

A BRUISED REED

“MATTHEW 12:20-21”

Ray and Carol Leaman reside in Pennsylvania. One summer they loaded their large family in their car, and drove to the West Coast. If you've made a cross-country road trip you know it's a very, very long drive. It takes *almost* forever. And it becomes even longer when kids are in the car. To break up the trip Carol decided to have “A Family Kindness Day.” Each family member's name was placed in a hat - then everyone drew. The challenge was to be as kind as possible to the person you drew.

And it was a great idea - *in the car and at pit stops* – throughout the day everyone found a kind deed to do for the person they'd been assigned. Carol's idea went so well, the next day her youngest son, Durrelle, asked to do it again. He passed the hat and everyone picked a name. Once again, the family went out of their way to pour out love on their selection.

It took until lunchtime to notice a peculiarity. Little Durrelle was enjoying an unprecedented amount of attention, and love, and kindness. After an investigation it was revealed that Durrelle had written his name on all the papers he'd placed in the hat. He was hoarding the family's affections. Yet, it's understandable. We all crave kindness and love. *No one can ever get enough encouragement.*

Sometimes we're reluctant to pass on a word of encouragement for fear of giving the other person the bighead. We worry about inflating their ego. Author Doug Fields proposes a litmus test to tell if a person needs to be encouraged. He says, “If a person is breathing they need encouragement.”

Life *tears us down and roughs-us-up*. It *punches us drunk and slaps us silly*. Our world is a discouraging place. “Beat-downs” occur daily. *Are you down for the count? Are you on the verge of giving up?* For some of you 2011 was a brutal year. It was tough-sledding. And you could use some *encouragement*? Well today, I come with words of hope.

It reminds me of Hall of Fame basketball coach, John Wooden. Coach Wooden led UCLA to 10 national titles. And he had a rule on his team... Whenever a player scored a basket he was required to wink, or nod, or smile at the teammate who had passed him the ball... Once, when instructing the team about this rule - one of the new players asked, “But coach, what if he's not looking?” Wooden replied, “I guarantee he'll look...” Coach Wooden knew we're all looking for a little affirmation. It's been said, “Man does not live by bread alone. He also needs some buttering up.” It doesn't take long for a man or woman or child to become starved for encouragement. Humans need daily doses of propping up.

Several years ago my wonderful wife threw me a surprise birthday party. Some of you were there to help me celebrate my 50th birthday. Kathy had the house decorated with scores of colorful, helium-filled balloons. They added to the festive mood... But afterwards those same balloons were a source of sadness. It didn't take long for them to lose their helium – *like the very next day*. That morning all the fun, festive balloons were nothing but shriveled up pieces of plastic hanging from a string. As pretty as a balloon looks with helium, one deflated looks even uglier.

I never forget sitting alone in the living room the morning after the party thinking about those balloons... *I asked God if the balloons were a metaphor for my life? Is being 50 years old like a soaring, colorful, festive balloon – or is it more like a piece of shriveled plastic just hanging on? After a few years now in my 50s I can say it's a little of both.* I've drawn one conclusion, *as a balloon needs helium... I need encouragement.*

Today, doctors hasten the healing process by performing all kinds of complex, invasive surgeries... *Bypasses, and ectomies, and transplants, and reconstructions, and stints, etc.* – but when it comes to healing for the soul sometimes *a simple pat on the back remains the best therapy.* I've heard it put, *“A pat on the back, though only a few vertebrae removed from a kick in the pants, is miles ahead in results.”* Hey, we all desperately need encouragement. And again, Jesus comes to our rescue. Our Lord Jesus comes to us with hope for a new year...

