is making a powerful statement. He’s the Son of Man, the one who came to serve all human beings. He’s most humble, yet he’s Lord of the Sabbath. He owns the Sabbath. He created the Sabbath. He rules the Sabbath. He should be worshiped on the Sabbath, not criticized. As Lord, Sabbath rules can’t be used to control him or put him down.

There was another incident on a Sabbath day. Look at verses 9,10. It shows how warped their minds were. They were *always* looking for a reason to accuse Jesus. When they saw a man with a shriveled hand, all they could think of was that it was an opportunity to get Jesus to do something wrong. Their hearts were shriveled and hardened by self-righteous legalism to the point that they had lost their basic humanity. How did Jesus respond? Read verses 11,12. These people took care of their sheep—meaning their property and their profit—so preciously that they’d bend all the Sabbath rules to justify it. But they could care less about weak people; they’d leave *them* in a pit on a Sabbath. Jesus taught: “It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” We shouldn’t just legalistically go to church; on Sundays we should find ways to do good for the needy. This is what pleases God. Jesus could have asked the man with the shriveled hand to come back some other day to be healed. But he refused to be intimidated by legalistic people. Look at verses 13,14. Jesus practiced God’s mercy and healed the man, not when it was comfortable, but at the risk of his own life.

Jesus was aware they were plotting to kill him, so he withdrew from that place (15a). Then what happened? It says, “A large crowd followed him, and he healed all who were ill” (15b). Jesus didn’t have to chase after people; people came to *him*, because they sensed he was a true shepherd. Instead of getting entangled in conflicts with religious people, Jesus quietly showed God’s mercy toward overlooked and hurting people. And he insisted that people not talk about it (16). What he was doing wasn’t for a show, to impress people; it was real ministry. Read verses 17–21. The prophet Isaiah was describing God’s Messiah who would someday come. We learn some important things here about Jesus. **First**, though he was so strongly hated, he is God’s chosen servant. The verses emphasize that God loves him and delights in him. We pay close attention to what people are thinking of us. Like Jesus, we should be paying *more* attention to what God thinks of us. We should be taking comfort in God’s personal love.

**Second**, God put his Spirit on Jesus (18). Jesus was empowered for ministry through the Spirit of God. He wasn’t working in his own strength or effort, but in reliance on God’s Spirit. When he was full of God’s Spirit, he was so humble and gentle in heart. He also was courageous and bold to speak about God’s truth and God’s justice, even in hostile situations. All over the world people get away with hurting others and leaving them damaged. The rich grind the faces of the poor. Wealthy countries suck all the natural resources out of poor countries and leave them ruined. The powerful oppress the weak. People do nothing about it. But Jesus is concerned about bringing justice to those who’ve been victimized and abused. **Third**, Jesus is quiet and peaceful. Read verse 19. Some pastors yell a lot when they preach. Some people involved in ministry are very noisy. Self-righteous people love to teach and argue and prove they're right. They easily snap and lose their temper. But Jesus is just the opposite. He’s so quiet. The Bible says that as his servants, we should not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, not resentful, and gentle in explaining (2Ti2:24,25).

**Fourth**, Jesus is the most patient healer. Read verse 20. A reed was used for writing, like our pencil. A bruised reed lost its natural strength and would be easily broken, so it was kind of useless. But here, it’s being valued and preserved. A smoldering wick in a lamp is like a flickering light bulb about to go out. It isn’t working properly, so it needs to be replaced. Both the reed and the wick are beyond repair and should be thrown away. But God’s chosen servant refuses to throw them away; instead, he nurtures them back to usefulness. The bruised reed and smoldering wick represented the tax collectors and sinners in Jesus’ day. Matthew experienced this first-hand. Such people are wounded by their own sins, as well as by society’s treatment of them. Rich and powerful people call them “losers.” Yes, sin still makes us losers—so useless and so sick it’s almost impossible to be recovered. But Jesus never gives up on us. He’s so careful, so tender, so patient, so hopeful, even when there seems to be no hope. It seems like a foolish investment of resources. But to Jesus, ministry is not a business. Compared to Jesus, how quickly we dismiss certain people as if they were nothing but junk! How often we trample on others’ feelings! How easily we hurt others in even small ways! On the other hand, how hard it is to heal! How hard it is to value people who’ve been deeply wounded! How hard to be patient with them to the end! In the name of Christianity’s mission, so many people have been crushed and wounded. May God forgive us our sins that we’ve not been like Jesus. May he draw us close to Jesus and truly change us.

