**Jesus, God’s Chosen Servant**

November 4, 2018

Matthew 12:1-21

Key verse 12:18 “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.”

There are many titles in the Bible given to Jesus Christ such as the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Messiah, Immanuel, Lamb of God, Prince of Peace, King of kings and Lord of lords. In this passage, we have two more titles: Lord of the Sabbath, and God’s chosen servant, the one God loves. Jesus is not only our Savior, but he is also our role model. He is the perfect servant, the perfect shepherd, perfect leader. We should all imitate Jesus Christ, God’s chosen servant.

**First**, Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. Look at verses 1-2. It was Jesus himself who led his disciples through the grain fields that Sabbath day, perhaps intentionally, to provide breakfast and quiet their growling stomachs. But the Pharisees saw this as unlawful work because it required harvesting (gathering the stalks) and threshing (separating the wheat from the chaff); it didn’t honor the Sabbath! To us it looks ridiculous, but to the Jews it was a very serious matter. To the Jews, the Sabbath was the focus of everything. In the Talmud, there are 24 chapters listing all the Sabbath laws and one rabbi spent 2 and ½ years trying to understand one of those chapters. Today, the Jews would not push the elevator buttons because pushing a button would be lighting a fire which is a work. You cannot treat a patient to make him better, only to keep him from dying. But what is the criterion? Sabbath keeping was a pain in the neck. It was impossible to rest. No wonder they were weary and burdened. No wonder they were sick to death of the system that had been imposed on them by the Pharisees. On the Sabbath, they had to think about the laws and the rules and the routines they had to keep. It made it more difficult to rest than it was to work the other six days. There was more work trying to rest than there was work trying to work. That is why Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

Look at verses 3-5. Jesus’ response is rather interesting. He didn’t excuse his disciples: “Just bear with them, they are young.” Nor did he engage in theological debate with them: “Well actually the Bible doesn’t say what they are doing is wrong. You guys are too legalistic and self-righteous in your application of the law!” Instead, Jesus said, “Haven’t you read…” and then gave two illustrations from the Old Testament. The first was about David, who was fleeing for his life from Saul in 1 Samuel 21. He and his companions were hungry, having no chance to pack food for the journey. They came to the priest Ahimelek for food, but he had only consecrated bread, which was only lawful for priests to eat. They ate it without experiencing guilt or wrath from God. Unique to Matthew, Jesus also refers to the priests in the temple in verse 5 who are said to desecrate the Sabbath by working hard, carrying out all the sacrifices required in service to the temple, yet Jesus says (and Pharisees agree) that they are innocent.

Look at verse 7. “If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.” This quotation from Hosea is a repeated teaching to the Pharisees, to help them understand why Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners (9:13). Their sin was to condemn the innocent, not because they didn’t study the Bible, but because they didn’t learn God’s mercy as a result. The law cannot stand in the way of showing mercy. God sometimes sets aside his prior laws for the sake of mercy. If you don’t believe that, then ask yourself why you aren’t dead, because you have sinned. Ezekiel 18:4 says, “The one who sins will die.” In verse 8, Jesus declares, “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” Jesus will not tolerate Pharisees’ perversion of his intended purpose for the Sabbath. The Sabbath was his. He wrote it, He would interpret it. Worshipping Jesus and following him is the true act of keeping Sabbath. More than simply a day off work, Sabbath rest is the experience of the forgiveness of sins through Jesus.

In verse 9 Jesus leads his disciples to their synagogue, as expected on a Sabbath. There was a man with a shriveled hand there (10a). Perhaps he was a regular. This condition was not life-threatening. But how ugly it would be to look at such a person! With his shriveled hand he was the object of ridicule. When a mischievous boy hit him two times with a one-two punch, he could only hit back one time. Because of his shriveled hand, he could not play basketball. Because of his shriveled hand he did not have even a beautiful dream of marriage. Religious leaders should have seen this man as one in need of God’s mercy. But they wouldn’t have it. By the way, this man with a shriveled hand did not mean anything to them. They never paid any attention to him until he became an opportunity to catch Jesus. They were far from knowing God’s mercy. This shows how dangerous it is to study the Bible without knowing God’s heart. Today we will have communion. In other churches there are many rules regarding communion; what kind of bread to use, what kind of wine to use, who can take communion, who can conduct communion. They make all kinds of rules which are not in the Bible. From their point of view, we are not doing communion correctly. But we do it anyway by believing that Jesus is the Lord of communion, and we do it to proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again.

Look at verses 11-12a. “He said to them, ‘If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep!’” Jesus reasons with them to help them recognize the hypocrisy in their own hearts: surely they would rescue their sheep on the Sabbath as it is helpless and valuable! But by using this man as bait they valued him less than an animal! How terrible to view material things above a human being! Jesus time and again pointed out the value of each person to God (6:26; 8:32), and he does so again here, saying they are much more valuable than a sheep! Jesus concludes with: “Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Jesus then demonstrated this act of service. Look at verse 13. “Then he said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.” What a beautiful expression of mercy and service on the Sabbath!

