

The Servant Way

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[0 : 00] Good evening, everyone. Great to see you all. A warm welcome if you're visiting St. John's tonight. It's our custom that we have our Bibles open during the sermon, so I would encourage you to open the Bible to Matthew 12, 15 to 21, if you didn't already have it open while Becca read it for us.

We're continuing a series in Matthew's Gospel. And as you look at Matthew 12, I want to ask you, how do you respond to conflict?

Are you a conflict involver, someone who likes to get right into the thick of it, right in the center of it, or are you a conflict avoider, someone who can't stand conflict and shuts right up, can't wait for it to be over?

Because our passage tonight, it's sandwiched between two huge conflicts, intense arguments between Jesus and the Pharisees. Last week, we saw the Pharisees attack Jesus over a violation of their extra rules for the Sabbath.

And in response, maybe you were here, you remember that Jesus made some huge claims about himself. He said, I'm greater than David. I am greater than your temple.

[1 : 18] And I'm greater even than the Sabbath, which the Lord made. That seventh day, that day of rest. And then next week, we're going to see a really intense debate, a conflict in which the Pharisees will actually accuse Jesus of being in league with Satan himself.

And here in between, Matthew gives us an intermission, a sort of breather, a pause from the action, in which to explain for us how Jesus responds to conflict, and why Jesus responds this way.

How and why. And the answer Matthew gives us, he's going to take us all the way back to the Old Testament to answer that question. He's going to take us to Isaiah chapter 42.

You heard it read in verses 18 to 21 of our passage. It's the longest quotation in the whole book of Matthew, which is a little signal that tells us this is important.

Matthew says, pay attention. And the voice that's going to speak to us, that is speaking to us from Isaiah through Matthew, is the voice of none other than the Lord God himself.

[2 : 29] It's God speaking about his son Jesus, explaining his unique identity and his unique mission. And the key word in that quotation, the key word to understanding Jesus, is the word servant.

It's that word servant in verse 18. Behold my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. So like I was saying, when an argument starts, we all respond differently. Some of us will jump right in, we take a verbal swing, we keep throwing punches till we win the argument. And others, grow silent and back away.

Either wait for the problem to go away, or do whatever is necessary in order to end the fight. We're all somewhere on this spectrum, right? Between conflict involver and conflict avoider.

But not Jesus. Not Jesus. In verses 1 to 14, Jesus does not back down from the Pharisees' accusations. He's not a conflict avoider. He goes round for round with them, until he's soundly beaten them at their own game.

[3 : 37] It's so effective, that in verse 14, we hear that these religious men, these devout, upstanding citizens, went out and conspired against Jesus how to destroy him.

That's conflict. So what does Jesus do next? You might expect him to return fire. Okay? So he hears about it, and he huddles up his 12 disciples.

He says, alright guys, we're going to war. I want snipers on the roof, I need a surveillance team, we're going to take these guys out. But no, the first verse of our passage tonight, have a look at verse 15.

Jesus, aware of this, aware of the Pharisees' conspiracy, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them, and he ordered them not to make him known.

And that verse 16 there, that's the most surprising thing of all. He ordered them not to make him known. He's just made the boldest messianic claim in the whole gospel.

[4 : 37] He's greater than David, greater than the temple, greater than the Sabbath. This is the time for offense. But no, instead he retreats, he withdraws, he orders everyone to keep these amazing things, he's doing a secret.

But friends, it's not because he's a conflict avoider, it's not because he's afraid, it's verse 17 that tells us why. Because, verse 17, this was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah.

In other words, in other words, how Jesus responds to conflict is at the very heart of his identity as the Messiah, as our rescuer. Or to put it another way, we are seeing Jesus' identity as much in the way that he acts as in what he does.

Let me say that again. We're going to see Jesus' identity as much in the way he acts, the manner in which he acts, as in what he actually does. So, it's the Father's voice that's speaking to us tonight from Isaiah 42.

And his words here are written as a promise. I will do this. I will bring this. Promises about his servant Jesus. About what he will do and what he will not do.

[6 : 01] Verse 18. I will put my spirit upon him, upon Jesus. And he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. And then verse 19 and 20.

He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break. A smoldering wick he will not quench.

