

Christ: The Tender Preserver of His People

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Now let us again seek the face of God in prayer, asking specifically that the Lord would fulfill His word of promise that if we who are evil know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more shall our heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him. Let us ask that the Father would grant the Spirit's presence in conjunction with the preaching and hearing of the Word of God. Let us pray.

Our Father, we thank you for Your word of promise that You are the God who delights to give good gifts to Your children; that you are the God who has promised that You would not upbraid us when we ask from You those things that are needful for our spiritual well-being. And we would, as we now come to the preaching of Your holy Word, acknowledge our present need of the present assistance of the Holy Spirit; that His ministry to us may not be theoretical, but that it may be powerful; that it may be known and felt in the preaching and hearing of this Your own holy Word. And we pray that the Spirit will do that work which He most delights to do, even taking of the things of Christ and revealing them to our hearts with power. Hear us, O God, we plead through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you have your Bibles open, may I urge you to just glance with me at the opening and closing words of the Gospel of Matthew. That may seem like a strange request, but I hope the rationale for it will soon become clear. The book of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament, begins with the words "The book of the generation [or the genealogy] of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." And then there follows in the next sixteen verses this record of the genealogy of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the flesh. There was a real genealogy of a real Jesus Christ whose birth record then begins in verse 18: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise." And then chapter 2: "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem...." And then throughout the Gospel of Matthew, we have this accurate, though not exhaustive and not always perfectly, chronological record of the life, the ministry, the teaching, the death, the resurrection, and the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, what we have in the Gospel of Matthew is a real, substantive, biographical account of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus. We are not dealing with the stuff of religious myths. We are not dealing with notions that devout followers of Jesus projected, as it were, into historical form. But rather, we have a real, bonafide biographical sketch under the direction of the Holy Spirit with reference to the life, the ministry, the teaching, the death, the resurrection, and the ascension of our Lord Jesus. But this very account of the historical facts as they relate to Jesus of Nazareth closes in its very last words (Matthew 28:20) with these very suggestive words: "And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world [or the consummation of the age]." And here we have a record of the words of Jesus promising that He would be with His people always (literally, each and every one of

the days, even to the consummation of the age). In other words, we have in the Gospel of Matthew what is introduced in the very first word and the first verse of that account a bonafide, real historical record of the life and ministry of Jesus. But then it closes with this promise of the abiding presence of the very Jesus whose record is given to us in the Gospel of Matthew.

Now, as Hugh Martin, the preacher, theologian, and pastor of the previous generation in Scotland has so masterfully demonstrated in his classic work now printed under the title *The Abiding Presence*, here we have in this combination of Matthew 1:1 and Matthew 28:20 one of the most amazing and encouraging declarations of what lies at the very nerve centers of the Christian faith. And Hugh Martin goes on to comment and, as it were, to conjecture what it would be like if all he had was an accurate, historical, biographical account of the person and work, the ministry, the teaching, the life and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. If that's all we had, we would experience what we experience when we read the biography of a noble man or woman who has come across the stage of human history. If that biography is accurate and we see in that man or woman noble characteristics, great deeds accomplished for the advancement of the truth of God or humanity at large; when we read such a biography, we are filled with admiration. We are filled with a sense of mingled disappointment that we had to read in the last chapter about the person's death. We are filled with a sense of longing: "Would that God would bring into my life someone with those characteristics in my generation." Hugh Martin says,

"If all we had in the Gospel records was this accurate account of the life and teaching and ministry of the Lord Jesus, a record of how He related to the full spectrum of humanity in all of its complexity of need, then to read the Gospels would merely fill us with admiration. It would fill us with longing and yearning that somehow we might know something of the presence and ministry of such a Savior. But God has not left us with that frustration. For having given us this beginning of the Gospel or Good News of Jesus Christ, this Gospel that begins with the record of His genealogy, the record of His birth, the record of His baptism, of His mighty ministry, it concludes with this marvelous promise that this very Jesus by the presence and ministry of the Spirit is with us, not to be admired from a distance, not to be longed after, not to be filling His people with nostalgia, but in the Spirit of faith to fill them with confidence that all that He is as He is displayed in the Gospel records, He is to the end of the age in the presence of His people. 'I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'"

Then Hugh Martin goes on to say,

"Think how frustrating it would be if all we had was a record of His promised presence, but we had no Gospel account of what He was like. If all we had was the promise, 'Lo I am with you,' but no record of how He related to the downcast, how He related to those of weak faith, how He dealt with the outcasts of society, how He dealt with the religious pride and smug. You see, if we had merely the promise of His presence but no substantial content in Scripture telling us what He was like, there might be some sense of mystical satisfaction, He is with me. But when I ask the question, 'How can I expect Him to act towards me?', I would be left at the mercy of my own imagination or the mercy of the opinions of others. And there are never lacking in any generation people who are quick to affirm, 'My Christ would never do this,' or 'My Christ would never do that,' or 'My Christ would always do this,' or 'My Christ would always do that.' And you see, if we had but the promise of His presence but we had no substantial record of what He is like, it could only fill us with this mystic

sense that He is somehow in some way or another with us. But precisely how He is with us and how He relates to us--concerning those questions we would know nothing. But since God has given to us this marvelous conjunction, this fusion of an accurate record joined to the promise of an ever abiding presence, we have all the human heart can yearn for in relationship to the Lord Jesus."

