

CHRIST'S TENDERNESS

"A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench, till He send forth judgment unto victory" (Matthew 12:20).

No one in history has so many contrasting qualities as Jesus Christ. Most great men have been big in some things and small in others. Christ was big in all things. How lovingly severe He was, for instance, to those whose pride and self-sufficiency made them blind to the truth that would have saved both them and their nation! And yet how tender and encouraging He was to those who were ready to learn and were honestly seeking the light! It is this latter quality which is emphasized in our text.

This text plainly teaches that the reign of Christ is one of gentleness, compassion, forbearance, patience, tenderness, and love. While He is a lion to devour His adversaries, He is at the same time a lamb, even the Lamb of God, Who will take away the sin of every soul that yields to Him. While He came into this world to destroy the works of the devil, He also came to save poor devil-deceived and devil-driven souls, if only out of repentant hearts they will look unto Him. Coupled with the verse immediately preceding it, our text gives us a beautiful picture of the tenderness, peacefulness, and quietness of the Saviour's disposition.

This text contains two images, one taken from the riverside and the other from the fireside. Here is an exterior picture and an interior one. The two metaphors that he employs are very suggestive. He talks about the bruised reed and about the smoking flax. Oh, what a glorious teacher Jesus was! Every teacher ought daily to study His method. He took up the simple things of life, the things about which the people knew, and from these He drew lessons which He proclaimed to the people, so that their deep meaning would more and more appear out of these simple matters to the understanding of listening minds and sincere hearts.

Imagine yourself in a lonely, desolate, flat marsh. Growing amid shallow, but cold and swirling waters, you see tall reeds and rushes. The sky is gray and heavy with clouds flying before the wind. The reeds bend to and fro. As they sway hither and thither, they are bruised, battered, and broken as they jostle one against the other. Look closely at them and you will scarcely find one that is not scarred. They are bruised reeds.

What is more slender and brittle than a reed? It grows very tall, is unsupported, and subject to the storms, and may be knocked down and trampled under foot by horses and cattle. It is easily bruised and broken. The pen of God chose a good comparison in selecting the reed as a likeness to the Christian. If I had come saying you were like the mighty oak, you would have thought, "Well, some Christians may be like the oak, but not I, not I." When I come to talk of the reed though, all of us are ready to say that it is a good comparison, for, like the reed, we are brittle plants in the garden of the Lord and very weak indeed.

Out of the frail reed, the Palestinian shepherd constructs a crude wind instrument on which he plays to while away the time while his sheep are grazing. The reed is a cheap, frail thing. The shepherd lays it down and a sheep steps on it and bruises it. No longer will the music flow, so he breaks it and throws it away. That is what the great Shepherd says He will not do with our poor, bruised lives. Instead, He will mend the bruises and cause the music to flow again.

Bruised reeds! How true an emblem of human experience this is! Look at the people about you, and you will find that none of them are free from scars and bruises. There are many things that bruise and cause the music of hope, and peace, and joy, and

faith's restful assurance to cease. But the Saviour does not break us and cast us away; He mends our bruises and causes the music to flow again.

1. Our lives are bruised by sin.

To this there are no exceptions. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Sin bruised the entire race, but God did not break it and cast it away. Immediately came the promise, "The seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head." No sooner than man sinned and fell, the first gleam of Him Who was to be the Light of the world shone out over sin-darkened and sin-doomed Eden.

We have no conception of what the grandeur and glory of man was before his fall. If you had never seen a railroad and a train of cars, until you had seen a wreck, with the track torn up and the cars piled up, you would not have any real conception of what a railroad and train of cars were before the wreck had taken place. A disastrous wreck occurred in Eden. We have seen man after the wreck. We see him in the ruin that sin wrought. Nor shall we see him as he was before sin wrecked him until we see him in the perfection through redeeming grace that shall be his in the glory of that day.

Instead of casting us off in our sins forever, He comes pleading in love and mercy that we come to Him for restoration.

"He saw me ruined by the fall,
Yet loved me notwithstanding all;
He saved me from my low estate,
His loving kindness, O how great!"

2. Our lives are bruised by temptations.

Perhaps, someone might say, "But I am never tempted." Then there isn't much to you. The devil loves a shining mark. When one who has repeatedly yielded to some great temptation, is striving his very best to overcome it, others may know nothing about the battle he is having. But, there was "One Who was tempted in all points like as we are" and He is ever able to succour them that are tempted.

3. Our lives are bruised by afflictions.

Dr. Moone, of Brighton, England, was stricken with blindness. The reed was bruised but not broken. He turned his blinded eyes heavenward and prayed, "O God, teach me to use and not to abuse this talent of blindness." Blindness became a talent which he did use. He invented the first raised letter system of reading through the touch of the fingers, which has been such a wonderful blessing to multiplied thousands of blind people.

4. Our lives are bruised by sorrow.

Sorrow is no respecter of persons; it comes to all. "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward." In a home where death had entered, a young mother sat by a little white coffin, dazed and comfortless. It contained the body of her first-born. Husband, mother, pastor, all had failed to bring her comfort. Not even the relief of tears was hers. She sat dry-eyed, gazing.

But across the country, as fast as the train could carry her, a girl friend from their youth and who had only recently gone through a like sorrow, was coming. On

entering the room she threw her arms around her grief-stricken friend and said, "Annie, dear, it is all right." And Annie looked up into her face, and said, "Oh, if you say it is all right, then I know it is."

