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Sermon Notes

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## **Gentleness Triumphant: The Bruised Reed and the Smoking Flax**

**Matthew 12:20**

Do you ever feel like a failure in your Christian life? Do you ever see the power of sin so strongly in yourself that you wonder how you can ever survive decades more of temptation in this wretched world? Have you ever grieved at the mixed nature of your walk with Christ... seeing some of God's work on your soul, but still so much sin left within? Then this message is for you!!

Basic concept: Christ is powerful enough to be gentle, wise enough to lead us to victory. Christ is extremely gentle with weak people on whom His grace is working. He will not crush them but will gently deal with them until He brings about final victory. BUT key to notice: He does the bruising, then heals us from the very bruising He has done.

### **I. An Oasis of Gentleness in a Harsh World**

- A. Our Harsh World
- B. The Harshness of Unbelievers
- C. The Harshness of Satan and His Kingdom
- D. The Harshness of False Religious Systems
- E. Christ an Oasis of Gentleness

### **II. Context: Enemies Plotting His Destruction**

- A. Matthew 11-12: Human Responses to the Advancing Kingdom
  - 1. Matthew 11: John the Baptist's Doubts
  - 2. Matthew 11:20-24 Korazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum... unbelief leading to indifference
  - 3. Matthew 11:25-30 Sovereignty of God, Gentle Appeal of the King
  - 4. Matthew 12:1-14 Trouble over the Sabbath: The Religionists Attack

***Matthew 12:14 But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.***

- a. careful conspiracy to end his life
- b. Jesus well aware of what they were plotting
- c. earthly King would have gone on the attack

B. Jesus' Gentle Methods for Conquest

**vs. 15 *Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place.***

- 1. Typical of the humble servanthood of Jesus
  - a. lived only to do the will of His Father
  - b. not seeking glory for Himself

***John 8:50 I am not seeking glory for myself***

- 2. Not seeking to press His Kingdom ahead by force
- 3. Gathers around Him hurting, sick, rejected, despised people
- 4. Hardly an impressive "popular uprising"... actually broke all the rules!
  - a. weak downtrodden sick people aren't much on a field of battle
  - b. recruitment drives flourish in major centers of population
  - c. for this reason, Jesus' brothers rebuked Him!!

***John 7:3-4 Jesus' brothers said to him, "You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. No one who wants to be a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world."***

This is worldly wisdom if you want to build a worldly Kingdom. But Jesus said

***"My Kingdom is not of this world..."***

Therefore, His ways of building His Kingdom were unlike any had seen before or since

He withdrew from population centers; did not seek the high and mighty of His day; opposed military might and power; worked with humble, broken-hearted people... the sick, the outcasts, those crushed by sin, those who were weakest

With this Kingdom He would conquer the world!!

Jesus' brothers, like a modern P.R. firm, howled at His strange and seemingly foolish methods

But Matthew, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit saw in it a direct fulfillment of a six-century old prophecy from the pen of Isaiah:

***vs. 17-21 This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 18 "Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. 19 He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. 20 A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. 21 In his name the nations will put their hope."***

Today, let's zero in on just one verse primarily:

***vs. 20 A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory.***

C. My Mentor: Richard Sibbes

1. \_\_\_\_\_-page booklet on this one concept
2. Central idea: Christ is very gentle in dealing with broken-hearted sinners

### III. Simple Explanation: The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax

A. Descriptions of Worthless, Offensive Frailty

B. The Bruised Reed

1. Reeds Used for Many Purposes
  - a. writing: dipped in ink
  - b. music: shepherds playing a tune
2. Bruised reed = creased, bent, perhaps even hanging by a thread
3. Frailty... weakness... ALSO Uselessness
4. Result: most certainly discarded... reeds were a dime a dozen; why take time to fix it??
5. THEREFORE: picture of worthlessness

C. Smoking Flax

1. Light from a lamp
  - a. ceramic dish holding pressed oil

- b. wick made of linen flax found readily, very cheap
  - c. wick drew oil up into itself and burned steadily and brightly
2. Smoldering wick = low quality flax, impurities, causing smoking and little light
  3. Offensive to the user... fills room with smoke and stench
  4. Fire is low, light is little
  5. Again: a picture of worthlessness... but also of impurity

