

Strength and Tenderness

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- [0:00] Good morning, church. Our sermon text today is Isaiah chapter 42, verses 1 through 4. That's page 564 in the Pew Bible. Let me invite you to turn there with me. Isaiah chapter 42, verses 1 through 4. Let me read this text for us.
- Behold, my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him.
- He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice. Or make it heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break.
- And a faintly burning wick he will not quench. He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged.
- [1:17] Till he has established justice in the earth. And the coastlands wait for his law. Let's pray together. Lord God, indeed, what a wonder it is that you have done in sending your son to be incarnate for us.
- Father, we thank you for this time of year when we devote these weeks to remembering your incarnation and your birth, your coming to earth. Lord, we pray that as we consider this text this morning, that you would help us to see Christ.
- Father, help us to see your son more clearly. And help our hearts by your Holy Spirit to love him and to worship him. To adore him and to trust him more fully.
- We ask all this, Father, in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen. Amen. Well, if you were to imagine in your mind the perfect leader, what would he or she look like?
- What would be the thing that characterizes them? Perhaps you think a strong sense of vision. A bold and stirring picture of where things ought to be headed.
- [2:33] Or perhaps this ideal, perfect leader would be a person who is a compelling communicator. Someone who could rouse the passions of others and make things clear to a group of people.
- Or maybe he or she would be a person of courage, of decisive conviction. Someone who's willing to take a stand and make a choice and even stand alone if need be. Or perhaps in your mind a great leader would ultimately be a person of integrity.
- Someone who's trustworthy and honest and compassionate and just. Of course, the older you get, you realize how rare such a leader is.
- Those who are strong and bold and decisive tend not to be so compassionate or fair. And those who are gentle and caring often tend not to be so firm and strong and courageous.
- Now, this December, we've been looking at the prophecies of Isaiah from the 8th century BC. We've been looking at Isaiah's prophecies about the coming king, the coming Messiah, that were ultimately fulfilled in the person of Jesus some 700 plus years later.
- [3:47] And the text we just read from Isaiah 42 describes not merely the mission of this coming king, but his character. What will he be like?
- Will he be strong and firm, able to affect change against fierce opposition? Will he be compassionate and gentle, tender and caring?

What sort of leader will he be? And Isaiah's surprising answer is both. He will be strong and gentle.

He will be powerful and compassionate. Unlike any leader before him, this one will perfectly combine in himself the seemingly opposite character traits of both strength and tenderness.

This one will be the leader that we long for and that we need. So I want to consider those two character traits of the Messiah from this text in Isaiah.

[5:02] First, let's consider his strength. Verse 1 again, Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations.

Now, this text that we're looking at this morning is the first of four so-called servant songs in Isaiah. In chapters 40 through 55, we reach kind of a new section of the book of Isaiah where Isaiah is proclaiming a message of hope now to Israel.

Looking ahead to their future captivity in Babylon, Isaiah proclaims a message of comfort. God will remember his exiled people and God will bring them home.

And you see, often in these chapters, it's the nation of Israel that's called the Lord's servant. It's as if God wants to remind them that their relationship with him hasn't been utterly lost.

God is still their God and they are still his people. But at key moments in Isaiah's message of hope in these chapters, there's another servant who appears.

[6:20] A servant who we see is distinct from the people and yet who will act on behalf of the people to do what they could not do for themselves, to succeed where they had failed.

This true servant will come and he will make things right. Now, some early Jewish commentators thought that perhaps this true servant was merely an idealized picture of the whole people of Israel.

But others realized that Isaiah was actually looking ahead to the Messiah, to the king who would come as a servant to rescue God's people.

And he would come, as verse 1 tells us, in strength. He will bring forth justice to the nations. Look again at the end of verse 3.

He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth. Three times this word justice is mentioned.

[7:30] This servant would at last make things right. Now, notice the contrast at the end of chapter 41. In chapter 41, Isaiah is exposing the futility of the idols of the nations, of false gods.

And at the end of chapter 41, verse 29, if you look there, he says, Behold, they, the idols, they are all a delusion. Their works are nothing.

Their metal images are empty wind. The idols of the nations are empty. They can't do anything. They can't change anything, Isaiah says.

But now, chapter 42 opens with another behold. Behold, my servant. He will bring forth justice to the nations.

You see the contrast? It couldn't be more pronounced. Over here, all the idols that we want to stack up to rescue us, to save us, to deliver us, to satisfy us.

