

A Bruised Reed

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[0 : 0 0] Let's look together at Matthew chapter 12 and particularly the passage from verse 9 to verse 21. Jesus went on from there and entered their synagogue and a man was there with a withered hand and they asked him, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath so that they might accuse him? He said to them, which one of you who has a sheep if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath will not take hold of it and lift it out of how much more value is a man than a sheep? So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Then he said to the man, stretch out your hand and the man stretched it out and it was restored healthy like the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him how to destroy him. Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there and many followed him and he healed them all and ordered them not to make him known. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah.

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 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 smoldered in wick he will not quench until he brings justice to victory and in his name the Gentiles will hope. Amen. In these verses we're reading about Jesus healing a man with a withered hand in the synagogue on the Sabbath and then in the aftermath of that he withdrew and yet many people came to follow him. And whenever we read a passage like this in any of the Gospels we can see that there's certain things that the Gospel writer wants to tell us. If you look at Matthew, Mark, Luke and John none of them record everything. Each one makes certain selections and have particular emphasis that they want to convey before us. And as we read through this narrative here in Matthew 12 we can see that there's two things in particular that Matthew wants to tell us. First of all and in a simple way Matthew wants to tell us what happened. So he gives us various details. He tells us the location, he tells us the people present, he tells us the words that were spoken and the actions that took place. And as we read this was an opportunity for Jesus to teach the people who were there about their priorities. At the same time he challenged them regarding their hypocrisy and then as we read he beautifully heals this man's hand and restores him to health.

But as we read Matthew also records for us how and like on many other previous occasions when Jesus helped people on the Sabbath his actions were viewed negatively by the Pharisees.

And I always find it amazing that these Pharisees can see Jesus performing a miracle and yet they respond by conspiring to destroy him. So at a basic level Matthew tells us what happens as we read in verse 15 to 17. It tells us how Jesus from there withdrew as a result of the conspiring and crowds followed him. But as we read on into verses 17 to 21 we see that Matthew wants to tell us something else and he takes us to a further level of detail regarding these verses and in particular he wants to show us that what's taking place here between verses 9 and verses 17 are in fulfillment of a prophecy in the Old Testament. That's something you often see in Matthew's Gospel again and again and again. He'll record an event in Jesus's life and you'll see this is to fulfill what was said and then he'll quote from the Old Testament. And here in Matthew 12 he quotes from the passage that we read in Isaiah 42. Isaiah 42 is a very important prophecy and as I'm sure many of you will know and there's passages in this latter half of Isaiah which are known as the servant songs where we read about the role and work that is going to be performed by God's chosen servant. And Matthew 12 is important because it's showing us that when we read about God's servant in Isaiah 42 who are we reading about? We're reading about Jesus.

As we're told it says, behold my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. Matthew said that servant in Isaiah 42 that's Jesus who's ultimately being referred to.

[5 : 07] So Jesus is God's servant as we see there in verse 18. He's the one in whom the Father delights. He's the one of whom the Father is so pleased, so delighted and as you look at the character of Jesus you see the kind of character and conduct that pleases God the Father. But Jesus is also the servant through whom God is fulfilling his purposes and that's really what the word servant means isn't it? He's here to do the work that God needs him to do. Jesus is God's servant. Now that doesn't mean that Jesus is just there to be bossed around by God like a sort of menial slave.

Rather it's meaning that Jesus has come to fulfill a crucial role for God. He has work to do. He has a duty to perform. He has a responsibility to fulfill and through him God's purposes are going to be fulfilled. And that's of course why Jesus said in John's Gospel, I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. So we're not just being told what happened, we're also being told that that these events are fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 42 and that Jesus is God's servant. And that raises the important question, what is the Father looking for from his servant? And that's the question I want us to consider tonight. We have this servant prophesied in the Old Testament fulfilled in Jesus Christ in the new but what is God looking for in his servant?

And you could say well there's lots that God's looking for and you could say perhaps first and foremost that God has a great plan of salvation and that his servant Jesus is performing a crucial role in that plan and of course that's true because the whole of scripture is setting before us God's great work of salvation and that work is totally centred on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

But if you look again at Matthew 12 you'll see that it doesn't actually talk about salvation in that explicit sense and we actually see that there's two other things that God is looking for from his servant. There's perhaps more things but there are two that I want to focus on together tonight. So that's our question, what is God looking for from his servant?

