

Encouragement for a Bruised Reed

Matthew 12:15-21

This afternoon we have an exposition of the greatest example of good leadership ever known to man, the leadership of Jesus. This model of leadership is in direct contrast with that style of leadership common in Jesus' day, equally common in our day. The difference in style of leadership is so well expressed by the words of,

Mat. 20:25 "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. 26 Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. 27 And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

So our subject this afternoon is servant leadership. Our subject is Jesus' leadership. "[W]hoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave."

Servant leadership. It is same leadership required of a husband,

Eph.5:25 "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her."

Servant leadership. It is the same leadership required of the elders of a church.

1 Peter 5:1 "The elders who are among you I exhort...2 Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; 3 nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock."

Servant leadership. "[W]hoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant." The leader is the servant, so this afternoon we look at,

I. JESUS THE SERVANT.

He has just finished a time of healing, on the sabbath day no less, bringing upon himself the wrath and hatred of the Pharisees, who, as we read in verse 14, "went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him." Then we read,

v.15-16

Verse 17 doesn't seem to follow, though the obvious irony is God the Father's approval upon Jesus expressed so clearly at the very point when he was oppressed and attacked by his earthly enemies. And the Father's approval is a quotation from the prophet Isaiah.

v.17-18a

The reference is Isaiah 42, and we really should look there.

Is. 42:1 "Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. 2 He will not cry out, nor raise His voice, Nor cause His voice to be heard in the street. 3 A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench; He will bring forth justice for truth."

To give you a fuller sense of Isaiah's picture of a servant, Isaiah writes further,

Is. 52:13 "Behold, My Servant shall deal prudently; He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high. 14 Just as many were astonished at you, So His visage was marred more than any man, And His form more than the sons of men; 15 So shall He sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths at Him; For what had not been told them they shall see, And what they had not heard they shall consider."

Is. 53:1 “Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? 2 For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, And as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, There is no beauty that we should desire Him. 3 He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. 4 Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

That great prophecy concludes,

Is. 53:11 “He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, For He shall bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, And He shall divide the spoil with the strong, Because He poured out His soul unto death, And He was numbered with the transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors.”

That’s Jesus, his servanthood as clearly defined in the Old Covenant context just as anywhere in the Bible. That’s Jesus the servant. “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted...All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

That’s Jesus the servant. And notice what we read about him in our text, Matthew 12:18 and Isaiah 42:1.

A. Jesus is chosen by God.

This was all God’s own plan. This was God’s own eternal purpose. He chose Jesus. He appointed Jesus to be the suffering servant, by whom and through whom our redemption would be purchased. God chose Jesus, according to his own sovereign decree, in order that Jesus would be “pierced for our transgressions,” that he would be “crushed for our iniquities,” that “the chastisement that brought us peace” would be upon him. It was God the Father, in all eternity, before the creation of the world, who chose Jesus so that we fallen sinners would be healed by his wounds, our sins forgiven by his act of obedience.

But notice. Jesus is not simply chosen by God.

B. Jesus is beloved of God.

He is beloved because he is begotten.

Ps. 2:7. “I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.”

It is the same recognition that Jesus received at his baptism, Mat. 3:16 “When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. 17 And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

“This is My beloved Son.” God the Father chose his son, his one and only son, to suffer for the sins of fallen men. The verse is familiar.

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Don't miss this in the familiarity of it. Jesus is beloved of God, but chosen by God to be the suffering servant. And Jesus came to earth, he was born a man, incarnate, in order to do his father's will. And thus,

C. Jesus is well-pleasing to God.

v.18a

There was a reason, of course, why Jesus was so well-pleasing, because he submitted to his father's will perfectly. His food, he said, was to do his father's will. "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work."

He did it perfectly! His whole life was a sweet smelling sacrifice, a pleasant aroma. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." What, then, did he come to do? What is...

II. THE WORK OF JESUS.

That, too, is clearly spelled out by this prophecy from Isaiah 42.

v.18b-19

Three things there of note. First, Jesus was...

A. Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

So now the whole of the trinity is in focus, all three persons of the godhead. Jesus would receive the anointing power of the Holy Spirit. Go back again to his baptism,

Mat. 3:16 "When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him."

We see the Holy Spirit giving comfort to Jesus in his temptation, but most importantly, we see the Holy Spirit at work in the power of the proclamation of the gospel. It was by that power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus was,

B. Called to proclaim righteousness to the world.

v.18b

Thus, v.21

This gospel power relates to another prophetic description of Jesus, this time found in,

Is. 61:1 "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, Because the LORD has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound; 2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, 3 To console those who mourn in Zion, To give them beauty for ashes, The oil of joy for mourning, The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; That they may be called trees of righteousness, The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified."

Now, to remove all doubt, remember what Luke tells us, that when Jesus finished reading that prophecy,

Luke 4:20 "Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. 21 And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

So Jesus came to proclaim the gospel to all the world, to all the nations of the world, to all who would believe on him. But in doing so, he was also,

C. Called to suffer humiliation.

v.19

Back to,

Is. 53:7 “He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth. 8 He was taken from prison and from judgment, And who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; For the transgressions of My people He was stricken. 9 And they made His grave with the wicked—But with the rich at His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was any deceit in His mouth.”