And that reality is the background and the framework of the passage to which I direct your attention this morning in this very Gospel in Matthew 12. And I trust you'll see the relevance of that rather lengthy synopsis of Hugh Martin's thesis given in the first chapter of his classic work *The Abiding Presence*. For here in Matthew 12, we have an accurate record of our Lord's two encounters with the Pharisees in conjunction with controversies over His activities and the activities of His disciples on the Jewish Sabbath Day. In Matthew 12:1-8, we have the incident where our Lord justifies and defends the action of His disciples in going through the grain fields and taking some of the gleanings of that grain in order to gratify their hunger. And the Pharisees take umbrage of this, and the Lord defends His disciples. Then in verses 9 through 13, our Lord Jesus heals a man who had a withered hand--and He did it on the Sabbath. And again, the Pharisees are upset that Jesus did this. And Jesus once again comes to the defense of His actions. And when Jesus is done with these two defenses of what in the estimation of the Pharisees was a breaking of their Sabbath rules (not God's), they are so frustrated that they've been openly put to rout that we read in verse 14: "The Pharisees went out, and took counsel against Him, how they might destroy Him." You see, when you cannot best a man with rational arguments, then you've got to get rid of him. He's an irritant, and the only thing left to do is get rid of him. And so that's what they are committed to doing. It's in that setting that we now read in Matthew 12:15-21:

"And Jesus perceiving it withdrew from thence: and many followed Him; and He healed them all, and charged them that they should not make Him known: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, saying [and then Matthew quotes of Isaiah 42:1-4], Behold, My servant whom I have chosen; My beloved in whom my soul is well pleased: I will put my Spirit upon Him, and He shall declare judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not strive, nor cry aloud; neither shall any one hear His voice in the streets. A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench, till He send forth judgment [or justice] unto victory. And in His name shall the Gentiles hope."

Now I want you to direct your attention particularly this morning to verse 20 in this passage. As the Lord Jesus withdraws from the Pharisees who are taking counsel how they might destroy Him, and as He is engaged in the work of healing multitudes and charging them not to emblazon abroad what He has done, but to be reserved and restrained in advertising His mighty works, Matthew, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, says the actions at this time were a direct fulfillment of what was prophesied of the Servant of Jehovah by the prophet Isaiah 800 years prior to the events recorded. And Matthew says everything that was prophesied of the Servant of Jehovah in what in our Bibles is Isaiah 42:1-4 is now being fulfilled in Jesus. And while the primary emphasis of the passage falls upon His reticence to send out these who have been healed as noisy ambassadors of His credentials, He solemnly charges them not to make Him known because the Servant of Jehovah was to accomplish His mighty work, not through the ostentatious methods of the worldly leaders, but by the sheer power and grace that rested upon Him by the Holy Spirit, He would accomplish His divine mission. But in the certain accomplishment of that

mission, a mission that would eventually encompass the Gentile nations (verse 21: "And in His name shall the Gentiles hope"), He can be expected to act in a certain way. And it is in verse 20 that we are told in the accomplishment of that mission, "A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench." I want us to meditate for the remainder of our time this morning upon this statement extracted from the prophecy of Isaiah, which Matthew under the guidance of the Spirit, says is now being fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus. For in His promise, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the [consummation of the age]," we are warranted to think of the Jesus who is with us as perfectly suited, as perfectly fulfilling this description: "A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench." As we think our way through the passage, consider with me first of all the imagery employed. Then secondly, we'll consider the truth conveyed by that imagery; then thirdly, the practical application of the truth declared.