Number one, a concern for justice. Look again at verse 18. Behold my servant whom I've 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. Now that's really interesting because you would expect it to say salvation wouldn't you? I'll put my spirit upon him and he will proclaim salvation to the Gentiles and that of course is a key part of what Jesus did proclaim, the gospel is the power of God for salvation but here the focus is not on salvation, the focus is on justice and it should stop us in our tracks and make us say why? Why is that? What does that mean? What is this justice that's been focused on here? Well when you hear the word justice what do you tend to think of?

[8 : 47] What's the first thing that comes into your mind when you think of justice? Well I suppose we may all be different in that regard but for me very often what comes into my mind when I think of justice is the idea of punishing those who've done wrong. We think of the criminal justice system where people who have broken the law are brought to justice for their actions and that of course is a key part of what justice involves but is that what the Bible means here? Is it talking about punishing wrongdoing? Well I'm not so sure it is because if you go back to Isaiah's prophecy which is where that verses come from you will see that again and again and again justice is mentioned, justice is a theme that's mentioned in Isaiah but when Isaiah talks about justice the focus is not so much on punishing the wicked, the focus is on something else and let's see, let's see what's at some examples to see. I'm going to read through four examples from Isaiah and I want you to ask yourself the question what is this talking about? What does it mean by justice? So a couple from chapter one, wash yourselves, make yourselves clean, remove the evil deed of your deeds from before my eyes, cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

Later in that chapter there's a few verses later, how the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her but now murderers, your silver has become dross, your best wine mixed with water, your princes are rebels and companions of thieves, everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts, they do not bring justice to the fatherless and the widow's cause does not come to them. There's two more here from chapter 10 first of all, woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees and the writer should keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil and that they may make the fatherless their prey. And last of all, in Isaiah 61, I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrong. Now what are these verses all talking about? They're all talking about justice but what are they focusing on? Well, they're not really focusing so much on punishing the wicked, they are primarily focusing on helping the vulnerable and the exploited. Back in Isaiah's time, it's clear that the powerful were exploiting the vulnerable and that's exactly the opposite of what God wanted. Remember that throughout scripture, there's a key principle which states that privilege and responsibility always go together.

So if you're in a position of privilege and status, you have a responsibility to help those who are around you. The prime example of that was the king who was in the greatest position of privilege in the whole land and yet he was the one with the greatest responsibility to look after people.

But all too often in the days of Isaiah and in the history of humanity ever since, the people enjoyed the privilege whilst ignoring the responsibility and in God's eyes, that is injustice. It's a hideous injustice in the eyes of God and that's highlighting something really, really important. It's highlighting the fact that when God speaks about justice, he is not thinking primarily about legislation. That's what I tend to think about when I think of justice, I think legislation but when God talks about justice, he is not primarily focusing on official and legal standards and procedures. He's not thinking about legislation, he is thinking about people. He's thinking about people and when he sees the exploitation and abuse and cruelty displayed towards vulnerable people, he says to his servant, go and proclaim justice to these dear people and that's a crucial lesson for us because we can often think that that real justice is cold and harsh and detached and when things go wrong you've got to make sure you stick hard to the letter of the law and sometimes in human behavior justice can be exercised with that kind of coldness but with God justice is never ever cold and it's never ever detached from the deep, deep mercy, compassion and love that God displays towards people. So when we think about justice, when we think about dealing with wrongdoing, when we think about upholding right and wrong, we need to make sure that we always, always, always think about the people who we are dealing with because as Jesus told the people in the synagogue in Matthew 12, people are immensely valuable and he says to them, you'll look after your sheep but people are far, far, far more valuable and all of this is a wonderful reminder that God cares about vulnerable people.

So look at the world today, you see people who are exploited with low wages, you see refugees who are driven from their home, you see children who are abused and neglected, you see slaves trafficked from one country to another, what does God think of all that?

[14 : 59] God says that's a hideous injustice and I am utterly, utterly opposed to it. He has sent his servant with a concern for justice and there's three things I want to highlight in that regard, three very, very, very important lessons for us. Number one, this is showing us that sin is the great exploiter of vulnerable people. That's a crucial point to remember, one of the great objectives of sin is to exploit people. So sin appears to us with a word of promise, promise of happiness, of fulfillment, of pleasure, of satisfaction, we are sucked in by these words, we're sucked in by the tempting appearance only to be left exploited and you must never, ever, ever forget that ultimately sin will rob you of the very thing that it promises you. That's what happened to Adam and Eve, isn't it? Satan said if you eat this fruit you will be like God, that was Satan's promise, you will be like God and yet what happened?

The very opposite because Adam and Eve were already like God, they were the image bearers of God and their disobedience broke that image. So instead of being like God as Satan promised, their likeness to God was broken, sin robbed them of the very thing it promised them.

