

A SPLINT AND A FLINT

MATTHEW 12:20-21

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.

Ray and Carol Leaman reside on the East Coast.

One summer, they loaded their family into a van and drove to the West Coast. If you've ever taken a cross-country road trip, you know it's a very, very long drive.

It takes *almost forever*.

And it gets 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 written on a piece of paper and placed in a hat - then everyone drew out a name. The challenge was to be as kind as possible throughout the day to that person.

And it was a great idea - *in the car and at the pit stops* - all throughout the day everyone found a kind deed to do for the person to whom they were assigned.

Carol's idea went so well that 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 a hurried investigation, it was

revealed that Durrelle had written his name on all the papers he had placed in the hat.

He was hoarding the family's affections!

Yet, it's understandable. We all crave kindness and love. Every one of us needs some *encouragement!*

Often, we're reluctant to pass on an encouraging word for fear of giving the other person the bighead. We're afraid of inflating the other guy's ego.

Well, author Doug Fields proposes a litmus test to tell if a person needs to be encouraged. He concludes, "If a person is breathing, they need encouragement."

Life can *tear us down and rough us up. It punches us drunk and slaps us silly.* The world we occupy is a discouraging place. "*Beat-downs*" occur daily.

That's why a little encouraging can go along way.

Well today, I come with words of hope!

It reminds me of Hall of Fame basketball coach, John Wooden. 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...*"

The coach knew we're all looking for affirmation.

I've heard it said, "Man does not live by bread alone. He also needs some buttering up." And it's true!

All human beings need daily doses of propping up.

When I turned 50, my wonderful wife threw me a surprise birthday party. She decorated the house with scores of colorful, helium-filled balloons. They added to the festive mood... But afterward those same balloons were a source of sadness. For it didn't take long for the balloons to lose their helium – *like the very next day.*

That next morning, all the fun balloons were nothing but shriveled up pieces of plastic hanging from a string. And as pretty as a plastic balloon looks filled with helium, a balloon that's deflated looks that much uglier.

I'll 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 - even a prophecy. Will my life be like a soaring balloon, or a shriveled piece of plastic just hanging on? I suppose the verdict is still out. But 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... But when it comes to healing for the soul... *a simple pat on the back is often the best therapy.* I've heard it said, "A pat on the back, though only a few vertebrae removed from a kick in the pants, is miles ahead in results."

We all desperately need encouragement. And our Lord Jesus comes to us with *healing, help, and hope...*

In Matthew 12, we find a Messianic prophecy that spoke of Jesus. Isaiah 42 described the Messiah and the nature of His ministry... *And I love Isaiah 42...*

Let's hit a few highlights... In Isaiah 42:1, God says of His Son and Servant, "I have put My Spirit upon Him..."

Verse 4 God declares of Jesus, "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... from the prison house."

In verse 9, we're told Jesus will do "new things."

In light of all Isaiah 42 predicts of Messiah, verse 10 is a command to all the nations, "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 that captures and stirs **Matthew's** imagination more than all the others... It's Isaiah 42:3...

And it's the passage Matthew quotes of Jesus in his Gospel, 12:20-21... "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."

Our Lord is all about *encouraging* not *extinguishing*.

To the bruised reed, He is a **splint** - to the smoking flax He is a **flint**. Jesus is a **splint** and a **flint**.

On the banks along the Jordan River, reeds grow high toward the sky. These bulrushes rise upwards as much as eighteen feet above the water level.

The *tip* of the reed carries a white plume.

Its *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. *And why?* Because they lacked the necessary strength.

When Jesus spoke of the authority of John the Baptist, He asked rhetorically, “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken in the wind?”

Unlike John, reeds are flimsy. In fact, a fragile reed swaying back and forth in the wind was 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 crimped. It didn't even require a complete break - just the slightest bend in the stalk was enough for it to be uprooted and tossed aside.

Since reeds grew in clumps, no one would ever take the time and make the effort to nurture back to health a single, crippled reed. It would be a waste... Just throw it away. Go back down to the bulrushes for another.

There were plenty of other reeds to choose from.

And the same was true of “**smoking flax.**”

Flax was used to make cloth. Various fabrics were made from its stalks. Flax is a plant that grows 2-4 feet high. It yields beautiful blue flowers. When harvested, its stalks are dried out. When the stalks become parched, they easily shredded into individual threads.

The most common use of flax in Jesus’ day was as wicks for oil lamps. Dry flax fiber is highly flammable.