And these promises are such good news for us. So, let's take a closer look at verses 18 to 21. And I want to do this under three headings. Jesus the servant, and then the servant's gentleness, and the servant's justice.

Can you do that with me? Jesus the servant, the servant's gentleness, and the servant's justice.

Let's start in verse 18. Remember, this is the Father speaking. Behold, look, my servant whom I've chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased, I will put my spirit upon him.

If these words sound a little bit familiar, it's because they echo what we've already heard in Matthew 3 at Jesus' baptism. When a voice from heaven spoke and said, this is my beloved son with whom I'm well pleased.

[7 : 14] Do you remember those words? When God the Father declared his love and his good pleasure for his beloved son. And we saw the spirit of God descending on Jesus like a dove.

So the question is, why does Matthew put Isaiah 42 here again? Why does he put this longest quote in the whole gospel here? Well, we need to think, to answer that question, we need to think back to the Old Testament, to Isaiah 42, which is the first of four servant songs.

And these servant songs are four different chapters where the Lord promises that he is going to send a person called the servant of the Lord. And this individual, this servant, he's going to rescue God's people.

How is he going to do that? By taking the punishment that they deserve onto himself. And this will be the ultimate act of servanthood. And Jesus is that servant.

I've noticed there's a lot of media attention right now on how leaders today behave when they want to get things done. political options, political opinions, they can get expressed in rash, 280 character tweets or less.

[8 : 43] And the anonymity that you and I have on social media, it allows us to disagree with one another in a way that we've never been able to do before. Complete anonymity.

So that our debates, our arguments, our conversations quickly disintegrate into personal attacks just at the push of a button. But Jesus, the servant, will not respond to his enemy's hatred and fear in this same way.

He's not going to fight fire with fire. His ministry, Isaiah is telling us, the Lord God is telling us, will display the characteristics that we're seeing of servanthood. He will be humble, but he's not a doormat.

And that's what brings us to the first point about what it is to be a servant. It's the servant's gentleness. The servant's gentleness. Look at verse 19 and 20.

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 smoldering wick he will not quench.

[9 : 50] So, you have to bear with this image for a moment. We don't talk about wicks and reeds much anymore, but a reed is a tall, it's a tall, sturdy piece of grass, right?

And it would be chopped down, and it would be used either as a ruler, a straight measuring stick, or it would be used if it was a thicker one, it could be used as a walking stick or for support, like a staff. Either way, it's only useful as long as it's straight, right? So that once it bends or it cracks, what would you do? Well, it's not worth anything, so it's useless to you, you throw it away.

You get a new one. And what about the wick? An oil lamp, it would have a strip of linen cloth, cheap linen cloth, that would act as a wick, soaked in oil.

And when the wick would burn down, it would begin to smoke, and the light would begin to flicker, you'd snuff out the wick, you'd take that piece of linen, whatever's left, throw it away, put in a new one, boom, bright light again.

[10 : 59] But Jesus, the servant, will not throw away a damaged reed. He will not throw away the sputtering wick. So of course, this image, I hope you see this image is talking about people.

It's describing real people. People who are damaged, people who are weak, people who are struggling to keep up. How will Jesus, the servant, respond to these types of people?

With gentleness, with tenderness, with compassion, with mercy. mercy. He displays an extraordinary willingness to encourage and lift up those who are damaged and vulnerable and unable to help themselves.

In our results-orientated culture, where businesses, corporations, leaders, even, dare I say, even families, only have time for those who are strong and can help themselves.

Jesus is not like this. Jesus says, come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Now, who are the bruised reeds and the smoldering wicks here?

[12 : 27] Who do we see in the world that's like this? You're hearing this tonight and you might be thinking, isn't it so nice that Jesus has patience and gentleness for people who are struggling?

Well, I have news for you. You are a bruised reed. You are a smoldering wick. Because our faith is small and our repentance, it's feeble.

And each of us is battered and bruised by the trials and the sufferings that we all face. But none of us for a moment are removed because of this from that tender love of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

His posture to us, his response to us, his mission for us does not change when he looks at us and he sees that we're damaged goods. He does not have a utilitarian approach to salvation.

our bruises are not despised by Christ and they ought not to be despised by Christians. We ought not to have to hide those bruises from one another.

[13 : 44] Well, all of this has only taken us as far as saying what this servant will not do. But it's high time that we turn secondly to what the servant will do.