The Master Musician doesn't break us and cast us off when sorrow bruises our lives. He mends the bruise, and sets His music flowing again.

"Here bring your wounded hearts,
Here tell your anguish;
Earth has no sorrow
That heaven cannot heal."

In one of the old castles on the Rhine, there was a noted musical instrument. From far and near people came to hear it played. But something happened to it and it would no longer discourse its music. Mechanics and tinkers were sent for, but, not understanding its mechanism, none could repair it. One day there came a wayfarer who inquired of the instrument. When told it would no longer play, he asked to see it. "I sometimes work on such instruments," said he, "and maybe I can repair it." In a little while he had it playing again. "Who are you that I may reward you and show you favor?" the lord of the castle asked. "I am the man," he replied, "who made the instrument."

Those hearts of ours get bruised and out of repair and lose their song; and, try as they may, the human tinkers with their philosophies and isms cannot repair them. But He Who made them can repair them, and set them singing again.

Oriental houses were lighted by crude lamps, bowls containing oil and a flax wick furnishing the flame. The little wick was placed down in the oil or grease, and one end of it was lighted and gave out light. When a gust of wind extinguished the flame, the smoldering fire gave out only smoke and a bad odor, and they would usually quench it. A smoking wick is not an attractive object. There it lies smoldering — an offensive thing, filling the air with unpleasant fumes, giving neither light nor heat. One's impulse is to stamp it out, and get rid of the offence.

Some people are like a smoldering wick. They are holding on, trying to find a way by which their souls can be kindled into a flame of faith and goodness. To these Christ speaks a message of encouragement in the words, "I will not quench the smoking flax." Instead of quenching the remaining fire, He will fan it into a flame. Think of how He cheers despondent people. "Fear not." "Be of good cheer." Knowing the gracious influence of encouragement, and the devastating power of scorn or contempt, He always encouraged others. How unlike Christ are those who speak words of discouragement to people! Our world certainly needs the grace of encouragement today.

We know that bruised reeds and smoking lamps are not of any use to anyone. The cripple cannot lean upon a bruised reed. Neither can such a reed bring forth harmonious music when blown upon as an instrument. No, it is not of any service. And the smoking flax cannot light the way for the midnight traveler; neither can a student read by the flame of it. It is of no use; men throw it into the fire and consume it. But as valueless and worthless as the bruised reed and the smoking flax appear, Christ will not throw them away. In tenderness, He will reconstruct the one and kindle the other.

1. There is the flame of love.

The chilling winds of the world may reduce it to smoking flax, but the Lord will fan it into a flame instead of quenching it. When Christ asked Peter thrice, "Lovest thou Me?" He used the word "agapao," which means to love in the highest degree. In each of his replies Peter used the word "phileo," which means to love as a little child; as much as to say, "If I can't measure up to the highest standard of love, Lord, I love Thee with the love of a little child." The smouldering fire is fanned into flame; and if you would see how brightly it glows, witness him at Pentecost as he preaches the sermon that won to Christ three thousand souls; and read again his glowing epistles in which he magnifies Christ as Saviour and Lord over all.

When the fires of love burn low and the glow is gone and only the smoking flax remains, the Lord will not put out what fire there is. Rather, He will fan it back into flame.

2. There is the flame of faith.

With Thomas that flame had all but gone out; but enough of the fire remained to draw him to the next meeting of the disciples when Christ, after His resurrection, appeared a second time to them. When they told him that the Lord was risen and had appeared unto them, Thomas said, "Impossible." "I will have to put my fingers in the nailprints in His hands, and my hand in the spear-wound in His side before I will believe."

Without turning a doorknob, Christ entered and said, "Reach hither thy finger and behold My hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into My side: and be not faithless but believing." And Thomas answering said, "My Lord and my God." The smoking flax of his faith was not quenched but was fanned into flame.

3. There is the flame of knowledge.

Oh, how little we know! How little we know about anything! How little we know about ourselves, about God, about God's Word, about His providence, about the great, deep, and blessed mysteries of grace! Oh, wondrous truth, He does not cast us off, even though we are so weak in knowledge!

4. There is the flame of zeal.

Once you were zealous in your Christian life and found great joy in Christian service. Now, perhaps, that experience seems to have left you, and you are wondering if you could have been mistaken about your Christian experience. But the fact that you are troubled means the smouldering fire is still there and that the Lord is waiting for the opportunity to rekindle the flame.

One of the most heart-breaking things on this earth is the weakness of God's people in their zeal for Him. If they would only give God a chance, the smoking flax of Christian zeal would become a glowing flame. It is not the success we attain in the Lord's service that wins the crown; it is the faithfulness with which we serve. Let us resolve that He shall have the best of faithful and loving service that we are able to render.

The encouragement of this text for Christ's people is that the least Christian in the world is as really saved as is the greatest one. But, so far as his happiness is concerned, so far as his usefulness is concerned, so far as his joy is concerned, so far as his peace is concerned, that is another question. But the teaching of this verse is that the salvation of the least Christian in the world is as certainly a fact as is the salvation of Abraham, or of Paul, or of any other who has mightily influenced the world for the glory of God and the good of mankind. Now, do you know a sublimer truth than that? Do you know any sweeter truth than that the least Christian cleansed by the blood of Christ is as truly and thoroughly saved, and will as certainly get to heaven, as the greatest Christian on the face of the earth?