First of all, the imagery employed. Our text says that Jesus will deal with bruised reeds and with smoking flax. "A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench." Now obviously, the prophet is speaking in figurative language. It's not telling us what Jesus would do if He came by a riverside or by the side of a lake and found a stand of reeds--that He would be very careful as the super environmentalists to make sure He didn't bruise one of them. Now, you see, environmentalists would find in this text a marvelous text to prove that Jesus supported their cause. Well, it's not talking about literal reeds; how Jesus would relate to reeds that He might pass on the way down to Jordan to be baptized, or on His way out of the Jordan, or reeds that might be found by the shores of the sea of Galilee where much of His ministry was carried on there in Northern Palestine. No, it is figurative language. It is not talking about how Jesus would deal in a home where some flax was smoking. It is figurative language. There is imagery employed. And it is crucial that we grasp the imagery. And let's seek to do that. "A bruised reed shall He not break." The reed is a hollow, tall but fragile water plant found abundantly by rivers and often around lakes. And apparently in Palestine, it was a well-known plant, for you'll remember in the Gospel record, the previous chapter, when our Lord was speaking about John the Baptist, He says, "What went ye out into the wilderness to behold? a reed [same word] shaken with the wind?" Now, you see, you don't use figures of speech that don't bridge in the minds of the people from the known to the unknown. You don't use figures of speech that make no sense. That's confusing issues, not clarifying them. So when Jesus said, "When you went out to see John, what did you go to see?"--now, that had all seen many, many times a stand of reeds, these thin, hollow water plants. And when a zephyr, a breeze would blow, they would all bend with the breeze and then stand again--He said, "Is that what you went out to see?" Did you see in John the Baptist one who is like a reed? And He could use that imagery because the reed was a common commodity to these in Palestine. It was so common that when our Lord is standing before that kangaroo court the night before His crucifixion, and they put Him into this posture of mock coronation as a king, and put upon Him a purple robe, and put upon Him a crown of thorns. It says in Matthew 27:29, "They put a reed [same word] in His hand." They had them readily available. The reed, then, was this hollow, tall, but very fragile water plant. A bruised reed would be a reed that someone had either walked against it or deliberately whacked it. And somewhere along the stalk of that hollow reed, it had been bruised, and being bruised would to some degree be bent at the point of its bruising. And now it says that Jesus, the Servant of Jehovah, can be counted on, that when He encounters a bruised reed, He will not break it. Now the word "break" is the very word used in John

19 three times with reference to the breaking of the legs that were crucified. They broke not the legs of our Lord. They did not snap the bones, though they did snap the bones of the other two criminals that were crucified with Him.

So here we are told that the Servant of Jehovah in the accomplishment of His messianic mission, which will be successful ("In His name shall even the Gentiles hope") that whenever He came upon a bruised reed, He would never do the thing that would be very easy to do. When you come upon a reed that is bruised and bent over, all you need to do is take the part that is bent and bring it down once and up again, and you break it off. A bruised reed, it's so easy to break it and to cast off that reed as no longer useful for a measuring rod, for that's what these reeds were sometimes used for. And it's that very use that appears in the book of the Revelation. John in vision sees that there is a reed used as a measuring rod. The reed in other cases was in the small end cut off and used for a quill and a pen. And that Biblical usage was found in the Scriptures as well. But this is the picture of a man who comes upon a bruised reed, and he does not do what would be so natural and easy to do to something that appears as though it's not going to be useful for anything anyway. It's already bruised and bent. "Break it off." He will never do that. "A bruised reed He will not break."

But then the second imagery is, "A smoking flax shall He not quench." Now what's flax? Well, again, we're in the realm of plant life. And the flax came from a plant, the stalk of which had fibers that could be woven into what we now would call linen. And in Biblical times, that particular plant and the fibers from the stem would be woven into various materials for various usages, and one of them was to make a wick for oil lamps. And when those fibers would be woven together into a wick, they would be placed into a bowl-like vessel that held oil. And the wick would be pulled out one end of it. Often it was formed in such a way that it would cut the wick, and that flax served as the wick for that lamp. Now it says, "A smoking flax shall He not quench." Well, we are told by those who are knowledgeable in these things and have even seen such lamps in our day in the Middle East, that when the supply of oil would be diminished, the flax itself would begin to burn. And when it did, it would begin to smoke and send off an acrid smell. And that would signal that you better get some more oil back in there because the house is being filled with the smell of burning flax. So the picture here is smoking flax. The oil is being diminished. And often what the woman of the house or the man of the house would do when the wick had gotten to the place where it began to smoke is clip off part of that wick that was smoking (it still had a little bit of the embers of living fire in it, but it was mostly smoke), quench the fire, pull off the burnt part, pull out more of the flax, and then re-ignite that flax and so have light in the house once more.