In Matthew 12 Jesus quotes an OT Messianic prophecy that spoke of Himself. Isaiah 42 describes the Messiah and the nature of His ministry... In verse 1 God said, *“I have put My Spirit upon Him.”* Verse 4 declares of Jesus that *“He will not fail.”* Verse 6 calls Him *“a light to the Gentiles”* Verse 7 predicts Jesus will *“open blind eyes”* and *“bring out prisoners.”* In verse 9 we're told Jesus will do *“new things.”* In light of all Isaiah 42 predicts of Messiah, verse 10 commands, *“Sing to the LORD a new song, and His praise from the ends of the earth...”*

But of all the pungent promises in Isaiah's prophecy, there's one prediction that captures and stirs my imagination more than all the others. It's verse 3 – the passage Jesus quotes in verses 20-21... ***“A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench, till He sends forth justice to victory; and in His name Gentiles will trust.”***

If you're looking for encouragement - and you've come to Jesus - you've come to the right place. Jesus is all about *encouraging* not *extinguishing*. To the bruised reed He is a **splint**. To the smoking flax He is a **flint**. Here's what our text teaches us, ***Jesus is both a splint and a flint.***

On the banks of the Jordan River reeds grow high toward the sky. The bulrushes rise upwards as much as 18 feet above the water level. *Their tip* carries a white plume. *Their base* can be as thick as three inches in diameter. These reeds help with erosion control in the riverbed. But they have other purposes as well... *The lower portion* is often used as a cane or walking stick. *The thinner middle section* was used to craft musical woodwinds - like flutes. *The slender upper portion* of the reed was used to carve pens and writing tools.

Reeds were almost never used as weapons. They lacked strength. When Jesus spoke of John the Baptist, He asked the multitudes, *“What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken in the wind?”* Reeds were flimsy. In fact, a fragile reed, swaying in the wind, became a symbol for weakness... *and a bruised reed was weaker still.*

Despite its *intended use* a reed was *useless* when the stalk was bruised or crippled. It didn't even require a complete break - just the slightest bend in the stalk weakened it enough for it to be uprooted and tossed aside. Since reeds grew in clumps no one would take the time and effort to nurture back to health a single, bruised reed. It would be a waste of time and effort. Just throw it away. Just go back to the bulrushes for another. There were plenty of other reeds to choose from.

And the same was true of “**smoking flax.**” Flax was textile fiber grown for the garment industry. Various fabrics were made out of the stalks of flax. Flax is a plant that grows 2-4 feet high, and yields beautiful blue flowers. Once the stalks are harvested, they’re laid out to dry. When the flax becomes parched the stalks are easily shredded into individual threads.

The most common use of flax in Jesus’ day was as a wick for oil lamps. Dry flax fiber is highly flammable. Place a thread into a lamp full of olive oil – then hit it with a spark. It easily ignites and burns for a long, long time.

The trick was to keep the flax dry. Douse it with water and all it did was smolder and smoke, without really catching fire. A wet wick was of no use. And just like **a bruised reed** you threw away **a smoking flax...** You could purchase dry wicks for a penny a pound. The time and effort it took to reignite a smoldering wick was a total waste. Just grab another.

Here’s what I think... I think some of you, here today, living in the 21st century can best be described by these 2000 year old, oriental analogies. Jesus’ words and idioms are timeless. You might not have used these words earlier today, but as you think about it this is how you feel inside... You’re “**a bruised reed...**” And you’re “**a smoking flax...**”

Like **a broken reed**... You’re damaged. You’re bent. You’re wounded. Your once tall stalk has a break. You’re weakness is now weaker. You feel like the slightest breeze could blow you over. *You stand no chance in a windstorm.* You’ve assumed you’re no longer fit for the purposes God once intended. You feel like it’s *over* for you... It would be easier for God to go back to the riverbank and start over with another reed.

And like **smoldering flax**... You’re exhausted. Your enthusiasm and passion for life – has been doused by a million drops of disappointment. Hope for the future - your willingness to love - has been extinguished. If I looked into the furnace of your heart I would feel coldness. I would see the last few dying embers of a once roaring fire. *Why would God waste time trying to rekindle wet wood?* You’ve assumed He’d prefer fresh flax...

But here’s what you don’t realize... Jesus doesn’t think the way we think. He’s not so utilitarian. When Jesus builds or starts a fire He actually prefers broken reeds and smoldering flax. **Jesus hasn’t given up on you!** Jesus is willing to invest in “**the bruised reed**” and “**the smoking flax.**” He refuses to write them off, or abandon either. He cares for them both. Time used... effort spent... nurturing and healing provided – is never a waste. Listen!... **There are no throw-away people in the eyes of Jesus.**

Several years ago I saw a movie about an underdog race horse. There’s a scene where an old horse trainer saves an injured thoroughbred from a bullet to the head. *Later he’s asked why?* He replies, “**You don’t throw a whole life away just because he’s banged up a little...**” Please hear that again, “**You don’t throw a whole life away just because he’s banged up a little...**” This is what Jesus is saying in our text...