And exactly the same is true of other sins. So greed comes to us, jumps up into our heart and into our mind and it promises us contentment if we just have a little bit more. I've fallen into that trap so many times and you think I must have this, I must have that, if I just get that I'll be happy the minute you get it you want something else and you feel empty without it. And so greed robs you of the thing it promises. Lust is the same, it comes to you saying that sexual indulgence is going to give you intimacy and security and love when all it does is leave you empty, exposed and vulnerable. Addiction promises someone satisfaction but as soon as you give in the craving just gets greater and revenge promises you peace, doesn't it? Somebody's hurt you and you think I will feel better if I can just get that person back. Revenge promises you peace but all it does is leave you more broken and more bitter because sin exploits us in every way that it can. And that is proved simply by looking at the ways in which people are exploited today. So you think of the huge issues of exploitation that are taking place in the world today. So you've got workers exploited in clothing factories, you get women who are abused in all sorts of awful ways, you get children who are neglected, you get governments who are corrupt, what are all these things examples of?

They are all sins. In other words they are all things that God has said don't do it. Sin is a hideous exploiter of vulnerable people. Sin is the source of all injustice.

And that raises the second point that's really really important that the blame for injustice does not lie with God. People will often look at injustice and they'll say why isn't God doing something about that? Why is God allowing that to happen? And that can be a big objection that many many people have against God. They see injustice and they say why isn't God doing something?

[19 : 02] How do we respond to that kind of accusation against God? Well there's at least two things that we can say. The first thing that we want to highlight to anybody who challenges us with that is that God never ever separates privilege from responsibility. Privilege and responsibility always go together. So we humans have immense privileges and these are gifts from God. The human race is in the most privileged position in the universe. We have attributes, skills, abilities that no other part of creation has. We have extraordinary privileges. These are a gift from God but with these privileges comes responsibility. And yet all too often we want to take the privilege and ignore the responsibility and then we say it's God's fault. So just look at the world. You look at the world that God has made for humanity and there is plenty food, plenty land, plenty water, plenty warmth, plenty space, plenty skills, plenty opportunity and perfect instructions in terms of how we should look after one another and live in a way so that there's more than enough for everyone. God has provided all of these things and yet when people are exploited we say that's God's fault. But really what happens is that people grab the privilege, ignore the responsibility and of course it's not God who is the one who's being unjust.

It's us. Privilege and responsibility always go together. But the second thing we can say is that when somebody says why doesn't God do something about this the whole point of the gospel is that God has done something. The gospel is the message that can transform the world from a hostile realm of selfishness and cruelty into a wonderful community of love and fellowship and care. God has given us what we need. He's given us all the instructions we've need. He shown us what we need to do and God has come to fix the problem of sin. The only stumbling block is that we refuse to listen. And that's where we see one of the great hypocrisies of modern humanity.

We blame God for something that we ourselves are totally guilty of. People claim to care about the vulnerable and yet all too often we refuse to do the very things that will make a difference.

So for example you look at the modern western world we all regard low wages as unacceptable and yet we all demand low prices in our shopping don't we? We are all horrified when we see cuts to the NHS or to schools or to home care and yet nobody is on the streets campaigning for higher taxes. We hate seeing poverty in other countries and yet we never say to our politicians spend less in Britain. And all the time God is saying to us learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widows cause. Thankfully God is not like us.

God is concerned for justice. The blame for injustice does not lie with him. So since the great exploitative of vulnerable people the blame for injustice does not lie with God. Thirdly the Bible gives us the true foundation for equality. Equality is a very very important word in Britain today. Society is very very concerned about equality and very often equality is the how do I say it's like the trump card in all discussions. It is the key key issue that's used in terms of trying to make things happen. And a lot of that's a really really good thing and we should be very very thankful that inequalities are being addressed. That's something that we would always always want to promote. But the quest for equality in modern Britain is also being used to shift us away from the moral standards of the Bible. And that's a dangerous thing because it's inevitably moving us away from the very foundation that gave us equality in the first place. It's the Bible that gives us the true basis for equality. And the point that we have to recognize and is that much of the campaign for equality that is in society today at the heart of that is the conviction that I should get what I want. And often that's well intended. Often people will say well nothing should stop somebody being who they want to be. Nothing should stop people from being happy. Nothing should stop people being able to do what they want to do from getting what they want.