But now it is said of the Servant of Jehovah: "A smoking flax shall He not quench." And that's the standard word for putting out fire. When Jesus spoke of hell as being a place of unquenchable fire, there's our word. It's the word used in Matthew 25:8 with the foolish virgins. They said, "Our lamps are gone out." Their fire has been quenched. And it's the word used in Ephesians 6:16 where Paul says, "withal taking up the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench [put out] all the fiery darts of the evil one." Now you see the imagery employed there. The Servant of Jehovah, as surely as He will never break the bruised reed, He will never put out the little remaining flickering embers in that smoking flax of that oriental oil lamp. He will never quench that flax. Rather, He will nurture it. He will do whatever's necessary to have it burn brightly again. So the Servant of the Lord in His ministry is one who would never

do what is illustrated in this snapping of the bruised reed and this extinguishing of the flickering fire in a smoking, oil-scarred, flax wick. That's the imagery employed.

Now then, secondly, what is the truth conveyed in that imagery? As surely as we know from the prophecy of Isaiah that the One who was the Son given, the One who was the child born would be the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace, we would know with certainty that in the accomplishment of His messianic tasks--whatever it means--He will never break the bruised reed, and He will never quench the smoking flax. Now what is the truth conveyed in that imagery? Well, negatively stated, it is this: the person whose spiritual condition is weak, flagging, and vulnerable like the bruised reed; whose spiritual condition is such that it is waning in the fire of devotion and zeal--such a one will neither be crushed nor extinguished by Jesus. That's the negative statement. And that's the way it comes to us in our text. Quoting from the prophet Isaiah, we are told: "A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench." But most likely what we have here is a figure within a figure. You have imagery used, but used in the form of what's called a litotes. And a litotes is a figure of speech--many of us use it--in which you state something and mean just the opposite. You state it negatively, but you mean just the opposite. For example, someone might say, "This cost me no little pain to make this for you." What do they mean? "It cost me much pain." Or we may say, "There were not a few present." What do we mean? There were many present. So when it is said of the Servant of Jehovah, "A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench," most likely our Lord intends that we should understand from this the positive affirmation that the person whose spiritual condition is weak, flagging, and vulnerable as the bruised reed; whose zeal and whose love and whose faith and whose repentance is well-nigh obscured in the smoky wick of spiritual dullness and barrenness--most assuredly the Lord Jesus will never break off and cast away that believer who is like a bruised reed, nor extinguish that almost imperceptible fire of spiritual life in the one who is like a wick of smoking flax.

Now it's interesting that in Bishop Ryle's Expository Thoughts when he comes to this very passage, he beautifully states this perspective in summary form:

"What are we to understand by the bruised reed and the smoking flax? The language of the prophet, no doubt, is figurative. What is it that these two expressions mean? What is the truth conveyed in the imagery? The simplest explanation seems to be that the Holy Spirit here is describing persons whose grace is at present weak, whose repentance is feeble, and whose faith is small. Towards such persons, the Lord Jesus Christ will be very tender and compassionate. Weak as the bruised reed is, it shall not be broken. Small as the spark of fire may be within the smoking flax, it shall not be quenched. It is a standing truth in the kingdom of grace that weak grace, weak faith, and weak repentance are yet precious in the Lord's sight."

Now if that is the proper understanding of what Matthew says is presently being fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus, then we should expect when we through the Gospel record concerning how Jesus dealt with those with weak faith, those with weak repentance, those with but a dull, little speck of zeal and fire and courage of devotion to Him, that we should see Jesus dealing in such a way, that we could immediately make the connection and say,

"Yes, there's a bruised reed. Jesus is in the presence of a bruised reed. What will He do with it? Will He break it? Here is a smoldering, smoking flax wick. It is acrid with

the smell of smoke. There is very little discernable fire. What will Jesus do? Will He clip it off? Or will He so deal with that smoldering, smoking wick that it once again burns brightly?"