**Fifth**, Jesus is our source of hope. Read verse 21. The Jews thought the Messiah was only for them. But God’s intention was to send the Messiah for all nations. In Jesus, God’s chosen servant, who does not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick, all people on earth can find hope. People who’ve committed sin are wounded, but people who’re very legalistic are also wounded. Apostle Paul wanted to help the diverse Roman church, in which its Jewish and Gentile members were having various conflicts. Because of Jesus, he told them, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Ro15:13). He was encouraging them to have hope for one another in Christ. May God give us his hope for those among us who are wounded.

Next, Jesus healed a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute. He was really like a bruised reed or smoldering wick. He seemed like such a lost cause. People were astonished when Jesus healed him, but the Pharisees accused Jesus of healing by the power of Satan (22–24). Jesus answered that Satan would never work against himself--he's too smart for that. Instead, Jesus was driving out demons by the Spirit of God, and it was evidence that God’s kingdom had come through Jesus (25–28). Jesus described his ministry as tying up a strong man, which involves intense wrestling. He was determined to rescue people from being kidnapped by Satan (29). He gave a dire warning about speaking against the work of the Holy Spirit (30–32). He also said people say evil things because their hearts are evil. So we really need our hearts to be changed, and that’s exactly what Jesus can still do for us. Only when our hearts are changed will we bear good fruit (33–35). Finally, Jesus gave another dire warning, this time about “empty words” (36,37). Here, "empty" in Greek is literally “lazy" or reckless. We can be reckless, saying whatever feels good to us, but our reckless words can wound. Jesus wants us to speak words that bring healing. We can do that only when the Holy Spirit changes our hearts (34).

Some Pharisees and teachers of the law started liking Jesus; they said they just needed to see a sign from him to really commit. Jesus called them “wicked and adulterous” (38,39a). The only sign he would give was the sign of Jonah. As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, Jesus would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth—referring to his death and resurrection (39b–40). He's saying his death and resurrection are the only miracle we need in order to commit to him. In verses 41,42 he again used Bible stories to illustrate his point. The men of Nineveh were notoriously wicked, but even *they* repented at the preaching of Jonah. The Queen of the South, the queen of Sheba, was so proud, but even *she* repented when she heard Solomon’s wisdom. Jesus was greater than Jonah or Solomon, but his enemies were still too proud to repent. In verses 43–45 Jesus described the inner life of self-righteous, legalistic people. They work so hard to clean up their lives with their own efforts and their own control. But shockingly, such people become the dwelling of evil spirits, because they haven’t been relying on God.

In the midst of resistance and criticism Jesus experienced God’s encouragement. Look at verses 46,47. Why did his mother and brothers suddenly show up? Mark’s Gospel tells us plainly: they thought Jesus was working so hard with sick people, he had lost his mind (Mk3:21,31ff.). When they were hostile to his ministry, Jesus didn’t go out to see them. Instead, he pointed to his disciples and called *them* his true family (48–50). Despite what his enemies were saying and how they were treating him, God was raising disciples through Jesus who were so eager to learn, so committed to doing God’s will. This tells us that no one can stop the good work God is doing through his chosen servant.

Today we mainly thought about Jesus. He’s the God of mercy. He’s Lord of the Sabbath. He’s God’s chosen servant, filled with God’s Spirit. He’s our source of hope because he’s our gentle healer. Nobody is too damaged or too wounded for him to heal. May God help us find hope in him. And may God help us repent and let Jesus change our hearts until we become patient and quiet healers for wounded people.