“A BRUISED REED HE WILL NOT BREAK”

Matthew 12:15–21

Key Verses: 12:20,21

“…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.”

What impresses you? Does delicious food come to mind? Gorgeous views? Some people are impressed by wealth or status or achievements. Some, by physical beauty or strength. Today Matthew records what he found to be most impressive about Jesus. What was it? What does it mean? How does it apply to our lives today? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his words.

Look at verses 15,16. This is another of Matthew’s brief reviews of Jesus’ ministry (4:23; 8:16; 19:2). But what stands out here is its quietness. It says he “withdrew” and that he “ordered them not to make him known.” Jesus is doing such great things, but it’s so low-key. Why? It coincides with his teaching to serve but not to draw attention to ourselves or to boast (6:4,6,18; 23:5–7). And there’s another reason. Verse 14 says the Pharisees were conspiring to destroy Jesus (14). By working quietly Jesus was avoiding conflict with them and creating a space where he could serve until the time came for him to give his life. His wisdom to “withdraw” in the face of opposition is an example for us (10:14,23a). And as Matthew often shows, Jesus continues to heal people. It says “he healed them all.” The emphasis is on “all.” There was no sickness that Jesus could not heal, and no doubt people were sick both physically and spiritually. In the midst of violent conspiracies against him, Jesus continues to bring healing and life.

Verse 17 says, “This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:” In his Gospel Matthew uses this word “fulfill” 15 times; he mentions prophets another 40 times. Prophets are important to Matthew. A few times it’s a reference to false prophets (7:15; 24:11,24); elsewhere he’s reminding us that the prophets were persecuted, killed and murdered (5:12; 23:30,31,37). John the Baptist is called a prophet (11:19; 14:5; 21:26), and so is Jesus (21:11). Referring to the Scriptures Matthew uses the phrase “it is written” another nine times. To draw conclusions periodically he writes “This was to fulfill…” five times (2:15; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4). Matthew is out to prove that Jesus and his ministry were a fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets (5:17). Why is this so important to him? Despite all the controversies, Matthew wants us to be sure that Jesus really is the promised Messiah.

Matthew mentions the prophets Daniel, Jonah and Jeremiah by name, but he refers to the prophet Isaiah seven times (1:22,23; 3:3; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13: 14; 15:7). The quote in verses 18–21 is from Isaiah 42:1–4. It’s the longest of all Matthew’s Old Testament quotations, so it’s worth paying attention to it. In the Book of Isaiah it’s the first of four songs about God’s Servant (42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–7; 52:13–53:12). Jesus fulfilled all these songs about God’s servant in that he came not to be served but to serve (20:28). Matthew first quoted from one of Isaiah’s servant songs back in chapter 8. He concluded that Jesus’ healing ministry fulfilled Isaiah 53:4: “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases” (8:17). Now he again mentions that Jesus’ healing ministry fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy.

According to Isaiah, it’s really worth it to stop and take a close look at who this servant is. So his prophecy begins with God’s words: “Behold my servant” (18a; cf. Isa 42:1a). There are dramatic events going on in the world. There are glittering objects all around us. Impressive people are doing amazing things. Every day we’re bombarded with all kinds of information. We can get fascinated, or troubled, or discouraged, or simply distracted and feel scatter-brained. But God wants us to focus on his Servant and to marvel at how vastly superior and how wonderful he is.

What’s so wonderful about him? Verse 18a says, “Behold my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.” Though people saw him with critical eyes, God calls Jesus his “chosen” servant, his “beloved,” and says his “soul is well pleased” with him. How God thinks and how the world thinks are so different. God loved Jesus so much, he was so pleased with Jesus, for many reasons. First of all, Jesus was his Son (3:17; 17:5). Jesus was gentle and lowly in heart (11:29) In being with sinners to heal them, Jesus was doing what God desires most, showing mercy (9:11–13). In this selfish, ruthless, merciless world, what a beautiful, refreshing person he is!