D. Christ's Actions: Gentleness, Patience in Working with Frail Sinners

1. A bruised reed He will NOT break
2. A smoldering wick He will NOT snuff out

Any mighty King and world conqueror can make use of the happy, healthy, powerful, wise, competent. God says that the true King can build His Kingdom using people who are broken, bruised like a weak reed; he can use smoldering wicks that stink up the place, nurturing that flame until it burns gloriously. With bruised reeds and smoldering wicks He builds a Kingdom!!

E. Christ's Destiny: Worldwide Victory in the End

1. Victory
2. Worldwide kingdom

***vs. 20-21 A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope."***

## IV. Four Dazzling Doctrines

A. Whom Christ Chooses

Doctrine: Christ chooses worthless, broken people to enter His Kingdom, and He gently binds them up and uses them to advance His Kingdom without destroying them.

***A bruised reed he will not break***

1. We are "bruised reeds"... worthless in the eyes of the world, but not to God
2. People most great leaders would completely ignore, Christ chooses

***1 Corinthians 1:26-29 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him.***

3. They are not mighty oaks, not redwoods of power and strength
4. They are feeble, weak, bruised reeds
5. No one enters the Kingdom whole, strong, mighty, healthy!

***“It is the healthy who need a doctor, not the sick”***

***“Blessed are the spiritual beggars, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”***

6. What kind of surgical precision would be needed to bind up a broken reed?
7. He is able to bind them up and minister to them, not breaking them or abusing them
8. With these feeble bruised reeds, Christ proposes to win a Kingdom... and He does it!!!
  - a. some world conquerors use people up and discard them like refuse
  - b. Christ uses you... but He doesn't use you up
  - c. with you, and weak frail people like you around the world, He advances His mighty Kingdom

Next key concept...

#### B. How Christ Bruises

Christ is actually, ultimately the one who bruises us... He does it for our own good, to wean us from the pride that will sink our souls into hell. He bruises us to humble us and make us totally dependent on Him, and that bruising goes on all our lives.

1. Bruised by sin... damaged goods
  - a. sin itself does its own bruising
  - b. disease and physical suffering a manifestation of this

- c. so also the principle of sowing and reaping... if we sow to the flesh we reap destruction from the flesh
- d. bruised by the sin of others

Abusive husband... dominating government... wicked criminal... ordinary sinners day after day

Sinners bruise each other... years and years of living in this sin-infected world leaves us severely damaged goods

Christ is fully able to bind up the broken-hearted who have been thus bruised by this wicked world

2. BUT Christ also bruises us... to save us

- a. we must be stricken in our hearts, pierced with our guilt before we can enter the Kingdom

***Matthew 5:3 "Blessed are the spiritual beggars, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."***

***Luke 18:13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'***

- b. thus through the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, Christ bruises us most severely

***John 16:8 When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment***

- c. He bruises us when we read the Bible and are convicted of sin

Pilgrim's Progress: Behold, I saw a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back. I looked, and saw him open the book, and read therein; and, as he read, he wept, and trembled; and, not being able longer to contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry, saying, **What shall I do?**

- d. He bruises us when He makes it clear how devastating sin is by not shielding us from its effects

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, it's only when he is surrounded by pigs, starving, and poverty-stricken... longing to eat the pods the pigs were eating... it is only then that he "comes to himself" and begins to think of his father's house

- e. when it's time to convert us, He lays us low, very low, by the preaching of the Word

***Acts 2:37 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"***

This is especially noticeable at times of great revival... such as the Great Awakening, under George Whitfield

In February, 1739, Whitefield ventured out of the safe halls of Anglican churches to preach to a poor, degraded assembly of coal miners, some of the roughest men I all of England. They were utterly irreligious, immoral, brutal men, drunkards, brawlers, enemies of righteousness. But when Whitefield proclaimed the Gospel to them, their hearts were crushed by conviction and fear of the wrath of God. Their sooty faces looked up at him as if he were an angel of God, and their hearts broke for their sins... the outward visible mark of the inner repentance was clearly seen in the tracks of their tears down their blackened faces.