Jesus created mankind to be far different than we turned out to be. When God scooped out of the ground a handful of dust to make the first man he had perfection in mind... *Then sin entered the world, and life got hard, and we got hurt... and people got banged up a lot...* but Jesus doesn’t scrap the damaged goods. He doesn’t haul us off to the landfill. It would be easy for Jesus to throw away the bruised reed and the smoking flax. But that’s not in His nature – that’s not how Jesus treats people. *In the eyes of our Lord Jesus there are no throw-away people.*

And the Bible is full of such examples... Jacob was a shady character from the start. He was born clutching onto the heel of his twin brother. There was competition in the birth canal. Greedy Jacob tried to pass Esau in the womb so he could be the firstborn. And that's how Jacob spent the bulk of his life, doing his best to steal from his older brother, Esau, the privileges that rightly belonged to him. Yet God in His mercy saw in Jacob's thievery as a desire for spiritual things. In the end God promoted Jacob. He became heir to God's blessing.

Jephthah is a name you might not recognize. It was also a name his fellow Hebrews tried to forget. He was an illegitimate child - rejected by his countrymen. His only acceptance was found among "**worthless men.**" The elders of God's people shunned Jephthah... *until they needed him.* When the Ammonites launched war, the Israelites recruited Jephthah's bravery. We're told "**the Spirit of God came upon (him).**" God used him to lead Israel to a great victory. The despised and rejected became the victor.

And who can forget **Jonah**? Called by God to preach to Nineveh, he boarded a slow boat to the other side of the world. *He ran from God's will.* Jonah was a bigot. He hated the Assyrians of Nineveh. Yet even the evil of prejudice and racism didn't cause God to wash His hands of Jonah. God spoke to Jonah in the belly of a fish... It's interesting, even the fish couldn't stomach Jonah. He threw him up on the beach. But God could not only stomach Jonah, God chose to love and use the prophet to preach His Word and convert an entire city.

And think of another *Jonah* - **Simon bar Jonah**. We know him as **Peter**. Talk about *a bruised reed* and *a smoking flax* - his faith was pretty flimsy. Three times Peter denied the Lord in His most critical hour. Afterwards he was so discouraged he went fishing. He figured he just wasn't cut out for Apostle-hood - besides Jesus wouldn't use him now anyway - not after his failure. So Peter went back to what he knew. Peter figured he could fish. But by the lake - on the beach - Jesus renewed His calling to a discouraged Peter. He told him, "**Feed my sheep.**"

Jacob, and **Jephthah**, and **Jonah**, and **Peter** are just a few examples of God's grace in action. Understand, *your failure* is no greater than *their failure* - yet Jesus didn't forsake them, and He sure won't forsake you. Jesus doesn't *bail on failed* followers. *Don't give up on Jesus...* for **Jesus sure hasn't given up on you!** Charles Spurgeon made this comment about our text, "**The feeblest are not distained by Jesus... He is patient with those who are unlovely in His eyes. He longs to bind up the broken reed, and fan the smoking flax into flaming life. Oh, that poor sinners would remember this, and trust Him!**"

Jesus is a **splint** to the bruised reed. Ever walk through a vegetable garden and see the stalks of tomato plants tied to wooden stakes. On their own the stalks aren't strong enough to keep the ripening tomatoes from dragging the ground. They need help.

Likewise a bent person - a person who's been nicked, or scarred totters under his own weight. But Jesus is a *splint*. He wraps His arms around that person at the point of the break. Jesus' strength allows the person to heal. Perhaps your injury is *physical*, or *emotional*, or *relational*, or *spiritual* - it doesn't matter. Jesus will be your splint until you grow strong again.