Well, if you have any acquaintance with the Gospel record, you know that the Lord Jesus deals precisely in this way with one after another after another. Just turn back to chapter 11 in this very Gospel for a beautiful example of a bruised reed and of a smoking flax. And it's interesting because this is a man of whom Jesus spoke and said, "He was a burning and a shining light." That's how Jesus referred to John the Baptist. But here in the opening part of chapter 11, we read in verse 2: "Now when John heard in the prison the works of the Christ, he sent by his disciples and said unto Him, Art thou He that cometh, or look we for another?" Now think of it, this is the one who was the forerunner of Jesus; whose devotion to Jesus even predated His birth. When Mary came into the presence of Elizabeth, John the Baptist had a glory fit in his mother's womb. The babe leaped in her womb in the presence of his Lord. He was filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb. It was he of whom it was said in John 1, that when he saw Jesus coming, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man who is become before me...I am not worthy to unloose His sandals...I baptize in water, but He shall baptize in the Holy Spirit and in fire." It was John who points to Christ, who speaks of Christ, who rejoices when people come and try to stir him up to jealousy and say, "John, everybody's going away from you and after Him." And it's recorded that John rejoiced and said, "What makes the friend of the bridegroom happy? It's when all the attention is place upon the bridegroom, not on the best man. I'm just the best man. And now that all the attention is focused on the bridegroom who's come, I rejoice." There is the burning and the shining light. But now look at him. He's in prison--swept into prison by a sea of raw, base, animal-like, male lust when everyone's raving about the seductive dance of Herod's daughter, Salome. And carried along in that mindless orgy, Herod says to this wicked young woman who's being pulled at the end of the strings of her mother's manipulative influence, "Look, I'll give you anything up to the half of my kingdom." John is in prison. And in prison, apparently, this one that seemed to be like a cedar in Lebanon is now a bruised reed. "What went ye out in the wilderness to see? A reed shaken in the wind?" Jesus said, "Not John. None greater among those born of women than John. He's not a reed. He's a cedar in Lebanon. Let the winds howl. Let the opposition come like a gale. This is no reed shaken in the wind." Look at him now: "Are You He who should come, or do we look for another?" He's a bruised reed. His faith, his confidence has been shaken. He's a smoking flax. "Are You He, or do we look for another?" And he said this after he heard of all His miracles. Strange thing. You'd think if there had been a period when Jesus wasn't doing miracles that John might have said, "Are You the One who should come?" But the text says, "When John heard of the works of Christ..." He sent by the disciples and said, "Are You He who should come, or do we look for another?" Now surely, if ever anyone was a just candidate to be rebuked for sinful forgetfulness, for unbelief, for unfounded timidity, it was John at this point. But how does Jesus deal with him? Look at the passage:

"Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and tell John the things which ye hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good tidings preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall find no occasion of stumbling in Me."

He said,

"Look, just go back and tell John all the things you see and hear. I have confidence that John knows his Old Testament Scriptures well enough that when you spread before him all of these specific credentials of My messianic identity, he'll remember who I am. All that he has said about Me and all that he's preached about Me and all that he's know about Me will once again ignite into a flame of present confidence that I am precisely who he declared Me to be, the Lamb of God, the Son of God, the promised Messiah. I am exactly all that's he's already preached that I am. Just go back and tell him."

And then what does the Lord do? Verses 7-9:

"And as these went their way, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John [now here's an example of what happens when you allow unbelief and doubt.... No, He doesn't use John as a springboard to give a lesson on the wickedness of unbelief and forgetfulness. He uses the occasion to give just praise to John], What went ye out into the wilderness to behold? a reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out to see? a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear soft raiment are in kings' houses. But wherefore went ye out? to see a prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet."

Dear people, do you see the Lord Jesus fulfilling His identity as the Lord's Servant. This bruised reed, John, He didn't break. This smoking flax, He didn't quench. And you can go through the Gospel records--we had some of it laid out so eloquently when Pastor Donnelly was here. You take Peter, yes, there's a time when the Lord calls him adversary when he would stand between our Lord and the cross, thinking that he is God's appointed means to keep the Son of God from suffering. The Lord says, "Get behind Me, Satan. You're thinking not the thoughts of God, but the thoughts of men." And then Peter, when he thinks himself to be a cedar in Lebanon: "If all forsake You, Ill never forsake You." But you see, there comes a point where Peter is a bruised reed. And his own ears cannot deny that they've heard his mouth taking oaths and maledictions in the presence of a little servant girl; in the presence of others, taking oaths and curses upon himself to affirm he doesn't even know Jesus. And what does the Lord do? The Scripture tells us that Jesus looked upon him. The Scripture tells us that Peter called to remembrance the words of the Lord Jesus and went out and wept bitterly. And when our Lord rises from the dead, what does He say? "Go tell My disciples and Peter. He may think he's cut himself off, but I want him to know I've not cut him off. Tell My disciples. And because Peter may think he's the bent and bruised reed and has been broken off and longer fits the category of disciples, go tell My disciples and Peter." And then you remember how sweetly and graciously He dealt with him. After He prepared breakfast for them by the seaside recorded in John 21, He said, "Do you love Me, Peter?" He didn't say, "Why did you deny Me?" Peter at that point was so bruised that such a question from the Lord Jesus would have broken him. His flax was so smoking and so lacking in any discernable fire that such treatment would have extinguished whatever remaining love and zeal was there. So the Lord Jesus tenderly deals with that smoking flax called Peter. And he says, "Lord, You know all things. You know that I love You." And the Lord re-commissions him. For each denial, there's the fresh affirmation of his love. And after it's all over with, the Lord Jesus says, "My purposes for you have not been sidetracked. You're to feed My lambs, tend My sheep. Peter, you're to follow Me as My faithful disciple." And you go through the Gospel records, and you see the Lord Jesus doing this again and again and again. Where there is one of His true people--weak faith, weak repentance, weak zeal--they are indeed fitting the imagery

of the bruised reed and the smoking flax. He neither breaks the one nor quenches the other.