In order to save us, Christ must first bruise us most severely!

The same thing happened when Whitefield went to preach in America...

*Nathan Cole, a farmer and carpenter of Kensington Parish (now Berlin, Connecticut), lived about 12 miles from Middletown, where George Whitefield was to preach on October 23, 1740.*

I was in my field at work; I dropped my tool that I had in my hand and ran home to my wife, telling her to make ready quickly to go and hear Mr. Whitfield [sic] preach at Middletown, then run to my pasture for my horse with all my might, fearing that I should be too late....As I came nearer the road, I heard a noise something like a low rumbling thunder and presently found it was the noise of horses' feet coming down the road.... Every horse seemed to go with all his might to carry his rider to hear news from heaven for the saving of souls. It made me tremble....I turned and looked towards the Great River [Connecticut River] and saw the ferry boats running swift backward and forward bringing over loads of people....The land and banks over the river looked black with people and horses. All along the 12 miles I saw no man at work in his field, but all seemed to be gone. When I saw Mr. Whitfield come upon the scaffold, he looked almost angelical—a young, slim, slender youth before some thousands of people with a bold, undaunted countenance. And my hearing how God was with him everywhere as he came along, it solemnized my mind and put me into a trembling fear before he began to preach. For he looked as if he was clothed with authority from the Great God, and a sweet solemn solemnity sat upon his brow, and **my hearing him preach gave me a heart wound**. By God's blessing my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me.

3. Christ also bruises us after conversion... to sanctify us gradually
  - a. this is through discipline... scourged for our sins
  - b. bruised through conviction again and again by the Word of God

***Hebrews 4:12-13 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight***

***Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.***

- c. bruised also through providential control of circumstances
- Do we love material possessions too much? Christ may perfectly bruise us by bringing financial hardship
- Are we proud in our estimation of our skills? Christ may perfectly bruise us by causing us to lose our job
- Are we weak and faithless in prayer? Christ may perfectly and gently bruise us by bringing a health problem so significant we can do nothing but pray and wait on Him.
- Are we given to anger and conflicts? Christ may perfectly and gently bruise us by allowing us to lose a good friend or damage someone dear through our temper... until we are sick of our ways and repent

4. YET Christ is very wise in how much and how far He bruises us

- a. not to the breaking point!!
- b. He makes us smart from sin... but then binds us up again

***Deuteronomy 32:39 "See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal..."***

5. In the end, Christ gently binds us up when the bruising has gone just far enough

***Isaiah 61:1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted***

The devil comes at us when we are weakest in order to devour us

Christ comes to us when we are weakest in order to bind us back together again and make us whole

This makes us very conscious of how weak we are in ourselves, and how much we must depend upon Christ for everything:

Illus. Sibbes: "Like a frail vine resting upon a mighty oak for support, so do we rest upon Christ."

So Christ does not break the bruised reed, although He wisely and perfectly bruises us when we need it that we may share in His holiness

Christ deals with us in supernatural gentleness and surgical precision... bruising just enough, but binding up

In the same way, Christ does not snuff out our smoldering wick!!!



### C. Why We Smolder Now

1. The present light is lit in our souls by God's sovereign grace

***Exodus 27:20-21 "Command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of pressed olives for the light so that the lamps may be kept burning. In the Tent of Meeting, outside the curtain that is in front of the Testimony, Aaron and his sons are to keep the lamps burning before the LORD from evening till morning. This is to be a lasting ordinance among the Israelites for the generations to come.***

***2 Corinthians 4:6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.***

2. Grace starts small... very small in the soul

Sibbes: "Nothing starts so small or ends so gloriously as grace!! Things that are of greatest perfection are longest in coming to their growth."

3. Christ's sovereign touch perfectly keeps the flame burning no matter what the devil does

And that light CANNOT be extinguished, no matter what the devil does

Example: Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress

Then I saw in my dream that the Interpreter took Christian by the hand, and led him into a place where was a fire burning against a wall, and one standing by it, always casting much water upon it, to quench it; yet did the fire burn higher and hotter.