The second characteristic that I want to look at, the servant's justice. The servant's justice. We need to go back to the second half of verse 18. Have a look.

I will put my spirit upon him and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. And then that same language gets picked up at the end of verse 20 and going into 21. Until, until what?

until he brings justice to victory. And in his name the Gentiles will hope. So two times we hear this word justice and both times it's connected to the Gentiles, literally to the nations.

And this word that's translated justice, it's kind of complicated, it's complex. It's the word crisis in Greek. And it draws on an image of the courtroom, an image for the determining of the correctness in a matter.

[14 : 48] Justice, right? A right verdict. Making the right judgment. But it also has this relational aspect to it that isn't fully captured by a courtroom with a judge.

And that takes us to the heart of this justice that Jesus brings, which is not only, it's not primarily here, justice between you and I, horizontally.

But the justice that Jesus brings is ultimately the justice, the making right, that is vertical between us and God. And if we want to carry this even deeper, we remember this is from Isaiah 42, and that was written in the Hebrew.

And that the word translated justice in the Hebrew is closely linked in the same family as the word shalom, which means peace or flourishing. So that in the Isaiah 42 text, this justice, it has a sense of legal and social order.

forever. So, just to summarize this, this word justice, we want to put it all together. What is encapsulated in this promise that Jesus brings fulfillment to?

[15 : 58] The servant's justice will proclaim the restoration of all things and will bring to victory our peace and our human flourishing.

And this is good news for not just the Jews. That's the other point that Jesus is making here. The servant's justice is good news for all those who hope in his name.

That can be you, can be me, but for anyone who rejects Jesus' lordship, who despises his offer of peace, and will seek instead to only quarrel with him and ignore his voice, just like those men that we looked at last week, the same ones who will be in conflict with him next week.

For those here in Matthew's gospel, and any like them who just want to be in conflict with Jesus, for those who refuse to acknowledge that you and I are in any way bruised or smoldering, for them, we learn that the servant's justice will only bring judgment.

Now, we've already made a great deal about the fact that Jesus doesn't seek out conflict, but instead he retreats from danger, he turns the other cheek as it were, he orders the crowds not to make him fully known, but the time is coming in Matthew's gospel when the servant will no longer avoid confrontation.

[17 : 36] Beginning in Matthew 21, we will see Jesus enter Jerusalem for the last time, and he's not going to hold anything back. He will put his messianic identity on full display until he finds himself hanging on a Roman cross, hanging on that cross with the words as a title above his head, king of the Jews for all to see.

He will die on that cross as he lived without a cruel word spoken to his enemies, without saying a single cruel word to those people shouting insults at the foot of the cross, but instead he will pray for them saying, Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're saying.

And so he'll die as the suffering servant, an innocent, sinless man taking the blame that we deserve on the cross. That's the moment when Jesus brings justice to victory.

Ekbalo. It's a forceful word. He brings victory out. He ejects it by force. Of course, this justice, this making things right, we're seeing it.

It's spreading with the gospel. It's in our midst here tonight. But we realize, it's very apparent, isn't it, that it's not complete, it's not finished.

[19 : 05] The servant's justice also has an eschatological significance. It has a fulfillment that will not take place until Jesus returns. And when he comes again as judge of the living and the dead, we will see the end of all bruised reeds and smoldering wicks.

And some of them will be snuffed out, will be snapped. But those who are in Christ, such good news will be made new in eternity with our loving triune God forever.

So as we close, I want you to consider for a moment what is your attitude towards Jesus tonight? How does it make you feel to hear that he wants to be Lord over your whole life?

That's what he's saying here in Matthew 12. Do you find yourself arguing with him about it? Pushing back against his lordship with your own strategies for how you're going to be, for your happiness, for your fulfillment?

Compromising? Trying to sort of, Jesus, I need a little give and take here, you know? Or do you find yourself tonight striving to keep up, to put on a mask, a veneer of put-togetherness, which covers up the fact that you're a bruised reed or a smoldering wick?

[20 : 35] Whatever the case, hear these promises spoken by your heavenly father. Jesus is the beloved servant.

And Jesus will not break you, he will not quench you. He wants to give you his perfect justice and a beautiful new life in him. Lean into this hope.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.