Place a thread in a bowl of olive oil - hit it with a spark, and it easily ignites. It burns for a long time.

The trick though was to keep the flax dry. Moisten it just a little and all it’ll do is smolder and smoke without really catching fire. A water-logged 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.*

And here’s what I think... I believe some of you in this room 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 terms earlier today, but as you think about it, this is how you feel inside...

You’re “**a bruised reed...**” You’re “**a smoking flax...**”

Like **a broken reed**... You're damaged. You've been bent against your will. You're wounded. Your once tall stalk has a break. Your weakness is now weaker.

You feel like the slightest breeze could blow you over. *You know you'll 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 just go back down to the riverbank and start over with another reed.

And like **smoldering flax**... You're exhausted. Your enthusiasm and passion for life, and ministry, and maybe even your marriage - 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'd feel a coldness. I'd see a few dying embers of a once roaring fire. *Why would God waste time rekindling wet wood?*

You've assumed He prefers 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 something, He prefers to start with broken reeds... When He starts a fire, He likes to use 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 deeply for them both.

Time used - effort spent - nurturing and healing provided is never a waste. Listen carefully, **there're no throw-away people in the eyes of Jesus. (repeat)**

Once, I saw a movie about a long-shot 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. And it's not only true of *old horses* but also of *banged up people*.

Certainly, God created mankind to be far different than we turned out to be. When He scooped out of the ground a handful of dust to make the first man, he had perfection in mind... *But then sin entered, 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 toss aside the *bruised reed* and the *smoking flax*. But that's not in His nature.

That's not how Jesus treats people!

As far as Jesus is concerned, there are no disposable people. **Jesus is a huge recycler!** He *redeems, restores, reconciles, revives* - these are all Bible words!

Jesus breathes *new life* into *exhausted lives*. He still has plans for *bruised reeds* and *smoking flax*.

And the Gospels are full of such examples...

Think of **the woman taken in adultery**. This gal had been in more laps than a napkin. In fact, she was being exploited not only by the man she slept with but by the Pharisees who arranged this tryst to trap Jesus. This gal was a pawn in a move to checkmate the Savior.

Talk about a bruised reed! Yet Jesus, the only person in the crowd that day qualified to cast a stone, didn't.

There was no malice in His voice. **"Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."** How many times have we replayed those words in our own heads when we were guilty... let's not forget them when the rocks are in our hands. *Our Lord never broke a bruised reed.*

Think of **Zacchaeus**, *the short guy with a long list of sins*. He was an enemy collaborator, a swindler to boot. He sold out his countrymen to strong-arm for Rome.

And Jesus spotted Zac - **up a tree...** what a fitting place for him to be. In a proverbial sense, Zacchaeus lived his life out on a limb. But Jesus called him by name. Invited Himself over to Zac's house for dinner.

Zacchaeus had burned his bridges and given up hope. *He was a smoking flax if there ever was one.*

But the favor He felt from Jesus relit a spark in his cold soul. The compassion of Jesus helped this *little man stand tall again*. Restitution now had a reason!

Think of the **Gadarean demoniac**. When Jesus cast the demons out of him, the evil spirits immediately entered a herd of swine and drove them to *sooey-side*. *Imagine what the demons had been doing to the man?*

Or what about **the sinful woman** who came to Jesus at the Pharisee's house. She bathed the Lord's feet with her tears and perfume. Jesus said she had a *big love* because He had forgiven her a *big debt*.

Or **Peter's mother-in-law**, racked with a fever - or **the lame man** lowered through the roof - or **Mary from Magdala** who had boarded seven demons - or **the hemorrhaging woman** who grabbed His robe - or **blind Bartimaeus** who when told to keep silent, kept asking - or any one of the infectious **lepers** who cried to be cleansed - or **Martha of Bethany**, *who like so many of us, was busy and tired from serving her Lord*. These were all bruised people and smoldering hearts.

And can you name anyone Jesus turned away? One crippled, choking soul He refused to help? *You can't*.

And think of **Peter**. Perhaps the prime example of *a bruised reed* and *a smoking flax* - this man's faith was awfully flimsy. Even after boasting of his loyalty, three times Peter denied His Lord in His most critical hour.

Peter proved chicken before the rooster crowed.

Afterward, he was so discouraged he went fishing. He figured he just wasn't cut out for this 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 - the risen Lord*

renewed His calling to a discouraged Peter. Jesus told him, “Feed my sheep.”

