

“HERE IS MY SERVANT WHOM I HAVE CHOSEN”

Matthew 12:1-21

Key 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.”

Jesus promised us that when we come to him, we will find rest for our souls. Who is Jesus to give such a promise? Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. Did you ever wonder why we have “weekends”? Did you know you can thank Jesus for the weekend? Sabbath means “day of rest.” On the seventh day of creation, God rested and made that day holy, or set apart (Ge 2:2-3). Later he would give Sabbath-keeping as one of the ten commandments (Ex 20:8-11). This was not a burdensome obligation, but a blessing to the Israelites, whom God rescued from slave labor in Egypt (Dt 5:12-15). The early church kept the Sabbath as Jews (Ac 17:2), which begins sunset on Friday and finishes sunset on Saturday. Why Sunday then? The first day of the week, Sunday, is the day Jesus rose from the dead (Mt 28:1), and a day that Christians most likely were meeting on (Ac 20:7; 1Cor 16:2). In 321 AD, Constantine decreed a day of rest for all of Rome to be held on Sunday. This seems to reflect the reality of a desire to adopt what the Christians had practiced for nearly two and a half centuries in celebrating the resurrection of our Lord. So when we say TGIF, it is literal! But the focal point isn’t the day of legal worship (Col 2:14-17). Jesus is the point, and coming to him, receiving him as Savior and Lord, is everything. Matthew wants us to know him as the prophesied Messiah, and find rest, hope, and victory in him today.

First, Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (1-14). 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 grumbling 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! I wonder why stalking your enemy isn’t unlawful work on the Sabbath? In reality, they weren’t concerned about the Sabbath, but wanted to have a reason to accuse Jesus and harass him.

“HERE IS MY SERVANT WHOM I HAVE CHOSEN”

Jesus’ response is rather interesting. He didn’t excuse his disciples: “Just bear with them, they are young.” Nor did 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 incurring 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. Why would Jesus give these two stories? Is it because God shows favoritism, giving exceptions for special people like David and the priests? Jesus’ view of his disciples was indeed very high. He considered them his mother and brothers (48-50). Jesus’ disciples are even known to be a royal priesthood (1Pe 2:9). But the real reason is given in verse 6: **“But I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.”** Jesus is greater than the law that David broke, or the temple which the priests served. Jesus is the focus and point, and his coming is the expression of God’s mercy and grace.

As a Bible teacher, I was struck by Jesus’ words: **“Haven’t you read...”** The Bible is great, when it leads to Jesus. But it has also been used throughout the years to divide God’s church, when a particular group believes their way of reading, interpreting and applying the Bible is superior, creating the one “true” Bible culture in its practices and traditions. This leads to self-righteousness and arrogance, expressed acutely in the first century Jewish culture, and repeated over the past two millennia in Christian communities. The problem isn’t the Bible – it is the reading of it as a means to create a reasonable set of rules, traditions, disciplines and habits, rather than coming to know and follow Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath and of all things. Jesus wants me to read the Bible to learn his mercy on sinners, and to come to know Jesus as Lord, not to promote sacrifice or demand it from others. What will that look like?

“HERE IS MY SERVANT WHOM I HAVE CHOSEN”

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. Let’s read verse 8 together. **“For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”** We learn the truth about the blessing of the Sabbath from Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath. 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 the gospel.

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 wasn’t life-threatening. Today such a condition could be overcome, but in that agrarian society where physical labor was so important, this man was a cripple and life must have been hard for him and his family. In view of Jesus’ teaching, religious leaders should have seen this man as one in need of God’s mercy. But they wouldn’t have it. They were like their ancestors, to whom God wanted to give rest for their souls if only they would follow the Way, but rejected him saying, **“We will not walk in it”** (Jer 6:16). They liked their neat and orderly control over Sabbath gatherings, and rejected Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath. Instead of mercy, they used this man in a plot to bring charges against Jesus.

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, a measure of their material wealth on the Sabbath, as it is helpless! 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!

“HERE IS MY SERVANT WHOM I HAVE CHOSEN”

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.

There is a contrast with the man with the shriveled hand and the Pharisees. He experienced the transforming power of Jesus, and his life was never the same after that day of rest. The Pharisees, however, who kept all the traditions and rituals, had no rest for their souls, but consumed by pride, jealousy and anger, became murderous, wanting to plot Jesus’ death (14). I learn that finding rest on the Sabbath has everything to do with our engagement with Jesus himself, and our attitude to him. For the man with a shriveled hand, it required courage and obedience. It was surely not easy to obey Jesus, stretching out his hand like that. He could have shied away, hidden in the back. But by faith he obeyed, and experienced the power of Jesus’ words in his life that day. He felt the love and mercy of Jesus on him, who saw his issue as important and urgent, like a sheep stuck in a well. We are so blessed to hear Jesus’ words every week. But it takes courage and faith to accept and obey, then comes the transforming experience, the true rest for our souls that he promised. What is it that Jesus is asking you to

“HERE IS MY SERVANT WHOM I HAVE CHOSEN”

stretch out this day? What word of Jesus are you accepting and obeying, to receive rest?

Over the last two weeks Amy and I with our four boys drove over 1500 miles visiting Toledo and then Lake of the Ozarks to visit family. I had rare opportunities to minister to them that I’m still processing in wonder at how God works. Last Sunday we were moving from one place to another, and for the first time in 20 years I did not attend a formal UBF worship service on Sunday. To be honest, I struggled with guilt about that, and coming to God this past week, preparing this message, I realized I still carry a lot of guilt about many things from my past, my character, ways I don’t conform, etc... They are like a shriveled hand that I don’t like anyone to see, but which cripple me from time to time. Amy always calls me out on it: “Why are you so negative on yourself?” since I can’t hide anything from her. I really felt like Jesus’ words, “**stretch out your hand**” were for me; to heal my guilt, to learn again the gospel of God’s grace and mercy and forgiveness. So I’m stretching it out, and what a peace to my soul. Do you have anything you’d like to stretch out before Jesus 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 he thought as they did: to gain influence and control. 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 mentioned in several passages from this section of Isaiah, emphasizing God would send a Savior to pardon 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. Verse 18 reads, “**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**

“HERE IS MY SERVANT WHOM I HAVE CHOSEN”

am well pleased.” In the immediate context verse 19 is apt 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.

Verse 20 reads, **“A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory.”** I almost chose this as a key verse, I was so moved by Jesus’ character here. 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 rat-race 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

“HERE IS MY SERVANT WHOM I HAVE CHOSEN”

not through a sense of pragmatism, but compassion. He wants to help bring justice through to victory for each person.

Twice justice is mentioned here, 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?

Verse 21 reads, **“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. Jesus' kingdom is the only kingdom that will endure. Like the Jews of Jesus' day, we find ourselves at odds with this Jesus. We want rest, and hope. But it will require submission and trust in Jesus, God's chosen servant, not on the past, or tradition or culture. To those who receive him as Lord of the Sabbath, who listen to his words, who submit to him, we will find restoration, healing, rest, peace and purpose to live as members of his kingdom, hoping in his ultimate victory.