[24 : 46] But if our quest for equality is based on the mindset which says I should get what I want then it is doomed to fail. Because think about it. We see inequality. We say that's wrong. People should get what they want. But the logical conclusion of the mindset which says I should get what I want is not equality. Ultimately the logical conclusion of that mindset is exploitation and inequality. Because if I always get what I want then inevitably it's going to force other people to be deprived. If I always get what I want it is inevitably going to involve others being hurt.

The western world got very rich by making the rest of the world very poor. And that applies in lots of ways. And that's why despite all our claims for equality what we're saying here can be proved.

And I would probably be strongly criticized for saying all this. People will say that's just not true. But I think it is true. And I think it's proved. Because we talk about equality a lot.

But society bases it on the view that I should get what I want. And what's happening in the world today is the gap between rich and poor getting narrower. No. It's getting bigger. The avenues into positions of power are not getting broader. They're getting narrower. But at the point now where you have to be a multimillionaire if you want to be the president of the United States.

And the quest for love and peace and security in the everyday lives of people is becoming more and more and more difficult. Because the mindset that says I must get what I want is just the path back to inequality and the path back to exploitation. And as with everything in life the true answer is found in the Bible. Because it's in the Bible where you will find what true equality is grounded on. It's not based on the mindset that says I will get what I want. It's grounded on the conviction that I will put others before myself. That is where true equality is found and the perfect model of it is God's servant, Jesus Christ. Look at Philippians 2, 4, 2, 8 and just think in terms of equality. Think of the word equality as we read this passage. Let you not let each of you not only look to his own interests but also to the interests of others.

[27 : 53] It's a very, very interesting verse for society today where people campaign for their interests. Bible says do the opposite. Don't look to your own interests. Look to the interests of others.

Have this mind amongst yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death even death on across.

Secular equality ties to push everybody up and where everybody gets more and more of what they want. Biblical equality goes the other way around where you will give of yourself for the benefit of others to the point of dying for them. That's where we find the foundation for true equality where we put one another first where we follow the example of Jesus. God's servant has come to bring justice. He's come to help those who have been left exploited, ruined and ravaged by sin.

He's come to put that right. So that's the first thing that we see and the second thing is much shorter. When we think about God's concern for his servant to bring justice and to put right the exploitation of the vulnerable we can easily think that this servant is going to come as a very strong firm no-nonsense operator. You imagine somebody very very very determined very very very strong and firm and of course there's a sense in which that's true because Jesus was definitely not a pushover and he was definitely not a compromiser. He remained utterly faithful to God's standards but as we read through the passage here before us in Matthew 20 we come to verse 20 in Matthew 12 when we come to verse 20 we see that although Jesus has come to bring justice in doing that he is never ever harsh with people who are broken. In fact he's the very opposite.

It says a bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not quench. So alongside a concern for justice God's servant is also characterised by a concern for the fragile and that's an amazing thing and the image before us here is very very simple but very beautiful.

[31 : 04] Imagine a reed or maybe for us you could imagine like a tender branch on a tree or maybe the stalk of a flower and and it's bruised so it's nearly at the point of breaking or imagine a wick on a candle or a lamp that's just got a tiny glow. It's at the point of extinguishing it is weak and struggling. Both of these things are very very very fragile and they're very very easy to break permanently. A broken reed just needs a wee knock. A bruised reed rather just needs a wee knock and it's broken. A smoldering wick just needs a wee flick and it's out permanently.

Both of these have long since lost their strength and their youth usefulness and their worth and the obvious thing to do is just get rid of them. If you've got a field full of strong reeds and there's one that's bruised the easiest thing in the world is just to break it off and get rid of it.

But the amazing thing about God's servant is that he is not here to break the bruised and he is not here to quench the smoldering. He's here to help them and he's here to heal them and that reminds us of the extraordinary hope that the gospel gives to every single one of us.

The gospel is a message of healing for the broken. It's not a message of congratulations to the fixed it's a message of healing for the broken. That's what the miracle in the synagogue shows us. You have this man with a withered hand and it's healed. The broken can be restored even though sin has made a horrible mess of people. Jesus has not come to deliver the final blow. He has come to bring us back from the brink and that is the extraordinary truth that is set before us in the gospel and there's two crucial lessons that arise from this that we need to make sure we write on our hearts and please make sure that you hold on to these for the rest of your lives. First of all this all gives us huge huge comfort because it tells you that nobody absolutely nobody is too broken for Jesus.

So if you feel bruised, if you feel like you are barely smoldering, if you feel weak and broken then Jesus is saying come to me and I will help you because you cannot be too broken or too bruised for Jesus to fix. So you cannot be too much of a failure in your life. You cannot be in too much of a mess. You cannot be too rubbish. You cannot be too stupid. You cannot be too worthless. You cannot be too weak because Jesus has come for the bruised and so often life leaves us bruised.