Verse 18b says, “I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.” The Jews thought the Messiah would be exclusively for them, to restore them to their former glory under David. But God’s purpose all along was for his servant to bless not only the Jews but also the Gentiles, meaning all peoples of all nations (Ge12:3). Two things stand out here. First is the phrase “I will put my Spirit upon him.” Matthew tells us that Jesus uniquely was conceived by the Holy Spirit (1:18,20). When he was baptized, the Spirit of God descended like a dove and came to rest on him (3:16). He was then led by the Spirit (4:1). His ministry was not from his own strength or idea but from the Spirit.

Now, this verse is telling us that God’s Spirit empowered Jesus to proclaim justice to the Gentiles. This was the message God wanted to get out to the world.

Matthew’s Gospel repeats this word “justice” 12 times, more than any other New Testament book. But what does “justice” mean? In this world there is so much injustice. The rich grind the faces of the poor (Isa3:15). People cheat, use and abuse, criticize, judge and condemn each other in so many ways. People are despised and excluded on account of their race or their problems or illnesses. So many people have been victimized, and those who did evil seem to get away with it. People sometimes take justice into their own hands and even invent their own morality. But God gave his Servant Jesus his Spirit to proclaim his justice to the Gentiles. It’s good news that one day God is going to judge the whole world with true justice through his Servant (Ac17:31). Those who were oppressed will be released; those who were falsely accused, vindicated; those who were despised, honored; and all those who were proud and cruel, who did evil and inflicted damage and wounds will be punished exactly in accordance with what they did. God wants all people to know that he will bring real justice to this sin-sick world.

Verse 19 goes on: “He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.” It’s opposite of what we would think. Though he’s proclaiming justice, God’s Servant Jesus is so *quiet*. He especially avoided arguing with the critical Pharisees or stirring up rebellion. Later we see his silence even during his extremely unjust trial and execution (26:63; 27:14ff.; cf. Isa53:7). His silence was golden. As his followers we’re called to such a quiet life (1Pe2:21–23; 1Th4:9–11). Apostle Paul writes, “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness” (2Ti2:24,25a). Sadly, many ignore this Bible teaching in the name of their own self-righteousness.

Let’s read verse 20. Isaiah’s prophecy is poignant poetry. These words describe people who’ve been wounded so deeply and become so weak that they are crushed inadvertently. This tough world has no time or patience for such people. They’re brushed aside, treated as worthless, or worse. But God’s Servant Jesus doesn’t see anyone like that. Even the most fragile person is so dear to him. He’s not reckless, harsh or insensitive. He’s full of empathy, actually *feeling* what hurting people feel. He has hope for the most hopeless. He has great power but is most careful and patient with those who’re broken. He’s willing to bear everything until they can be revived and restored. It’s his patience that brings spiritual healing, like a nursing mother gently caring for her children (cf. 1Th2:7). He’s so affectionate toward the spiritually sick. As we follow God’s Servant Jesus, even we become more and more like him.

To fully appreciate how wonderful he is, words cannot suffice; we need to experience his mercy. We need to taste how great his grace is, despite all our sins, weaknesses and failures. Apostle Paul wrote, “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (1Ti1:15,16). As we become more aware of his grace in our own lives, even we become gracious healers like our Lord.

Verse 20b says, “…until he brings justice to victory.” The patience of God’s Servant Jesus with the most wounded people ends not in futility but in victory. This victory refers to the full restoration of a human being created in the image of God. In the ultimate scheme of things, it’s the defeat of our real enemies, sin and death and Satan, and it means the doors of the kingdom of heaven are now open to all who receive his Son by faith. By faith every believer, no matter what we’ve been through, shares in the victory of God’s Servant Jesus (1Co15:57; 1Jn5:4).

Verse 21 concludes: “…and in his name the Gentiles will hope.” All people of the world can find real hope in Jesus. His quietness, his gentleness, his patience, his great compassion, his healing, his ultimate victory inspire hope in the most depressed, downtrodden, defeated people. He enables us to abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Ro15:13).

Let’s read our key verses, verses 20,21 again. May God help us to turn our focus to his Servant Jesus, to how wonderful he is, so that we may experience his healing, his victory and his hope. May he fill us with his same grace and make us healers like him for the wounded people he brings to us.