These are just a few examples of God’s grace in action. Realize, *our failure* is no greater than *Peter’s failure* - yet Jesus didn’t forsake Peter, and He won’t forsake you. Jesus doesn’t *bail on failed* followers.

I love Psalm 136. Twenty-six times in 26 couplets the psalmist repeats the phrase, “His mercy endures forever.” He’s trying to ram it in our heads. Never *give up on Jesus*, **for He sure doesn’t give up on us!**

The prince of preachers, Charles Spurgeon, once commented on our text, “The feeblest are not disdained by Jesus...He is patient with those who are unlovely in His eyes. Jesus longs to bind up the broken reed and fan the smoking flax into flaming life. Oh, that poor sinners would remember this and trust in Him!”

Okay, *poor sinner*, are you willing to trust in Jesus?

Jesus is a **splint** to the bruised reed.

Ever walk through a vegetable garden and see the stalks of tomato plants tied to their wooden stakes?

On their own, the stalks aren’t strong enough to keep the ripening tomatoes from dragging the ground.

They need strength and support.

Likewise, a bent person - who’s nicked, or scarred - totters under his own weight. But Jesus is a *splint*. He provides support at the very point of your brokenness.

The strength of Jesus allows you to heal.

Jesus holds you up when on your own you would fall. He wraps His strong arms around your frailty.

Perhaps your injury is *physical*, or *emotional*, or *relational*, or *spiritual* - it doesn't matter. Jesus promises to be your *splint* until you grow strong again.

You've been betrayed by a friend - now it's difficult to trust another person... *You've loved someone, and were rejected* - and you're reluctant to love again...

Your marriage is wounded - you're worried your relationship will never be as strong as it once was...

Maybe you embarked on a job or a ministry opportunity that didn't go so well - Now you doubt your gifts and calling. You're suffering a crisis of confidence.

You're a bruised reed... But realize Jesus wants to give Himself to you! *What greater gift could He give?*

The strategy you hear in the business world today *is play to your strengths and minimize your weaknesses.*

But Jesus has a different way... He wants you to rely on Him **at the very point of your weakness.** Let Him show Himself strong on your behalf... Jesus *props up* and *builds up* flimsy folk until they grow sturdy again. In the words of our text, **“He sends forth justice to victory.”**

Jesus is a **splint** to *the bruised reed* - and make no mistake about it, He's also a **flint** to *the smoking flax.*

Bears Grylls was the star of "Man Vs. Wild." It was my boys' favorite show. Then Bears had a new survival show, "Get Out Alive." It was one of my wife's favorites.

I've watched a lot of Bears Grylls. And one thing I've learned about surviving in the wild is you need a *flint*.

For with that small piece of flint, you can kindle a fire, and with fire, you can cook, boil water, stay warm, dry clothes... *life is easier with fire!* Every survivalist is excited to have fire... *And the same is true spiritually...*

A life, or ministry, or marriage without spiritual fire - *the fires of enthusiasm, joy, motivation, love, commitment, passion, and hope...* can be very difficult.

To survive the wild of this world you need fire.

Imagine two different rooms on a cold, frozen night...

The first room has a roaring fire in the fireplace. The family is all gathered around the hearth. Everyone enjoys the smells, and 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 - far from it*. No one *lives* in this room. 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 but two lives... One life contains the flame of God. The Holy Spirit lives inside this person. 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 and stay here.

Our tendency is to walk off from the room that's cold and empty - *why would we want to hang out there?*

But Jesus refuses to leave *such a life*. He stays with the cold and empty. He refuses to abandon them. He wants to build a fire... *He has flint!* Jesus is the spark that can get the fires of enthusiasm burning again.

At times, it's hard to start a fire. You have to *prime it*, show *patience*, be *persistent*. But those are all tasks Jesus is good at. He's an expert at rekindling fire!

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 will take smoldering kindling - a flicker of a flame - and fan it back to a full-blown blaze.

Jesus can reignite a *ministry* that had nearly died out. He can revive the *dream* or *vision* that had almost faded. He'll re-establish a *respect* smothered by failure. Jesus specializes in rekindling burned-out people...

Remember what John the Baptist declared of Jesus, *"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."* Jesus is the Lord of the spark! He fires 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.

Let me warn you, Satan has the killer instinct. Do you understand what I mean when I use that phrase, “the killer instinct?” Such a person doesn’t just want to beat their opponent; they want to punish him.

When he falls down, the goal is to *finish him off*. A football player with the killer instinct doesn’t just tackle the quarterback. He tries 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 fierce wind that blows in to tear it in two...