You've been betrayed by a friend - now it's difficult to trust another. *You loved someone, and were rejected* - you're reluctant to love again. *Your marriage has been wounded* - it's wobbling and creaking even as I speak. You're afraid the next storm that blows in will snap it in two... *You've failed at a job, and your confidence has been shattered* - under the pressure to provide, you now doubt your skills and your know-how... *You're a bruised reed.* Jesus wants to give Himself to you. He wants us to trust Him at our point of weakness... Rely on His strength, His wisdom. He *props up* and He *builds up* flimsy folk until they grow stronger.

Remember the story of Moses when Israel fought the Amalekites. Israel had just escaped Egypt when they were confronted by the enemy in the plains of Sinai. The Amalekites were opportunists. They tried to jump on the Hebrews before they could train their troops, and organize an army. As the two sides clashed, Moses went to a cliff overlooking the battle. When he raised His shepherd's staff Israel gained the upper hand, but when his arms grew weary, and dropped under their own weight, Israel's army swooned. Amalek gained the advantage and siezed the momentum.

As soon as Moses' two assistants, Aaron and Hur, recognized what was happening, they flanked Moses, and supported his arms. They helped him hold up the staff long enough for Israel to thoroughly trounce its enemy. And this is what Jesus offers to do for us. When we grow weary and break – and can't find the strength within us to carry on - He doesn't sit back and watch the enemy gain the upper hand. He surrounds us, and supports us, and helps us elevate our faith. In the words of our text, **“He sends forth justice to victory...”**

Jesus is a **splint** to the bruised reed, and a **flint** to the smoking flax. Bears Grylls is star of **“Man Vs. Wild”** – one of my boys favorite shows. Whenever Bears gets dropped into a harsh environment he carries a flint. With a small piece of flint you can kindle a fire – and with fire you can cook, boil water, stay warm, dry clothes... *life becomes easier with fire*. Every survivalist is excited to have fire... **And the same is true spiritually...** Life without spiritual fire – the fire of passion, and enthusiasm, and motivation, and excitement, and hope – can be very, very difficult.

Imagine two different rooms on a cold, frozen night... The first room has a roaring fire in the fireplace. The family is gathered around the hearth. They all enjoy the smells, light, and warmth of the fire. Now the second room... On this chilly night the fireplace is empty. Folks walk through this room, but it's not a *living room*. No one *lives* there. There's no warmth or light to attract people to stay because there's no fire.

And what I've described are not just two rooms – they're two lives... One life contains the flame of God. The Holy Spirit lives inside them. And people are attracted to the love and warmth and light they sense. But the other life is cold, empty, lonely. There's no life in this room because there's no fire. There's nothing that attracts other people to come.

Our tendency is to walk off from the room that's cold, and empty – *why hang out there!* But Jesus refuses to leave such a space – *or such a life*. He wants to build a fire... He has flint. Jesus is the spark that can get the fires of love and passion burning again. Sometimes it's hard to start a fire. You have to prime it, and be patient, and be persistent. But those are all traits that characterize Jesus.

And not only can Jesus relight a fire in your heart. He can do the same in a *marriage* – or with a *friendship* – or for a *confidence* – Jesus can take smoldering, smoking kindling - a flicker of a flame - and fan it into a blaze. Jesus can reignite a *ministry* that nearly died out. Jesus can revive a *dream* or *vision* that was almost extinguished. Jesus can rekindle a *respect* that was doused with disappointment. Recall what John the Baptist said of Jesus, **“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”** *Jesus is the Lord of the spark!* He can fire up new life.

Understand the spiritual warfare that surrounds this ministry of Jesus. Our Lord is a *splint* and a *flint* – whereas, our enemy is a *harsh wind* and a *wet blanket*. Satan's nature is just the opposite of Jesus. Satan has **the killer instinct**.

Do you understand what I mean when I use that expression, “*the killer instinct?*” Such a person doesn’t just want to beat their opponent – they want to punish them. When a man falls down the goal is to finish him off. The idea behind a killer instinct is not to just to win, but to conquer. A football player with the killer instinct doesn’t just tackle the quarterback. He wants to disable him and put him out of the game. And Satan has this killer instinct.

Satan doesn’t just bend the reed, or break its skin. He’s the harsh wind that blows in to tear it in two... Satan doesn’t just let the fire die down. He’s the wet blanket – the bucket of water – that snuffs out the coals. And if it were not for Jesus, Satan would work His cruelty on us. There would be no hope for recovery. The first *failure* would be *fatal*. Our *first sin* would be our *last hope*. But Jesus is able to keep hope alive.

