

The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax

In speaking of Jesus who would fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 42:3, Matthew's gospel says, "*A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory*" (Matthew 12:20). In English grammar this is litotes, not to be confused with hyperbole. A hyperbole is the use of comparison and exaggeration for emphasis and effect. Here's an example from the words of the Lord Jesus: "*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God*" (Matthew 19:24). Now a camel can't go through the eye of a needle - it's an exaggeration to make a point - it's hyperbole. Litotes is a figure of speech consisting of an ironical understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by negating its opposite, as in "This is no small problem," meaning a great problem, or "You won't be sorry," meaning you'll be glad, or "I was not a little upset" when you mean, I was very upset, "A citizen of no mean city," that is, of an illustrious city. These are examples of litotes - an ironical understatement, especially expressing an affirmative by the negative of its contrary. Isaiah and Matthew used litotes to emphasize Jesus' compassion: "*A bruised reed shall he not break,*" in other words, Christ will lift, heal and help the bruised reed and "*The smoking flax shall he not quench*" to emphasize that our Lord will raise, trim and use again the flax that has diminished.

I have been meditating on this verse for a few months. For my precious people of Christchurch, you may remember my lame attempt to do an exposition of this text. I have been so consumed with it, that I have also preached it in Bible Conferences. As always, we frail human Bible teachers can only surface-mine the riches of God's Word. Occasionally, our Lord's grace permits us to delve into the riches of the meanings of certain texts. There is such a powerful word here; I long for God to give us all the insight of what is being said in this great text.

In my search for a better understanding of the bruised reed and smoking flax, I serendipitously (more correctly, providentially) came across a writing from F. W. Boreham's book, *The Uttermost Star* published in 1919, recently reprinted in another book entitled, *All the Blessings of Life*. In the chapter, Broken Reeds, he provided the best explanation I have read thus far. Boreham explained that he had been on a visit to the mid-east and while on this holiday, he was enjoying a day under the Syrian sky above him with the rich foliage beneath him and a beautiful body of water just beyond him. While enjoying the mere leisure with a prayerful and praiseful spirit, he heard a sound coming from the hills behind him. It was a flock of sheep. Soon he saw the shepherd, pre-occupied with the reeds in the shallow, marsh waters. The shepherd quickly approached the reeds finding a bruised one, one that was doubled in the middle. He roughly snatched it up in his hands, broke it in half and cast it into the waters. As the broken reed floated downstream, Boreham noticed the shepherd had found a tall straight reed that was undamaged. The shepherd carefully cut the reed, carved finger holes and whittled ever so precisely. Then he took the reed and the most beautiful music began to come forth. "Such harmony!" Boreham exclaimed in his writing. The sheep began to gather around the shepherd. I read in another writing that shepherds in the east would either call their sheep by their voice or by a specially prepared flute, carved from a reed.

F. W. Boreham introduced himself to the shepherd. As the custom still is in that area of the world, hospitality is expected and given freely, especially to strangers. After conversing for a while, the shepherd took Boreham back to his hut and lit the lamp hanging on the interior wall. After lighting the lamp, the shepherd went behind his place to fetch some wood for the fireplace. Upon returning, to his dismay, he discovers that the lamp is filling the room with smoke. He angrily blows the smoldering lamp out, carelessly flings it to the shelf and takes another lamp, lights it and displays the well working lamp to provide the light.

Boreham went back to his own temporary home that night and dreamed of the shepherd who broke the reed and quenched the smoking flax. Then he understood what our Lord, the Good Shepherd would do in contrast. Our Good Shepherd would take the bruised reed and carefully, with more kindness, carve the reed that had been broken into usefulness and make an even more beautiful harmony! Our Good Shepherd, rather than discarding the smoking flax, in his patience would lift up the wick of flax and tenderly trim it and re-light it again and allow it to provide the most beautiful light it had ever made.

Let me share with you Boreham's exact words, "The bruised reed! The bruised reed represents the things that have never been of any use; the things that are marred in the making. From the bruised reed he gets the choicest harmony!

The smoking lamp! The smoking lamp represents the things that have been useful, but have lost the usefulness they had. Once luminous, they have become loathsome; once shining they now smoke. From the smoking lamp he gets the clearest light!"

In light of these revealed truths I make my observations:

1. The Lord is not only willing, but wanting to use those for which this world has no use.

"The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me" (Matthew 11:5,6). Those who are reduced to begging, the unclean, untouchables are those our Lord seems to prize the most. Jesus said, *"I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance"* (Luke 5:32).

He does not break the broken reed! He lets it grow beyond the break. And although He uses those prepared and unbroken in the mean time, He keeps his eyes on the bruised reed. In my imagination, I see our Lord on the given day He deems it has now grown beyond it's wound; He takes it and makes the most beautiful flute of all. And with that very reed previously broken, He calls His sheep. Have you not seen the person with a great testimony of what they use to be, but are no longer because of God's mercy and grace? And have you not seen how God uses these people to give hope to the hopeless and help to the helpless. What a clear call for sinners they provide.

2. The Lord is able and capable of using those who lost their testimony to be used again.

"And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it" (Jeremiah 18:4).

Many a Christian, like the smoking flax, has damaged his or her testimony to the point of filling their environment with the smoke of spiritual pollution. How thankful I am for the Good Shepherd who never forsakes His own! *"Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ"* (Philippians 1:6).

3. Let us give hope for those never used and let us give hope again to those who have lost their place in God's service.

Let us follow the example of the Lord and not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax. May God give us His Spirit. In just a few verses before this passage our Lord says, *"But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy..."* (Matthew 12:7). And in the closing of the previous chapter Jesus said, *"Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls"* (Matthew 11:29). This parallels perfectly with His

words in the ninth chapter, “*But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance*” (Matthew 9:13).

May we ever follow in Christ’s merciful footsteps!

- Pastor Pope -

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