So we've considered together the imagery employed; secondly, the truth conveyed by the imagery. Now thirdly, I want to make application of this truth to those of you sitting here this morning. And since there are two basic groups sitting here this morning more basic than male and female--it's the groups, those that are in Christ and those that are out of Christ--I want both of you to know what you can expect of Christ, the Christ of whom Matthew speaks saying that this passage is now fulfilled. He who has come as the Lord's Servant is the One who will not break the bruised reed and will not quench the smoking flax. So I want to make application first of all to you who are the true people of God. And I have three applications I want to lay upon your understanding and upon your conscience. And the first is this: I want to call upon you as I call upon myself to worship and to admire such a Savior. In the midst of a passage--and note this emphasis--a passage which declares the triumph of the mission of the Lord's Servant: "Behold, My servant whom I have chosen; My beloved in whom my soul is well pleased: I will put my Spirit upon Him, and He shall declare judgment [or justice] to the Gentiles.... And in His name shall the Gentiles hope." There shall be such a revelation of His character and works--that's what His name means as we saw several Lord's Days ago--and even Gentiles shall hope, shall trust; they'll place their confidence in this One as He is revealed in the Gospel. In a context where the Servant is set forth as the successful Servant in His mission, yet in the success in that mission, there is nothing of the worldly conqueror in our Lord Jesus. There is nothing of the worldly method to accomplish His mission. There is nothing of a pattern of the Gentiles, as we were reminded in the previous hour. Jesus said, "Among the Gentiles [those that reach the top] are those that lord it down upon others. [They climb to the top over the reputations and over the sensibilities of others.]" And in our Lord Jesus, we see this beautiful balance, this fusion, a principled, determined commitment to do the will of God, unflinching commitment to the will of His Father. And yet the gentleness and the tenderness, that it can be said that the bruised reed He will never break, and the smoking flax He will never quench.

In a very moving sermon on this text, one of the most powerful preachers of the colonial period--some say in their judgment, the most powerful preacher that America's every produced--Samuel Davies. He opened his exposition of this text with these words:

"The Lord Jesus possesses all those virtues in the highest perfection which render Him infinitely amiable and qualify Him for the administration of a just and gracious government over the world. The virtues of mortals when carried to a high degree very often run into those vices which have a kind of affinity to their very virtues."

Then he quotes a statement which apparently was in vogue in his day:

"Right too ridged hardens into wrong. In other words, in mortals, a man committed to righteousness and committed in principle, unflinching in his commitment to right can very easily cross the line into a harshness and into an inflexibility. Strict justice steals itself into excessive severity, and the man is lost in the judge. In other words, the tenderness that ought to mark humanity in the midst of suffering humanity is lost in this absorption with principle and with equity. But in Jesus Christ, goodness and mercy are joined to this inflexible commitment to righteousness. These seemingly

opposite virtues center and harmonize in the highest perfection without running into any extremes. Hence, He is at once set before us in Scripture as the Lamb."

Remember in John's vision: "I saw, as it were, a Lamb in the midst of the throne." Yet in that same book, He is called the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Well, He is Lamb or is He Lion? When it is right for Him to be Lamb, He's all Lamb. "As a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth." Pilate marveled; Herod marveled at His silence before all of this sham witness of His so-called sins. When it's time to be a Lamb, He's all Lamb. When it's time to be a Lion, He's all Lion. Psalm 50 shows Him as the Lion who says, "I will rend you in pieces." Now I ask you, can you worship and admire a Jesus who is perfect Lamb and perfect Lion? Not all Lamb, not all Lion, but perfect Lamb, perfect Lion.

In this passage, we see Him, the Servant of Jehovah anointed by His Father to go forth to accomplish His mission. And He shall be, He must be successful in that mission. But in that mission, He is never so preoccupied with the world-encompassing task laid upon Him that when He passes by a bruised reed, He just nudges it and sees it break. He stops and takes that bruised reed like I took one of the branches on one of the shrubs in front of my house, a shrub that is dependant for symmetry upon all of its branches. And somehow during the ice storms last year, one of them got bent over to where it would have been the easiest thing to just snap it off. But it would have destroyed the symmetry of that bush. So I tenderly propped it up, splintered it, wrapped some duct tape around it, and now it's joined the rest of its fellow branches. That's the picture of our Lord. Filled with zeal to accomplish His messianic mission, so much so that at one point as He sets His face like a flint to go to Jerusalem, it says that even His disciples were amazed. They were blown out of their minds. There was an aura of determination, a fixation that they could not comprehend. Yet in the midst of that, He never walks by the bruised reed and carelessly snaps it off. And when He sees the smoking flax, He doesn't say, "Look, we've got to get on with it. We've got no time to stop and trim smoking flaxes. Let's snip them off and pull it out." No, the smoking flax He will not quench. O, dear people of God, how we ought to admire and worship our blessed Savior for all the perfections of holy humanity seen in perfect equipoise and balance in Him.