Then said Christian, What means this?

The Interpreter answered, This fire is the work of grace that is wrought in the heart; he that casts water upon it, to extinguish and put it out, is the Devil; but in that thou seest the fire notwithstanding burn higher and hotter, thou shalt also see the reason of that. So he had him about to the backside of the wall, where he saw a man with a vessel of oil in his hand, of which he did also continually cast, but secretly, into the fire.

Then said Christian, What means this?

The Interpreter answered, This is Christ, who continually, with the oil of his grace, maintains the work already begun in the heart: by the means of which, notwithstanding what the devil can do, the souls of his people prove gracious still. And in that thou sawest that the man stood behind the wall to maintain the fire, that is to teach thee that it is hard for the tempted to see how this work of grace is maintained in the soul.

**Christ will NEVER let the devil extinguish the fire of grace from your heart**

4. BUT Smoke results from internal corruption of sin
5. Smoldering is a MIXED condition
  - a. some fire, however small... that is the beginning of grace
  - b. some smoke... that is the remnant of sin

We long to pray... that is the fire of grace

We grow weary quickly in prayer... that is the smoke of corruption

We long to witness for our faith... that is the fire of grace

We frequently wimp out through selfishness and cowardice... that is the smoke of corruption

6. Christ Skillful in Dealing with Smoldering
  - a. He doesn't despise small beginnings

He created the tiny acorn, which sends out a tender green shoot upward to the sunshine, and the small green taproot down into the soil... he doesn't despise the small start, for someday it will be a mighty oak

- b. He delights in progress in Christian faith
- c. He knows how to guide us from smoldering to burning to a raging fire for God
- d. He doesn't tolerate smoldering forever, and when the progress is too slow He is able to quicken the pace of growth

#### D. How We Will Shine Forever

1. The small spark in our souls is a mere foretaste of glory
2. Someday it will be a raging glorious fire for we will be like God

***Hebrews 12:29 "our God is a consuming fire."***

***Matthew 13:43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.***

3. His Kingdom will be worldwide and victorious!! Not a single smoldering wick will go out until we all burn brightly in the Kingdom

***vs. 20-21 A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope."***

## V. Seven Characteristics of the Savior

### 1) Christ is **gentle**

Only a gentle Savior could properly deal with a frail reed dangling by a thread. If you feel like damaged goods, know that Christ is gentle enough to take you in His arms and bind you up! Only a gentle Savior could blow lightly on a smoldering wick until it gradually ignites into a steady flame.

### 2) Christ is **patient**

Only a patient Savior could bear with us mixed, smoldering, half-hearted creatures who sometimes love and serve Him and sometimes rebel against Him. Only a patient Savior could stay with such a gentle approach to world-wide conquest. An invading army of angels could end human history this afternoon. Christ's plan is much more patient... slow steady advance using bruised reeds and smoldering wicks like us.

### 3) Christ is **wise**

Only a wise Savior knows how to deal with each sinner individually, knowing when we need to be gently encouraged, and when we need to be thrashed soundly. Only a wise Savior could know how far to bruise us and when to bind us up. Only a wise Savior would have chosen such a strange approach to world conquest!

### 4) Christ is **gracious**

Only a gracious Savior could die on the cross to cover all our wickedness, our bruises and our smoldering rebellion. Only a gracious Savior could be bruised for our iniquities and pierced for our transgressions. Only a gracious Savior could keep forgiving us again and again.

### 5) Christ is **powerful**

Only a powerful Savior could be mighty enough to use frail reeds like us as a weapon against the devil. Samson was mighty because He used the jawbone of a donkey to slay a thousand men. Christ is mightier because He uses bruised reeds to topple the devil's empire.

### 6) Christ is **hopeful**

Christ is a hopeful Savior, constantly looking ahead to what we will be, not always at what we are. He deals with us according to His plans and purposes, His power... not according to our frailty, weakness and wickedness. He has His eyes on the glorious future He is building into us.

