

Matthew 12:15-21

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Matthew tells us that Jesus is not harmed by the Pharisees' plot to destroy Him at this time. He continues to heal people, but is careful to keep His identity as the Messiah a mystery. Matthew highlights how this is another rich fulfillment of one of Isaiah's prophecies.

The parallel gospel account of this event is found in Mark 3:7-12.

Jesus knew what the Pharisees were conspiring. *He* was aware that they were plotting how they might destroy *Him* because *He* had shamed them publicly when they challenged His authority over the Sabbath. So, *He* left and *withdrew from there*. Matthew indicates that *Jesus* certainly left the synagogue where *He* had restored the man with a withered hand, but *Jesus* also may have left that town or region and *withdrew* to somewhere else in the Roman province of Judea. Where exactly *He* went, Matthew does not tell us.

Wherever *He* went, *many followed Him*. Mark reported where *the many who followed Him* came from. They came from Galilee (northern Israel), Judea (southern Israel) and the city of Jerusalem, the region of Idumaea (further south of Judea, beyond the Jordan in Perea), and from the Mediterranean coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon to the northwest (Mark 3:7-8). This means that the people who *followed Him* originated from a radius of a hundred miles or more.

They were drawn to His miraculous powers or perceived that *He* might be the Messiah. As they *followed Him*, *Jesus* continued to use His power and *He healed all of them* who came.

But as *He* healed the sick among the multitudes, and as they speculated about His Messianic identity, *Jesus warned them not to tell anyone who He was*. Perhaps this was because *He* did not wish it to be broadly known that *He* was the Messiah until His time had come (John 7:6). *Jesus* gave this warning to the exorcised demons who shrieked out that *Jesus* was God's Son (Mark 3:11-12).

Matthew next told his readers that *this* shielding of His identity *was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet*. Matthew again is demonstrating through Old Testament scriptures to His primarily Jewish audience that *Jesus* is the Messiah. Matthew cites Isaiah 42:1-4 with a few modifications. Matthew wrote:

*Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen;
My Beloved in whom My soul is well-pleased;
I will put My Spirit upon Him,
And He shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not quarrel, nor cry out;
Nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets.
A battered reed He will not break off,
And a smoldering wick He will not put out,*

*Until He leads justice to victory.
And in His name the Gentiles will hope.*

There are four noteworthy differences between Matthew's citation and Isaiah's words. The first is that Matthew describes the *Servant* as *My Beloved* while *Isaiah* describes Him as "My chosen one." The second is that Matthew alters Isaiah's tense in the third line to read *I will put my Spirit upon Him* instead of "I have put my Spirit upon Him." The third difference is Matthew interprets Isaiah's descriptions of "nations" and "the coastlands" to mean *Gentiles*. This is an interesting choice for Matthew whose purpose for writing this Gospel narrative was to show how *Jesus* was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah sent from God. The final noteworthy difference is that Matthew omits two of Isaiah's lines, "He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not be disheartened or crushed." These differences do not materially alter the substance or meaning of what *Isaiah* prophesied, rather they provide insightful points of emphasis, fresh focus, and an additional perspective of Isaiah's original prophecy.

Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 42:1-4 is actually the end of an extended quotation from the LORD God of Israel that begins in Isaiah 41:25 and runs through Isaiah 42:4. The fuller passage describes how no one in the history of Zion has listened to God (Isaiah 41:26), and that there is no counselor among them able to speak to them on God's behalf (Isaiah 41:28-29). And then the LORD says the part of the prophecy which Matthew quotes (Isaiah 42:1-4).

The LORD describes the Messiah as *My Servant* (Isaiah 42:1/Matthew 12:18). *Jesus* came as a servant. He served His Father's will in perfect obedience (Matthew 26:39, John 6:38, Philippians 2:5-8). And He came to serve all of humanity by suffering on their behalf to make their redemption available (Matthew 20:28).