But then secondly, I exhort you, my fellow believers, to trust the Lord Jesus to be just such a Savior to you. Now I hope you see the rationale for giving you a little synopsis of Hugh Martin's marvelous insights. "The book of the generations of Jesus Christ." And the record unfolds. But you see, it closes with the words, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the [consummation of the age]." And the Christ who is my Savior, my Lord, my keeper, my preserver, my protector, I can trust Him to continue to be what He has declared in this text, to be the Lord's Servant who will never break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax. And when I know myself to be the bruised reed; when I like John find myself in a place where faith is low and my whole world has come crashing down at my feet, and I hardly know my left hand from my right, it is precisely then that the accuser will come and say, "What will He have to do with you? You're nothing but a bruised reed. You're nothing but a piece of flax that stinks. There's no pure and even discernable flame of faith and love and zeal and repentance. What use does He have for you?" That's what the accuser will say to you. And as a man or woman, boy or girl of faith, you need to face your accuser and say, "My Savior is the One who is committed never to break a bruised reed and never to quench a smoking flax." And you look up into His face and you say,

"Lord Jesus, this isn't a very glamorous thing You're looking at. It's a bruised reed that's drooping over, apparently useless, casted off, no good for a measuring rod, no good even to be put as a mock scepter in the hands of the Son of God--no good for anything. But Lord, You said You'd not break bruised reeds. And Lord, I'm smoking flax. If I had to look with the most powerful microscope, I wonder if I could even find a glimmer of any real, living fire of zeal for Your honor, of tenderness, of brokenness. Lord, my repentance shames me. My faith is well-nigh indiscernible; my zeal--I can't even think of it without shame. But Lord Jesus, You have said in Your Word that would not quench the smoking flax."

Now it's not very good for self-esteem, I realize, to say I'm a bruised reed or a smoking flax. But if you're committed to this wretched gospel of self-esteem, you'll never, never be able to walk as a Christian in a Biblical way. It's not flattering to say, "Lord, I'm a bruised reed. I'm a stinking, smoking, no good piece of flax at this point." But you see, you're a reed and a piece of flax for whom the Son of God shed His precious blood; for whom He came all the way from heaven by way of Mary's womb to get up to a cross where hell would be poured out upon the soul of the Son of God. That's your value to Him. So you come as the bruised reed and the smoking flax and say, "Lord Jesus, manifest in me Your messianic function and identity: the Lord's Servant who will not break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax."

Then my third exhortation to you the Lord's people is this: not only worship and admire such a Savior, trust Him to be such a Savior to you, but imitate Him in your dealing with others. The Scripture says in 1 John 2:6, "He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also to walk even as He walked." We've heard in recent weeks, "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; even as I have loved you." And surely this is one dimension of His love by which He nourishes and cherishes all of the bruised reeds and the smoking flaxes for whom He shed His precious blood. And now you and I are called upon to imitate Him in our dealings one with another. And where we have no reason to doubt the profession of one with whom we are bound in common confession of faith and attachment to Christ; there's not been a repudiation of that profession; there's not been official church discipline which has labeled someone's profession as spurious and put that person out of the church, we are to deal with one another as the Lord Jesus deals with us. And we will see each other at times as bruised reeds and as smoking flaxes, and we need to deal with one another as the Lord Jesus deals with us. And when someone has done something that was irresponsible and stupid, and now they're reaping the fruits of that stupidity and irresponsibility or even sin, what is our function? To rub their noses it? No, but to be like our Savior and come to the bruised reed and the smoking flax and to minister in the gentleness of our Lord Jesus. Isn't that what Galatians 6:1 says? "Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in any trespass, ye who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to thyself, lest thou also be tempted." How many times in pastoral dealings when people have come and had to expose some aspect of sordid declension from the Lord, and they've looked at me, and I say, "What do you want me to do? Spit on you? Throw you out of my study?"

"Well, aren't you angry?"

"No, I'm a sinner, and apart from the daily mercy of God vouchsafed to me in Jesus Christ, where would I be? And whatever you've done, but by the grace of God, on the day you did it, I would have done something ten times worse."

Surely, if we are present monuments of the fact that Jesus does not break bruised reeds or quench smoking flax, we ought in our dealing with one another reflect the disposition of our Lord Jesus.