He opened not his mouth. Jesus the servant. Jesus the savior. Jesus the redeemer. Jesus, the son of God. But all of that is really just my introduction this afternoon, because what I really want to preach from this text is what we find in,

v.20

A bruised reed. Just think of the image. Almost broken, damaged, diseased. He doesn't break it. A smoldering wick, almost burned out. The fire is almost extinguished, but Jesus doesn't put an end to the fire. Such a vivid picture of,

III. THE TENDER GENTLENESS OF JESUS.

Jesus the servant. Jesus the eternal son of God. Jesus, the gentle shepherd. In him, there is,

A. Encouragement for a bruised reed.

If I may emphasize this image a bit, it is fair to say that describes all of us. We, fallen creatures that we are, are all bruised. We are battered, sometimes by our own sin and sometimes by the sin of others. Sometimes by the sorrows and griefs of this world, sometimes by the opposition and persecution we might encounter along the way.

We are, so often, sinned against. We are so often, afflicted not only sin but also the effects of sin. We are so often distressed not only by trials but by the ongoing effects of that tribulation. And Jesus gives encouragement.

Please take that encouragement this this afternoon, and as far as my words are able to bring it about, feel that encouragement. You who are bruised. You who struggle. You would feel despair, disappointment, frustration, even bitterness. You who are wounded by others, or harmed by your own foolish sins, take heart. And fix your eyes on Jesus, for “a bruised reed he will not break.”

Sadly, too often, we don't afford this same grace to others. We take advantage of those who are wounded. We are harsh with those who are vulnerable. We are self-righteous with those who struggle with sin. We are indignant at the sins of others, and seem to forget that we are all in the same category of fallen creatures saved by grace.

Please consider how you yourself treat others. It is this perspective that gives you patience with those whom you find hard to get along with. Don't take easy offense. Don't pour on grief to those who offend you. Do assume the worst or impugn the motives of those with whom you engage. Perhaps, above all else, view others as that bruised reed. And set out to love them, even as Jesus loves. “A bruised reed he will not break.”

Even as you might describe yourself, look unto others, seeking to give and provide this same encouragement that you receive from Jesus yourself. “A bruised reed he will not break.”

Perhaps it is helpful to admit to yourself that you are that bruised reed. Perhaps, in your own pride and self-sufficiency, you

need to come to that point of humility. Others, no doubt, need no such exhortation, for their brokenness is felt every day of their lives. The point is, we are all in the same condition, all in the same category. We are all bruised reeds, and Jesus offers the encouragement that he will not break such a one. Instead, as we studied a few weeks ago, instead comes the invitation,

Mat. 11:28 “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

You who feel that weakness, hear these words and feel that encouragement. “A bruised reed he will not break.”

Then,

B. Hope for a smoldering wick.

Smoking flax, as it is translated in the NKJV. Nothing is more devastating to your well-being than this sense of hopelessness. Nothing, I believe, is more harmful to your soul than to lose hope. Yet many do. Many Christians struggle at that very point. Many non-Christians find no meaning in life at all, so desperate are they for some ground of hope. For some people, none is to be found. Beloved, there is always hope in Jesus, for “a smoldering wick, smoking flax he will not quench.”

Your may well feel that smoldering within your own life. Your life may seem to be but smoldering, almost extinguished. But Jesus won't put out the fire. Jesus won't compound your problems nor will he leave you hopeless. So when you run that race that is set before you, fix your eyes upon Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith. Put your hope in God.

Consider these words of the Psalmist,

Ps. 42:3 “My tears have been my food day and night, While they continually say to me, “Where is your God?” 4 When I remember these things, I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go with the multitude; I went with them to the house of God, With the voice of joy and praise, With a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast. 5 Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him For the help of His countenance.”

This is your hope,

Ps. 27:1 “The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid? 2 When the wicked came against me To eat up my flesh, My enemies and foes, They stumbled and fell. 3 Though an army may encamp against me, My heart shall not fear; Though war may rise against me, In this I will be confident. 4 One thing I have desired of the LORD, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD All the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD, And to inquire in His temple.”

Or, perhaps, in the theological language of Paul,

Rom. 8:31 “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? 33 Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written: “For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” 37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. 38 For I am persuaded that neither

death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Beloved, everything that I have just preached is laid out before you on this table. Jesus the servant, whose willingness to please his father was never more evident than when his body hung upon the cross and his blood poured out unto death. The work of Jesus is proclaimed to you, even as we proclaim his death by eating and drinking. And the tender gentleness of Jesus is here portrayed, for it is at his invitation that we come to the table. So if you are a bruised reed, if your wick is smoldering and your flax nearly extinguished, then listen all the more carefully to this invitation which Jesus originally gave at that last supper with his disciples,

Mat. 26:26 “And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.”

27 Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. 28 For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”

Beloved, here is your encouragement. Here is your hope. No matter what the circumstance. No matter what the burden. Here, is Jesus, as I preach him to you with words, here he is in such a way that you can have fellowship and communion with him. You can eat his flesh and drink his blood.

v.18-21