[34 : 38] Bruised by disappointments, bruised by cruelty from others, bruised by broken promises, bruised by failures and frustrations, bruised by foolish mistakes that we wish we'd never done.

But in God's eyes the wreckage that sin brings into your life is a horrible injustice and he has come to put that right. So that's why Jesus says I am not going to break you.

I am going to hold you and protect you and heal you. And he was willing to die on the cross to make that possible. Underneath all your bruises is a person who is so, so, so precious in the eyes of God. Far more precious than you and I will ever realise.

Jesus has come for the bruised. So it's a huge comfort for us. But secondly, this is a big challenge for us as well. Because here in this verse we are finding the pattern for all our dealings with people who are broken and vulnerable. That's a really, really, really important thing to recognise.

This verse is setting before us a pattern that we are expected to follow. And the key point that's been set before us here is that a bruised reed is easy to break. And often we can think that break breaking a bruised reed is justice. Now, and think about that for a minute. So we have somebody who's made a mistake in their lives. We have somebody who's found themselves in a mess and we tend to think that they deserve what they get. And so we think that the bruises are their own fault.

[37 : 06] And so to break them is to administer justice. And yet all we are doing is deepening the bruise and making the situation worse. Because, for example, you have the lonely person who turns to alcohol and who falls into addiction and who becomes alienated because they are an addict and they get even more lonely. The bruise just gets bigger. You've got the insecure girl who turns to the wrong relationship and makes a mess of things and ends up ostracised and the talk of the town and what do they become? They become even more insecure and the bruise gets bigger.

You have the person who's confused about who they are, whether that's in terms of gender or sexuality. And people can see them as some sort of freak and they become even more confused about who they are. And the bruise gets bigger. You have the person who's made a mess of their career and they're judged by other people and they feel like even more of a failure and the bruise gets bigger. And we think that's justice because these people are getting what they deserve.

But God is saying that's not justice, that's injustice. Because it's exploiting vulnerable people. Now that does not mean that nobody is guilty of wrongdoing. Many of the people whose lives are in a mess are there because they've done things that they shouldn't have done. But in terms of guilt, there's only one judge and it's not us.

It's God. And before we look at anybody else, we should always be far more concerned about the fact that we have to give account of our own actions before God ourselves. Our responsibility, the pattern that we need to follow is that if we are dealing with a bruised reed and a smoldering wick, we need to be gentle and we need to give them every bit of help that we possibly can.

Because beneath the bruises that we see in people around us are people who are so precious to God. And that's why a great prayer for us to pray is, Lord, help me to recognise bruised reeds and help me to recognise smoldering wicks around me and help me to do what I can, to heal them. And of course, to do that, to help the fragile is simply to follow the example of Jesus.

[40 : 05] How many fragile people did Jesus meet? And he helped them. He met many, many bruised reeds and he helped them all to stand strong again.

So what is the Father looking for in his servant? He's looking for a concern for justice and he's looking for a concern for the fragile. A concern that all the awful injustice that sin has brought will be dealt with and put right. And a concern that all the fragile people who have been left broken by that sin might be healed. That is what the Father is looking for in his servant and do you know, you look at Jesus and you see that he fulfilled these two duties perfectly.

Did everything that was required to deal with sin and the injustice that it brings? And he constantly, constantly does everything that he can to help heal bruised reeds.

And that should give us so much hope because when we look at the world around us, we see a lot of people who are suffering injustice. And when we look at ourselves, I'm quite sure you see a lot of bruises. Jesus has come for you and for everybody who's been left broken by sin. God is looking for a concern for justice, a concern for the fragile.

Jesus fulfills that role perfectly. And the question we have to close with is this, what is the Father looking for in us? And of course the answer is exactly the same.

[42 : 26] A concern for justice, a concern for the fragile. May God make us all people like that.

Let's pray together. Our Father, we thank you for the extraordinary hope that the gospel gives us.

That through the work of Jesus Christ, all the awful injustice and damage caused by sin is dealt with. He's the one who has won the victory over the power of sin. He is the one who has come to put everything right. We thank you so much for our exalted Savior Jesus Christ, but also we thank you for just the amazing tender, tender care that you show towards us in your Son.

Because we don't come before you as people who are strong. We come before you as those who are fragile. We come before you as those who are bruised. And we thank you so much that a bruised reed he will not break. And a smoldering wick he will not put out.

We thank you so much for our amazing Savior and we pray that in every single way we will be like him. Amen.