In *Isaiah* He is called "My chosen one" (Isaiah 42:1). The Greek Septuagint uses the word "ekletos," meaning "chosen" or "elected." Matthew writes, "*My Beloved*," ("agapetos") indicating the close relationship that *Jesus* shared with His Father. *Jesus* was both chosen by God the Father for the divine task and He was dearly *beloved* by Him. Both *Isaiah* and Matthew follow this description with an affirmation of how pleasing the Messiah is to God's *soul*. At *Jesus*'s baptism, Matthew wrote that "a voice from the heavens," declared, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

The next line of Isaiah's prophecy reads, "*I have put My Spirit upon Him* (Isaiah 42:1)." It is of interest that the *Isaiah* prophecy states this utterance in the past tense. It is common in the Old Testament for a prophecy of something that will occur in the future to be stated in the past tense in order to emphasize the certainty that God will bring it to pass. The idea is that because God has spoken it, its occurrence is certain. In this instance, it could be argued that this part of the prophecy has already taken place, since *Jesus* is God. More likely the passage is predicting that God will become Human, and be subject to the leading of the Spirit.

We know that this Servant is *Jesus*, God's Son, and the Word of God who was with God in the Beginning (John 1:1). It was not widely understood by the Jews in Isaiah's day that God is Three-in-One. This is one of a number of places where the Trinity appears in a subtle manner. It gives a subtle reason for a Jew to pause when reading it.

As mentioned above, Matthew alters the tense from past to future for this thought, writing, *I will put My Spirit upon Him*. The common practice in their era was for readers to read the scriptures to the people. This was due to lack of access to the scripture scrolls, it was common for each synagogue to have one, and for the people to commit it to memory. The reader would translate from Hebrew to Aramaic (the common language of Jews at that time) as they read. It could be that the readers translated this as future tense, since that is clearly what is indicated from the context. It is clear that the future coming of the Messiah is what is in view.

Isaiah writes, “*He will bring forth justice*” (*Isaiah 42:1*), which is something that the Jews would have expected the Messiah to do among themselves. But *Isaiah* does not stop there. He says, “*He will bring forth justice to the nations (Isaiah 42:1).*” “The nations” is a euphemism for those who are not God’s chosen people, the non-Jews, *the Gentiles*. Matthew modifies “bring forth” to *proclaim* and removes the euphemism and explicitly states *Gentiles*. God is making a point through *Isaiah*’s prophecy. His point is that because the people of Zion have refused to listen and obey God, He will send His *Servant* to bring *justice* among *the Gentiles* (instead of them).

Interestingly, the word that Matthew uses that is translated as *justice* in this passage is not the typical one. The normal Greek word for *justice* is “*Dikaioné*,” which is often translated as “righteousness.” “*Dikaioné*” emphasizes harmony or the good or right ordering of things. The Greek word translated as *justice* in this passage is “*krisis*.” From this word we get our word “crisis.” This word is usually translated as “judgment.” A more descriptive translation of Matthew’s meaning might be “vindication.” The thrust of this prophecy stresses that God’s *Servant*, the Jewish Messiah, will vindicate or validate *the Gentiles* by graciously including them into His plan of redemption. This judgement or “*krisis*” will bring *justice* and be *the Gentiles*’ great *hope*.

It is fitting how Matthew mentions this prophecy at this particular moment in his narration. He brings it to mind in the middle of four confrontations between *Jesus* and the religious leaders of Judea. They too behave like their forefathers and refuse to listen and obey God. They will eventually lead the nation to reject *Jesus* as Messiah. They did this even though *Jesus* was the Jewish Messiah: an everlasting priest in the order Melchizedek (*Psalm 110:4*, *Hebrews 6:20*); a prophetic lawgiver among their brethren like unto Moses (*Deuteronomy 18:18*, *John 1:45*, *Acts 3:22*); and a King in the line of David (*II Samuel 7:11-16*, *1 Chronicles 22:9-10*, *Psalm 89:3-4*, *89:35-36*, *Jeremiah 23:5-6*, *Matthew 1:1*, *1:17*, *9:27*, *12:23*, *Luke 1:32-33*, *Acts 15:15-17*).

Jesus is also Savior of the entire world (*John 3:17*, *4:42*, *Romans 1:16*, *Titus 2:11*, *1 John 4:14*).

Jesus was foretold to the Jews. And He came as a Jew unto the Jews. But when the Jews rejected their Messiah, *Jesus* offered His salvation and His kingdom to the Gentiles and unto all who would believe and follow Him, as was partially foretold in *Isaiah*’s prophecy. In *Romans 9* and *11*, Paul argues that in God’s mystery He is using the apostle’s ministry of sharing Christ among the Gentiles to “move to jealousy my countrymen and save some of them” (*Romans 11:14*).