[8:36] And Isaiah says, they're empty. But behold, the servant who brings real, lasting, substantial change.

What do we mean by justice here? The Hebrew term actually means more than just sort of right legal judgments. It's a much more holistic word than that.

In its deepest sense, it means the right ordering of creation itself, the right ordering of relationships within the world God has made. That is justice, rightness in the fullest sense.

You see, when humanity rebelled against God, our alienation from God resulted in a series of fractured relationships.

Suddenly, our relationship not just to God, but to one another and to the created world. And even to ourselves, like a cascade rushing down, just keep getting broken and broken and broken.

[9:45] But to make those things right again, that was justice in the full sense of the term.

And of course, to do that, it would take strength. It would take courage. Consider the passage from Matthew that we read earlier.

Jesus is in the synagogue. He's come to restore, to make things right, to enact justice in its fullest sense. And when he heals the man's hand and restores it healthy like the other, what is the response of the Pharisees?

Matthew says, they go out and conspire how to destroy him. Why? Because Jesus was breaking the rules that they had made about how the Sabbath ought to be observed.

And Jesus, knowing full well that this act of justice would turn the tide against him, in strength and in courage, he does it anyway.

[10:57] This is the conviction, the courage of Christ to bring forth justice, even though it would bring the fury of the religious and political authorities down upon his head.

And you know, today as followers of Jesus, such a courageous pursuit of justice ought to characterize us as well. What does that look like?

Well, first and foremost, this means telling others about the reconciling work of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. You know, too often today in the Christian world, we pit evangelism and justice against one another as if they were on different teams.

There's sort of team evangelism and there's team justice, and they never seem to get along, which is completely absurd from a biblical perspective. Evangelism is a work of justice in the rich biblical sense.

When we tell others about the saving grace of God in Christ, we are participating in God's work of putting the world right again. Because the gospel is the means God uses to turn us from the emptiness of idolatry and restore us to a right relationship with him, which is the heart of what real biblical justice is all about.

[12:30] Now, how could we withhold that from our neighbors and our friends? How could we not pray and partner and plan to take this saving message of Christ to the nations and to our neighbors?

How could we not pray and partner and plan to take this saving message of God? But as followers of Jesus, a courageous pursuit of justice doesn't stop there. Where else is the world out of joint with God's intended good design?

How have our relationships with one another, with the material world, even with ourselves, gone awry? Why? Poverty. Racism.

Ecological damage. Should Christians care about such things? Should Christians take thoughtful action about such things? If we are followers of Christ, we must.

We follow a Lord who has determined to bring forth justice to the nations. Isaiah says he will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth.

[13:41] And so in confidence that he continues his work, we must continue to join him in that work as well. So the portrait Isaiah gives of the servant of the coming Messiah of Jesus is one of strength.

But this picture isn't just one of courage and strength, of bringing justice to the nations, is it? It's also a picture of surprising tenderness.

Consider the surprising tenderness of Christ in this passage, verses 2 and 3. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street.

A bruised reed he will not break. And a faintly burning wick he will not quench. Consider the humility of verse 2.

Unlike the proud rulers of Isaiah's day and even of our own, who heralds, who herald their own victories to get glory for themselves, crying aloud with their own successes, lifting up their voices every chance they get to attract attention, Jesus, on the other hand, is humble.

[15:07] He doesn't cry aloud or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street, trumpeting his own glories. He's humble. More often than not, he instructed those that he healed to tell no one.

Imagine that. He wasn't out to grow his own platform or establish his brand or see how many followers he could get on Instagram.

Hashtag Jesus is king. You got it. Keep it going. He was humble. He was meek. Most of all, he let his actions speak for themselves.

And the actions that spoke most loudly were his actions of compassion and tenderness. In verse 3, Isaiah uses an image of a bruised reed.

A reed is a tall, slender plant. I bet if you go down to the Quinnipiac River sometime in the spring, you'll probably see reeds growing up.

[16:20] And a bruised reed is a reed that's been damaged, that's weak in some way, that's unable to sort of barely hold up its own weight. At the end of last school year, my son Jack brought home some bean plants that he had grown in class.

They were these sort of slender, tender little things sort of spilling out of the pot. And on the drive home, one of the stems got sort of bent and folded over.

But it didn't break the whole way through. So when we got home, we got a little stick, and we put it in there, and we got some string, and we sort of gently tried to prop it up and keep it up to see if it might last and make it so that it could stand up and continue to grow.