### 7) Christ is **holy**

Only a holy Savior could refuse to allow you to stay bruised and smoldering. He will lead justice to victory all around the world because He hates sin so much!! He will not tolerate our sin but will labor perfectly to rid us of all of it. And He will not stop until every bruised reed is a mighty oak of righteousness, every smoldering wick is a raging inferno of holiness in the heavenly temple of His Father.

## VI. Seven Characteristics of the Saved

### 1) We are naturally **worthless** (apart from Christ)

We think so highly of ourselves... but Christ calls us bruised reeds and smoldering flaxes... completely worthless if left to ourselves. We have no intrinsic value, because sin has so thoroughly ruined us. This is exceedingly humbling!

### 2) We are **feeble** because of sin

We are also powerless... feeble and weak. A bruised reed dangling by a slender green thread. A smoldering wick about to go out forever. We are physically feeble... a slight slip, a car accident, a short illness, and we are dead. We are spiritually feeble... a slight temptation, a small pull from the world and we sin.

### 3) We are **unimpressive** for building a Kingdom

Because we are so worthless and weak, we are the last ones one would naturally choose to build a mighty empire. We were not a promising building site... only a fool builds on sand, but Christ has built on bruised reeds.

### 4) We are **mixed**: for we **burn** by grace

Yet for all of this, we have a spark of grace in us if we are born again. We love what we used to hate and hate what we used to love. We now love God, love His Word, love His heaven, love His people. We now hate sin, hate the world system, hate our own corruption. We have a spark of light and a tiny amount of heat, for God has put it in our soul.

### 5) We are **mixed**: for we **smolder** with impurities

Yet even though this is true, we are mixed with sin. Grace and sin exist within us side by side. We love God yet we disobey Him. We love the Bible, yet we get bored with it. We hate sin, yet we do the very thing we hate.

### 6) We **survive**: for we still live in Christ

What God began in us some time ago is still with us today. We were dangling by a thread, but now we still live. We were about to smolder out, but behold, we burn for God. We live we live we live BY GRACE!!!

### 7) We are **destined for glory**

Justice will be led to victory, for we have put our hope in His name. We trust in Him to the very end of the world.

## VII. Applications

### A. Attitudes

1. **Be humble:** you are a bruised reed, not a mighty oak; you are a smoldering wick, not a raging fire. Totally despise your own strength, efforts, righteousness... those things amount to nothing
2. **Be hopeful (optimistic):** Christ will win in the end!! Christ will never let you be destroyed, never let you be extinguished! Satan cannot quench what Christ lit in you! Neither can Satan stop Christ's worldwide Kingdom from coming! All of God's chosen ones will shine like the sun in the Kingdom!
3. **Be trusting completely in Christ:** Since you despair in your own efforts to save yourself, you are only trusting in Christ. Put your bruised soul squarely in His hands and say "Deal with me according to your wisdom!"
4. **Be gentle** with yourself and with others: Since Christ is so gentle with us, we ought to be gentle with ourselves and others. By this I do not mean tolerate sin... NEVER!!! Sin is our bitterest enemy, the serpent of our souls. But be gentle in dealing with weak, humble, broken-hearted sinners.
5. **Be holy:** Do not use this encouraging message as an inducement to sin. God will deal severely with willful sin!!

#### B. Actions

1. Delight in Christ's nature

Christ is **gentle, patient, wise, gracious, powerful, hopeful, holy**

Praise Him for these amazing attributes!!!

2. Join in Christ's work

- a. in yourself:

- i) submit gladly to Christ's bruising as He wisely apportions it to you
- ii) bruise yourself over sin
- iii) trust that He will bind you up in due time
- iv) when you feel despairing, come very close to this gentle Savior

- b. in others around you

- i) deal with them gently and tenderly

Many legalistic churches have forgotten how many commands there are to deal gently with each other

May we not be a harsh, "in your face" church

ii) YET deal with them!! Christ doesn't leave us sinful... but He nurses the grace He put in us until sin is driven out

c. to the ends of the earth

This is a world-wide missionary endeavor... let's be active to the end of the earth