But then in closing, I want to bring a word of application to you who are not in Christ. And I want to bring it in terms of two very simple and direct questions. There are those of you sitting here today, men and women, boys and girls who are not in Christ. You have never divorced yourself from sin and been married to Christ in the bond of faith. You've not turned from running your own life and being in the God business, and embraced the Living God as your God and His Son as your Savior and your Lord. And I want to give you two words of exhortation in the light of this text. The first is a sincere question, and it's this: why would you not want to put yourself in the hands of such a gracious Savior? As I was preparing, I said, "Lord, to go on in unbelief under the preaching of the Gospel is moral madness." It doesn't make sense. Why would you not want to put yourself unconditionally in the hands of a Savior who says,

"If you do so, I will pardon all of your sins, I will break the chains that bind you, I will give you a title to eternal life, and I will be to you the kind of Savior I was prophesied to be by Isaiah and that Matthew said I was to be in My earthly ministry. I do not break bruised reeds, and I do not quench smoking flaxes."

My unconverted friend, I ask you to think on this question: what reason can you give for not putting yourself in the hands of so gracious a Savior? Unbelief is moral madness. That's why Jesus said, "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls." Why would you not come and take a yoke that gives you rest? Your present master gives you no rest. He promises you pie in the sky, and all he gives you in an accusing conscience. And however sweet the momentary taste of sin may be, it's bitter aftertaste. It isn't worth it! And here is a Savior who is committed to so dealing with all of His people that the bruised reeds among them He does not break, and the smoking flaxes He does not quench. I ask you sincerely, why would you not want such a Savior to be yours?

Yes, I've ask a sincere question, but I must close with a solemn warning. While He'll cherish, nurture, and preserve the weakest of those who truly trust Him, He will utterly crush all who oppose Him and die in that opposition. I want you to hear His own words from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 21, as our closing passage. You see, this is where some people can't hack the Jesus of the Bible. They want a Jesus who's all Lamb but no Lion. Alas, there are some who would have Him all Lion and no Lamb. But let the Lord Jesus Himself tell us what He will be to some. Matthew 21:42-44:

"Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the head of the corner; this was from the Lord, and it is marvellous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. [Now this is Jesus speaking, the One who will never break a bruised reed, who will never quench a smoking flax.] And he that falleth on this stone [Jesus said, 'I am that stone spoken of by the Psalmist'] shall be broken to pieces: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will scatter him as dust. [It will grind Him to powder.]"

Here, the same Servant of Jehovah of whom it is said His gentle hands will never break a bruised reed; they will never quench a smoking flax. He said, "I am that stone rejected of the builders, but chosen and appointed by the Lord Jehovah in the building of His spiritual temple." If you by faith do not become incorporated into that chief cornerstone rightly related to Him; if you fall upon Him thinking you're going to do Him harm, you shall be broken to pieces. And if He falls upon you, if He comes upon you in the fury of His righteous judgment, He will grind you to powder. My friend, don't you mistake the gentleness of Jesus for an effeminate, carnal, unprincipled indulgence in your willful unbelief. "He that believeth not shall be damned." The same Jesus who will never break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax will grind to powder everyone who says, "I'll take my chances, maintain my own independence and self-will and pride." My friend, don't you become an eternal exegete of what it means to be ground to powder by God's chief cornerstone.

Some of you wonder why we don't indulge in telling jokes and creating a climate of laid back, relaxed, easy, low-key, cool communication in this pulpit. I'll tell you why. We believe what Jesus said. The day is coming when people who sat in this building and heard of the love and mercy and compassion of Jesus, said, "No, no, no, no," and Christ will have the final "no," and He will grind you to powder. May God have mercy upon you, that this day the Spirit of God will apply the Word with power to your conscience and cause you to see. "Why, why should I be a monument of His right and power to grind to powder when I could be a monument of His gentleness and tenderness in never breaking the bruised reed and never quenching the smoking flax?"

One of the interesting things, I believe, when we get to heaven, dear fellow believers, is to have the Lord Himself show us all the times when we didn't even know we were bruised reeds, but He did. And we were so close to bending and breaking, but He secured that we would not be broken. And we were the smoking flax, and He nurtured the life He had implanted until at last He brings us home to the consummation of that life in His very presence. May God grant that this sight of our Savior will draw out the hearts of all of us who know Him to admire Him and worship Him, to trust Him to be just such a Savior to us, and to pray that we may imitate Him in our dealings with one another.

And to those of you who are not in Christ, may that question follow you to your home: why would you refuse such a gracious Savior? And may the solemn warning fasten itself upon your conscience and give you no rest until you turn to Him.

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