And that sort of almost ridiculous tenderness over a bean plant, that's the sort of tenderness that Christ shows to us.

And a faintly burning wick, it's an image of a fire or even of a candle that's on the verge of going out, that's barely lit, that's just about ready to give in to the darkness.

[17:37] But such as these, Isaiah says, he will not quench. He's going to come, and he's going to guard those faint embers, and he's going to nurse them back to flame.

How often in his ministry did Jesus not break the bruised reeds or quench the faintly burning wicks? When synagogue rulers came to him and said, my child is sick, come quickly.

When hemorrhaging women reached out to touch his robe, eager for a cure that they could not find anywhere else. When lepers came to him pleading for mercy. When the crowds gathered round him late into the day without bread to eat.

Always, he responded. Always, with that perfect mixture of strength and tenderness. And friends, does he not continue to do so even today?

No matter how weak, no matter how bruised, no matter how heavy laden is your conscience, no matter how much guilt or shame you carry, come to the servant, come to Christ, and he will neither break nor quench, but he will receive you with that wonderful combination of tenderness and strength.

- [19:09] All of Jesus' life was characterized by this tenderness and strength, wasn't it?
- Was that not true of him in his birth? Was it not his great strength that allowed him to step over the infinite gap between a creator and creature and become a human being while remaining fully God?
- And at the same time, was it not his great tenderness that compelled him to take human nature as a baby so that he might know us in our deepest vulnerability and weakness?
- If it was true of his birth, was it not also true of his death? Was it not his great strength that allowed Jesus to shoulder the cross, to stand in our place as our redeemer, to conquer the powers of darkness that stood against us?
- But was it not his great tenderness that compelled him to remain there, to thirst, and to bleed, and to die in our place, and to bear our penalty that we sinners deserved?
- [20:29] And yes, is this not also true of his resurrection and of his ascension to heaven? Surely it was his great strength whereby he rose from the grave, swallowing death and victory, triumphing over the tomb, dismantling death forever?
- But friends, don't you also see the great tenderness even there as his resurrection body is just that, a body still with nail scars in his hand, carrying our human nature with him into the new creation, and then ascending to the Father's right hand as our great high priest where he stands right now to intercede for us, to stand for us, to assure us of our place, of our welcome in God's presence forever.
- Isaiah's message was good news for Israel in exile. Do you see what he was saying to Israel all those years ago?
- A true servant would come, one strong enough to free them from their captivity, and one tender enough to forgive them their sins. And is this not good news for us, friends?
- The true servant has come with strong justice in one hand and with tender mercy in the other, freeing us and forgiving us.
- [22:11] a lion and a lamb, a king and a servant. Isaiah ends by saying, and the coastlands wait for his law.
- Isaiah wants to make sure that we know that this good news isn't just for Israel. It's good news for the whole earth, even the coastlands from Isaiah's perspective on the other side of the world.
- A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices. This is the kind of leader. This is what we've waited for and longed for and hoped for.
- Bringing his law, his justice, his tender strength to make things right and to teach us how we should walk too. And Christmas is the constant reminder that now he's come.
- So friend, what do you have to lose by putting your trust in Christ and by becoming a Christian? And Christian, what do you have to lose by walking in his law and his ways of compassionate justice and just compassion?
- [23:39] For don't you see that Isaiah is telling us you are putting your trust in the one who is strong enough to protect you in the face of all your fears and who is tender enough to accept you in the face of all your flaws?
- Behold, the servant, our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray. Our Father, we give you much praise this morning that we see in Jesus the radiance of your glory and the exact imprint of your being.
- We see your almighty strength and your perfect, tender compassion and mercy. Oh Lord Jesus, by your Holy Spirit, would you draw us near to you?

Father, I pray for those who are here this morning who have been holding you at arm's length for some time. Lord, I pray this morning they would open the door to your knocking and they would let you in.

That they would receive you and bow before you and take you as their king. And Father, I pray for those of us who are fearful to walk in the steps of servanthood that you've laid before us, Jesus.

[25:14] Lord, perhaps we are afraid to pursue justice. Perhaps we are fearful to be people of compassionate tenderness. Oh Lord, help us to see that though we are weary, though we grow faint, Lord Jesus, you do not.

your flame is ever burning, your reed is ever strong, and as we step out in obedience to you, Lord, we know that your strength and your light will continue to sustain us by your spirit.

Oh Lord, help us to be obedient, we pray. We pray all this, Father, in the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.