As appropriate as it was to include this particular prophecy from *Isaiah* at this moment because of the Pharisees’ rejection of *Jesus* as their Messiah, this does not seem to be Matthew’s main reason for doing so. His main reason appears to be to explain why *Jesus warned the many who*

followed Him to not tell who He was. Matthew says *this was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet*. In other words, *Jesus warned* others (at least in part) because it was necessary to *fulfill* this prophecy. The next lines, which form the heart of Matthew's quote of Isaiah 42 (verses 2 and 3) make this clear:

*He will not quarrel, nor cry out;
Nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets.
A battered reed He will not break off,
And a smoldering wick He will not put out,*

When seen in this light, we see that God's *Servant* does *not* make a big scene about Who *He is*. *He does not quarrel* or attempt to prove Himself to others by arguing with them. He does not demand or insist that others recognize *His* true identity. *He does not scream nor cry out* that *He* is the Messiah. People do *not hear His voice in the streets* promoting *His name* as the Christ. *He will* reveal Himself humbly. *He will* reveal Himself so gently that *He will not break off a battered reed*. *His voice will* be so quiet that *He will not put out a smoldering candle wick*.

Instead of loudly announcing Himself as the Messiah, *Jesus* will let *His* miracles, *His* character, *His* moral teachings, and prophecies (such as this one) proclaim *His* identity for *Him*. This leaves others the opportunity to accept and love Him for themselves by faith. Had Jesus fully unveiled Himself and His identity, then no one would have had a free choice to come to Him. Everyone would have been overwhelmed by His presence and the inescapable terror that He was God, and been compelled to acknowledge Him. In the future, at His second coming, Jesus will unveil His glory and compel all to acknowledge Him as King (Romans 14:11, Philippians 2:10-11). But during Jesus' first advent, He came as a servant. And He made certain people had a free choice whether or not to believe. In coming as He did, He gave more than enough evidence to plainly demonstrate His identity, while leaving enough space for people to accept or reject Him as they chose.

Matthew then omits two of *Isaiah's* lines. "*He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not be disheartened or crushed*" (Isaiah 42:3-4). It is possible that he left these out because they refer to Jesus's second advent, when He will return to earth to execute *justice*, and bring in everlasting righteousness (Revelation 19:11). In His first advent, *Jesus* was crushed and rejected. He had injustice done to Him.

Old Testament prophecies are not always evenly told in a historical linear sequence of events. Foretold events are often mixed and jumbled out of order or with irregular gaps in time. This appears to be the case in this Messianic prophecy from *Isaiah*. He is talking about two comings of the Messiah, the one that occurred when *Jesus* was born in the first century A.D. and the other when He returns to earth in the future. In explaining this passage, Matthew seems to primarily focus on how *Jesus* fulfilled *Isaiah's* prophetic utterances that pertained to the Messiah's first advent.

Matthew ends his quote of *Isaiah's* prophecy with *Until He leads justice to victory. And in His name the Gentiles will hope*. The *until* serves as an important warning. God's *Servant* will not forever remain so gentle and mild. *He will not* be disheartened or crushed in His second Advent.

One Day *He* will be anything but mild. When *He* appears to His friend John in Revelation, *Jesus* is a terror to behold (Revelation 1:14-17). *Jesus* will ferociously lead *justice to victory* when *He* returns to wage war against “the beast and kings of the earth and their armies assembled... against *Him*” (Revelation 19:19). There will be nothing gentle about *Him* then. Matthew again lets it be known that *Isaiah* is saying God’s *Servant will be a hope for the Gentiles*. Mathew likely included this foretelling of *Jesus* judging the world because it is clearly written as a future event.

This is the twelfth time Matthew has explicitly pointed out how *Jesus* fulfilled Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. (The previous eleven are found in Matthew 1:22-23, 2:5-6, 2:16-18, 2:23, 3:1-3, 4:4-6, 4:13-16, 8:17, 10:35-36, and 11:10. This list does not include the three additional Messianic prophecies that *Jesus* alludes to in Matthew 11:5-6).

Biblical Text

But Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. Many followed Him, and He healed them all, and warned them not to tell who He was. This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet:

**Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen;
My Beloved in whom My soul is well-pleased;
I will put My Spirit upon Him,
And He shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not quarrel, nor cry out;
Nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets.
A battered reed He will not break off,
And a smoldering wick He will not put out,
Until He leads justice to victory.
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