Jesus, our Lord, teaches us that the day of rest be used to serve and do good to others. Sometimes it can become just tradition, or worse a burden to people. Instead of doing good to others, we burden them down with a view of the Lord’s day as an obligation. What brought you to service today? Is it to do good, to be loved and to love? I thank God for many people who have used their Sabbath to sacrificially serve, as Jesus did. What a great privilege to have one day in seven to rest, rebuild community, and most important connect to God in worship, in service and in his word! I really don’t want to grow in the image of Pharisees, grumpily criticizing people or guilt-shaming people about Sabbath-breaking. Instead, I want to grow in Jesus’ image, learning of and practicing his gentleness and humbleness. If we would become doers of good, like Jesus, can you imagine what a difference it would make? Let’s pray for a revival of such a view of Sabbath keeping in our community, families, and nation, and find rest today.

**Second**, Jesus is God’s chosen servant (15-21). Aware of the plot against his life, Jesus withdrew, to continue ministering to the crowds that followed him, healing their diseases (15). The religious leaders wanted to kill him because they feared that Jesus was a dangerous cult leader who would undermine their religion and gain control of the people. But Jesus wasn’t interested in that. He warned those he healed not to tell others about him (16). When attacked, Jesus didn’t retaliate; Jesus loved and served. Matthew takes a break in the narrative to quote Isaiah, clearly identifying Jesus as the Suffering Servant, emphasizing that God would send a Savior to forgive the sin of Israel and lead them back to him for times of blessing.

Look at verses 18-21. Some of these have been fulfilled in Matthew’s account so far. Look at verse 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.” Matthew recorded this in 4:13-17, at Jesus’ baptism, where God spoke from heaven, saying: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” In the immediate context, verse 19 is fitting as Jesus did not quarrel or cry out in protest against the religious leaders, but withdrew when they threatened his life. This also emphasizes his gentleness in character. Jesus is so much more than just the Lord of the Sabbath; he is the Son of God, the Savior of the world, our Lord who always does what pleases God.

Look at verse 20. “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory.” Reeds were used as support for roofs, for writing instruments, and structures of many kinds in Jesus’ day. They have a strength which bends. They are also very low in value, costing pennies for large quantities. But a reed that is bruised is worthless. It can’t be depended on, as it could snap or buckle. Such things are simply discarded and passed over. Many people are like that; weak and wounded. They should be strong and resilient, but instead are sensitive and weak. Wicks are the part of a candle or oil lantern that is ignited to burn the wax or the oil to produce light. A smoldering wick, usually caused by lack of air or fuel, no longer produces light, but instead creates smoke that is annoying and irritating. They should be fully snuffed out and another candle or wick used. Many people are like that, weary, harassed and helpless, tired and out of fuel. In our dog-eat-dog world of no rest, many are burnt out. Others have their light snuffed by circumstances of life, bad choices, or systemic abuses of authority and privilege. They can become bitter and burdensome to deal with. When religious leaders saw such people, who were like bruised reeds and smoldering wicks, they ignored them at best or persecuted them at worse. They wondered, “Why can’t you be better? Why aren’t you like so and so?” But Jesus is totally different. He is so gentle and humble, he bears with, helps and serves bruised reeds and smoldering wicks. Think of the people he has served in Matthew’s gospel: the sick and demon-possessed (4:23-24; 8:32; 9:33), a leper (8:3), a centurion’s servant (8:13), Peter’s mother-in-law (8:15), a paralyzed man (9:6), a tax collector (9:9), a bleeding woman (9:22), he raised a little girl (9:25), blind men (9:29-30), a man with a shriveled hand (12:13). His own disciples were not top class people, but ordinary fishermen, uneducated people, public sinners and political activists, and the like, yet Jesus chose each of them, defended them when they were being attacked, and taught them. Jesus did this because he values people. He wants to help bring justice through to victory for each person.

Twice justice is mentioned in verses 18 and 20, as something proclaimed to the nations and something to be brought through to victory. What is this justice and victory? On a small scale, Jesus helped bruised reeds to be healed, and smoldering wicks to reignite with passion and purpose, but ultimately this points to Jesus’ cross. He himself chose to bear with, protect and serve bruised reeds and smoldering wicks until his victory is realized. As Isaiah so powerfully stated: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed (Isa 53:6).” This gospel truth is the victory of the cross, the justice and righteousness won for all weak and wounded sinners. A gospel faith will lead to costly love, lived out to protect bruised reeds and encourage smoldering wicks. Rather than trying to establish our own system or protect our rights, will we follow Jesus in reaching out and serving the bruised reeds and smoldering wicks of our time? Look at verse 21. “In his name the nations will put their hope.” “Nations” here and in verse 18 is talking about Gentiles, non-Jews. They were excluded from God’s people due to wickedness and idolatry. But in Jesus’ gospel there is hope for all. Is it any wonder that the world puts its hope in this person, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Beloved Servant Son?

Jesus is not only our Savior, but he is also our role model. I look at my own life, and I say, “I too, am a child of God. I too, have been called to be a servant and I am loved by God.” If I am faithful to attack the Kingdom of Darkness, to penetrate the Kingdom of Darkness with the light of the Gospel of Christ, if I am faithful to preach the truth of God, I too, will be persecuted by the false teachers. If I am to be a faithful servant of God, then I too must be compassionate toward people like bruised reeds and smoldering wicks, and I must be concerned about their hurts and pains and sufferings and sorrows. I must recognize that I have been called and chosen by God to do his work in this generation. I have been empowered by the Spirit; that I am to be faithful to communicate the message of righteousness to the ends of the earth. I must be committed to humility, gentleness and meekness. I must be an encourager of the weak. In the end, if I am faithful, I too, will know the victory and the triumph. So, the Beloved Servant Son is, not only, my Savior but my role model. May God bless each of you to grow in his image.