

Until He Brings Justice to Victory (Matt. 12:15–21)

By Jacob D. Gerber

Right as Jesus seems to gain a little momentum in his ministry, Matthew records that Jesus withdraws from the region where the Pharisees had begun to plot against him (v. 15). How should we view such a setback? How did Jesus understand the reasons for his withdrawal? How do the Scriptures situate Jesus' withdrawal in the larger context of his ministry? In spite of appearances, Matthew cites Isaiah 42 in order to explain how Jesus' withdrawal fits in with the purpose for which he had been sent by his Father into the world. Against all outward appearances in this withdrawal, *Jesus is still bringing his justice to victory.*

A Purposeful Ministry (Matt. 12:15–16)

Matthew tells us that Jesus withdraws from the Pharisees because he was “aware”—that is, aware that the Pharisees had begun to conspire against him to kill him (Matt. 12:14). Previously, the Pharisees had questioned Jesus (Matt. 9:11; 12:2) and criticized him in harsh language (Matt. 9:34). Now, however, the Pharisees plot how to bring about his murder. So, while the immediate cause of the Pharisees' planning to kill Jesus had been his teaching and work related to the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1–14), this conflict had been brewing for some time by this point.

We should make two observations about Jesus' withdrawal in this context. First, Jesus' determined willingness to go to the cross ultimately shows that we should not misinterpret his actions as arising from fear or a reluctance to suffer. On the contrary, Calvin notes that even the need to flee like this is a part of his suffering, “a part of that emptying of himself which Paul mentions, (Philippians 2:7,) that when he could easily have protected his life by a miracle, he chose rather to submit to our weakness by taking flight. The only reason why he delayed to die was, that the seasonable time, which had been appointed by the Father, was not yet come, (John 7:30; 8:20.)”¹

Second, as Jesus returned to his ministry healing “all” who followed him, but also ordering “them not to make him known” (v. 15b–16), we also see that “Jesus was not seeking fame. He did not wish to stand out as a worker of miracles.”² By withdrawing, he declined to remain in the center of human attention from human motivations. The time will come for Jesus to come directly into the center of attention, and, by doing so, to suffer and die; however, until then, Jesus neither wants to provoke the anger of the Pharisees needlessly nor to stir up the adulation of the crowds who would be impressed with his miracle-working.

These two observations stand behind the quotation from Isaiah 42 that Matthew will quote in the following verses. By Jesus' withdrawal here, we gain an insight into his motivations and purposes

¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 2:56.

² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 519.

for ministry. As Morris observes, “though there will be vicious and unprincipled opposition to Jesus, and though he will stoutly resist his enemies, there will be no hitting back at them as one with his unusual powers might conceivably do. Rather, Jesus will take a lowly way, not quarreling with his opposition, nor entering into brawls, verbal or otherwise.”³ Or, as France writes, these actions exhibit traits that are characteristic of Jesus’ overall life: “a gentle, nonconfrontational attitude, an avoidance of publicity, and a patient ministry of encouragement rather than denunciation.”⁴ Even so, as Jesus withdraws from the public spotlight, “in this very concealment his glory continues to shine, and even bursts forth magnificently into its full splendor.”⁵

A Paradoxical Approach (Matt. 12:17–20a)

Matthew links Jesus’ withdrawal here to the prophecy of Isaiah “This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah...” (v. 17). The exact words found in the source text are slightly different, as highlighted below:

[1] Behold my servant, whom *I uphold*, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will *bring forth* [Matt. 19:18: “proclaim”] justice to the nations. [2] He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; [3] a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will *faithfully bring forth justice* [Matt. 12:20: “until he brings justice to victory”]. [4] *He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands* [Matt. 12:21: “the Gentiles”] wait [Matt. 12:21: “hope”] *for his law* [Matt. 12:21: “in his name”]. (Isa. 42:1–4)

The differences do not mean that Matthew has corrupted the passage. Isaiah and Matthew are both inspired, and, as Hendriksen notes, while this “is not a word for word reproduction,” it is nevertheless “the result of profound sympathetic reflection.”⁶

Thus, we read about the Lord’s “Servant.” Calvin is certainly correct when he writes that Jesus “is called a *servant*, not as if he were of the ordinary rank, but by way of eminence, and as the person to whom God has committed the charge and office of redeeming his Church.”⁷ In v. 18 (quoting Isa. 42:1), the prophecy emphasizes that the Lord’s Servant is chosen, beloved, and well-pleasing to the Lord. In the context of Jesus’ rejection, the Lord’s affirmation is important to demonstrate that the Lord’s evaluation of Jesus does not necessarily match the Pharisees’ evaluation of Jesus. The fact that the Lord will put his Spirit upon his Servant also helps to explain the reason for the different evaluations of Jesus: Jesus’ glory was spiritual, not visible. As Calvin writes, “the glory of Christ’s divinity ought not to be the less admired, because it appeared under a veil of infirmity....The flesh is constantly longing for outward display, and to guard believers against seeking any thing of this

³ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 308.

⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 468.

⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:57–58.

⁶ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 519.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:59.

description in the Messiah, the Spirit of God declared that he would be totally different from earthly kings....”⁸

We should also notice that Matthew interprets the Servant mission as a ministry of proclamation. While Isaiah says that the Servant will “bring forth justice to the nations” (Isa. 42:1), Matthew interprets this by translating the verse to say, “and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles” (v. 18). In part, this may point to the manner of justice that Jesus had insisted upon for the Sabbath, governed not be legalistic prohibitions but with an eye toward doing mercy and doing what is good. By saying that Jesus would proclaim justice “among the Gentiles/nations,” the prophecy teaches us that “Christ’s mission takes [as] its ultimate object, the bringing of the gospel of grace, redemption, and justification from Israel, where it was prepared, to the whole Gentile world.”⁹

While the first verse of this prophecy suggests that the ministry of the Lord’s Servant will be marked by success (“with whom my soul is well pleased”), power (“I will put my Spirit upon him”), and boldness (“he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles”), the second half of the prophecy qualifies the nature of this success, power, and boldness in significant ways. First, while the Servant will proclaim justice boldly, he will not do so belligerently: “He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets” (v. 19). As Lenski comments, “His method is the opposite of violence; he will not even cry down his opponents. He is no turbulent agitator. He wins by meekness.”¹⁰

Second, while the Servant’s ministry will be marked by power, he will be absolutely gentle: “a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench” (v. 20a). By this, we learn that our Lord will not accomplish his will by brute force, running down any who might stand in his way. Morris’s exposition of this verse is worth quoting at length:

A *reed* might be used as a flute, a measuring rod, a pen, and in many other ways. But for whatever purposes it was wanted, a whole reed was desirable. Reeds grew plentifully and were cheap....The natural thing was to discard an imperfect reed and replace it with a better one. But the Lord’s servant does not discard those who can be likened to *shattered* reeds, earth’s “broken” ones. A perfect reed is at best fragile, so the imagery emphasizes weakness and helplessness. The same truth is brought out with the reference to a *smoking wick*. A wick that functioned imperfectly was a nuisance: it would not give out good light and its smoldering released a certain amount of smoke. The simple thing was to snuff it out and throw it away. A little bit of flax did not cost much, so replacing it was the normal procedure. It took time and patience and the willingness to take pains to make anything useful out of a bruised reed or a smoking wick. People in general would not take the trouble.¹¹

Jesus did not come to bring about his victory by force; rather, he would gently minister to those who most seemed to be disposable in the eyes of the world.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:58.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 473.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 473–74.

¹¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 311.

A Promised Victory (Matt. 12:20b–21)

Third, while the Servant’s ministry will be victorious, that victory would not come immediately: “until he brings justice to victory” (v. 20b). The word “until” signifies that Jesus’ victory will require patience, diligence, and faithfulness as he moves toward his goal—especially so that “in his name the Gentiles will hope” as he brings salvation from Israel to the whole world (v. 21). More than this, Blomberg puts it well when he writes that Jesus’ “cross must precede his crown. He comes first to suffer before returning in splendor.”¹² In the short term, this will mean that Jesus will faithfully minister to those around him—here, healing all those who followed him. In the medium term, this will mean that Jesus will suffer and die, but that he will rise victoriously from the dead. In the long term, this will mean that Jesus “will never cease to do all this...until at last, at the great consummation, sin and all its consequences will have been banished forever from God’s redeemed universe.”¹³

Discussion Questions

1. What was Jesus “aware” of that prompted him to withdraw from the area (v. 15)? What had stirred up the murderous hatred of the Pharisees? What does Jesus do as he withdraws from that area? Why does Jesus order those whom he heals not to make him known? What should we make of Jesus’ withdrawal? Is he shrinking in fear from what he is supposed to be doing? If not, then how should we understand his actions?
2. What does the word of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah tell us about the Father’s attitudes toward Jesus? How does this prophetic passage shape how we should evaluate Jesus’ withdrawal? What should we understand by the description of Jesus as the Lord’s “servant” (v. 18)? What is significant about the fact that the Father puts his Spirit on Jesus? What does it mean that Jesus came to “proclaim justice to the Gentiles”?
3. What does it mean that Jesus will “not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets”? What does it mean that Jesus will not break a bruised reed, or quench a smoldering wick? How does Jesus’ meekness and gentleness ultimately lead him to “bring justice to victory”? What does this tell us about Jesus’ patience as he fulfills all righteousness? How does this lead Gentiles to hope in his name?
4. What is one area of life that discourages you? How does Jesus’ patience in the midst of his suffering help encourage you in your own suffering? How does Jesus’ resurrection from the dead give us confidence in the midst of our trials? How does Jesus’ gentleness and meekness with his people give us confidence and boldness to come to him with our burdens? Where do you need to learn how to hope in him in your life?

¹² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 200–01.

¹³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 522.