Obviously, there are a lot of factors that produce the emotions we feel. But most of us don’t consider a main cause for our turbulence. The highs and lows that sweep over us – *a wave of encouragement* followed by *a crashing wave of discouragement* – is often a result of spiritual warfare. When feelings of despair strike at a strange time - and for no apparent reason - there may actually be a spiritual battle raging to sink our faith. *Discouragement* isn’t always traceable to discernable causes.

And *encouragement* can come in the same mysterious manner. Recently, my sons and I burned some debris in the meadow below our house. it was a huge bonfire. Late in the day, I doused the fire with water. It was a full two days later – *two days* - I noticed smoke rising from the meadow. I couldn’t believe the fire still had life... But the wind had kicked up and ignited the smoldering ashes with a spark. *This is what Jesus does!* Even when there’s no visible reason to be optimistic – even when a positive outlook isn’t tied to anything tangible – even when you’ve seen it all burn out before your very eyes... hope can still swoop in from God’s throne of grace. Jesus comes and works in us like **a splint** and like **a flint**.

The starting point for you and I comes at the end of this morning’s text. Isaiah said, “**in His name Gentiles will trust.**” *Do you trust in Jesus?* Not just in the *macro sense*, but in the *micro sense*... I have a son who’s pursuing a business degree in college, and he has to take two basic economic classes – **micro** and **macro economics**. **Macroeconomics** is the overview of how markets work to create growth, cause inflation, and produce jobs... Whereas, **microeconomics** deals with the choices individuals and companies make to profit within the market.

Let me suggest that there is such a thing as **micro** and **macro faith**... **Macro-faith** embraces overarching truths – *there is a God, His Son is Jesus, He died to save me, He’s alive today, the Bible is God’s Word*... But there’s also what we could call **micro-faith**. This describes the faith I put in Jesus in the nitty-gritty... *when I let Him influence my thought life... and obey Him in my finances... and lean on Him with an emotional need*... Both the **macro** and **micro** are important. Eternal salvation depends on **macro-faith**, but **a bruised reed** and **a smoking flax** needs **micro-faith**. You need to be able to trust Jesus at the point of the break – at the moment when the fire is about to die out – that’s when your faith needs to kick in.

Two thousand years ago a man was rejected, beaten, crucified, and buried. But three days later He rose from the dead never to die again. You believe that... **but the empty tomb is proof of so much more!**...

Right now your back is against the wall – you face what you think are insurmountable problems – you’re looking around for reasons to hope, but you’re not finding many... **That’s why you need to look to that empty tomb!**

Jesus too was once a **damaged reed**. He too became **cold embers**. *Are your problems any greater than the problems Jesus faced? Certainly not!* Our Lord Jesus triumphed over our archenemies – both sin and death. Now with that victory under His belt... *nothing is impossible for Jesus!*

Understand, your discouragement isn't a big deal. In the grand scheme, it's tiny... It's the size of a mere quarter... In contrast, Jesus is larger than the sun. His light shines brighter. The warmth He generates is powerful. But here's what can happen... If I hold a quarter close to my eyeball - between my eye and the sun... to me - at that moment - that quarter will become larger than the sun itself. If I allow it, a small coin can block out the enormous sun... And in the same way, just a little discouragement can have a devastating effect on our faith. This is why you have to dig in your heels - trust Jesus in the midst of your mess. If you want to live in the light, and warmth, and love of God you can't allow discouragement to come between *your eyes* and *God's Son*.

I love the story of the dad who was taking his little boy on a fishing trip the next day. It had been planned for weeks. The excitement had been building in the boy. The night before, the dad tucked his son into bed. The little guy looked up at his father and said, "Daddy, thank you for tomorrow." This is what faith will say to Jesus, "Lord, thank you for tomorrow!" For Jesus rose again to be there *in your tomorrow!* Even when your *strength fails* or *passion fades* – He promises to be there in your tomorrow. "A bruised reed He will not break..." "smoking flax He will not quench..." This is how Jesus promises to *treat* you... Now you should *trust* in Him!