Satan doesn’t just let the fire die down. He’s the wet blanket - or bucket of water - that snuffs out the coals.

And if it were not for Jesus, Satan would work His cruelty on us. There’d be no hope for recovery. Our first *failure* would be *fatal*. But Jesus keeps hope alive!

Do you ever suffer from inexplicable moodiness? Your soaring one day only to be depressed the next.

It amazes me how vulnerable I am to the highs and lows, and flows. A lot causes this turbulence.

But have you ever considered a main cause could be spiritual? That wave of encouragement followed by a wave of despair may be the result of spiritual warfare.

When a *bout with the blues* strikes 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 discernible, obvious causes. The enemy of our soul loves to ambush our feelings.

But likewise, *encouragement* can also rise up and roll in over us in the same sort of mysterious manner.

Not long ago, my sons and I burned some debris in the meadow below our house. It was a huge fire. Late in the afternoon, I doused the big blaze with water.

And it was a full two days later - *two days, mind you!*

I noticed smoke rising from the meadow. I couldn't believe the fire still had life... But the wind had kicked up, stirred up a spark, and reignited the smoldering ashes. *This is what Jesus does in a believing heart!*

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 swoop in!

The Holy Spirit blows in like a rushing, mighty wind.

He's dispatched from the throne of grace. The Spirit of Jesus comes to us like **a splint** and like **a flint**.

The starting point for you and I comes at the end of this morning's text - the last line we read. Isaiah said, *"in His name Gentiles will trust."* Do you trust Jesus?

Not just in the *macro* sense, but in the *micro* sense...

Years ago, when I was at the university in pursuit of my business degree, I had to take two courses in economics - **micro economics** and **macro economics**.

Macro is the big picture. It involves market trends, and government regulation, and the health of the overall economy... Whereas, **micro** is more specific. It deals with the choices individual companies make...

And let me suggest there's such a thing as **macro** and **micro faith**. **Macro-faith** looks at universal issues, while **micro-faith** examines matters specific to me.

Macro-faith embraces the 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 **micro-faith**. This is the faith I exhibit in the nitty-gritty. *Do I let Jesus influence my thoughts? Do I obey Him in my finances? Do I lean on Him for my emotional needs? Do I trust Him in the day to day?*

Both the **macro** and **micro** are important! You could say, **"My eternal salvation depends on macro-faith, while my internal salvation depends on micro-faith!"**

A **bruised reed** and a **smoking flax** need a *specific, targeted faith...* We need to trust Jesus day by day. I'm sure you have **macro-faith**, but what about the **micro**?

Do you trust Him at the exact point of your break? Right where the mending and healing need to occur.

At the very moment when the fire is about to smolder and die out - that's when your faith needs to kick in!

Two thousand years ago a man was rejected, and beaten, and crucified, and buried. **Yet 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 seems to be insurmountable problems - you're looking for

reasons to hope, but not finding many... **That's why you need to look to that empty tomb!**

Jesus too was once **a damaged reed...** He became **cold embers** for us... *Are you telling me that your problems are greater than the hardships Jesus faced?*

Certainly not! Yet in the end, the Lord triumphed over our archenemies - both sin and death. Now with that victory under His belt, *nothing is impossible for Jesus!* **And Jesus will work miracles in us if we trust Him!**

Understand, your discouragement isn't a big deal. In the grand scheme, it's tiny. It's the size of a mere coin.

In contrast, **Jesus is larger than the sun. He shines brighter. The warmth He generates is more powerful.**

But here's what can happen... If I hold a coin close to my eyeball, it can block out the sun... To me, at that moment, the coin becomes larger than the sun itself. If I allow it, a tiny coin can block out the enormous sun.

And in the same way, a small, but well-placed speck of discouragement can devastate our faith. If we're going to walk in victory, we can't allow discouragement to ever get between *your eyes* and *God's Son*.

Once, a dad and his little boy were planning a fishing trip. For weeks, it's all the son could talk about.

They were planning to leave the very next day.

Excitement had been building in the little boy.

The night before the big trip, the father was tucking his son into bed when the little guy looked up at his dad, and said to him, **"Daddy, thank you for tomorrow."**

And this is what faith says, "Lord, thank you for tomorrow!" Jesus rose again to be there *in your tomorrow!* Even when your *strength fails* or *passion fades*, Jesus promises to be there in your tomorrow!

"A bruised reed He will not break..."

"Smoking flax He will not quench..." This is how Jesus *treats* us... All that's left is for us to *trust* in Him!