

Smoking Flax And The Tender Love Of Jesus

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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I invite you to do something, as we begin our study today. Please imagine that you are camping. It's evening and you are now attempting to light a campfire. The weather has cooled down. You arrange the material to be burned with some logs, under which you have some kindling and paper to help the fire get started. Now you strike a match. There's an evening breeze that is somewhat brisk, so you do something with your hands to insure that the fire can get started. What is it that you do with your hands? You cup them to protect the infant flame, don't you. You don't want the spark to be blown out by the wind.

I hope that this picture is embedded in your mind as we open God's Word today. In fact, I hope that it remains in your mind and is recalled often, because it is a picture of how God is protecting and guarding you, specifically the spark of spiritual life in you.

At one time we were "in the world," which is the Bible's way of saying that our minds were not tuned in with God and His program. We were born that way. We came from the womb with selfish interests and cared only about "me." All along though, God through His Holy Spirit was speaking to us and encouraging us to follow His way and live a different life. At some point we began to listen to His Voice and the Spirit led us in a new direction.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way: "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of the our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, Who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loves us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." Ephesians 2:1-6.

For some of us, it may be that we were once on the path of life, but became detoured. A discouraging event, a laxness in spiritual exercises, an attraction to go

back to the things of the world or some other circumstance caused us to lose the vital connection with Christ and His Church. But now He has led us back onto the path again and we are enjoying a new experience once more in the journey toward the kingdom. If this describes your life, be encouraged! We're all "come-backers" of one sort or another. There's no better time to become connected, or re-connected with the Lord than today! As you scan the horizon of world events; as we see the prophecies of the Word being fulfilled before our very eyes, we know that we need to be right with the Lord. We need His Spirit in our lives and hearts to conquer sin in our lives and to prepare us for what lies ahead.

And Jesus is there to help us. He is cupping His hands about us, protecting the spark of spiritual life so that it won't be extinguished by the winds of the world. That's the picture I hope we can see in today's Scripture lesson. I hope that you see yourself in that picture. The image is drawn from the book of Isaiah. "Behold, My Servant Whom I uphold, My Elect One in Whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. He will not cry out, nor raise His voice, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break and smoking flax He will not quench." Isaiah 42:1-4.

This passage is describing the work of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Matthew quoted it in his gospel and applied it directly to Jesus. "He will not quarrel nor cry out, nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench." Matthew 12:19, 20. In the book of Isaiah, the work of Jesus is put forth in the imagery of the "Conqueror" and the "Suffering Servant." In the role of the Conqueror, He is portrayed by the illustration of Cyrus the Persian, who defeated Babylon, released God's people from their captivity and built a "new Jerusalem." All of those things describe the work of Jesus.

But Isaiah also portrays the work of the Messiah as a "Suffering Servant," the One Who would come without "shouting" and "acclamation," but as a "still small voice," teaching quietly the words and ways of God. When the prophecy says, "He will not cry out, nor raise His voice, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street," it is drawing from the image of an altercation in a house with voices elevated, which can be heard from outside. Have you ever heard shouting from a house next door? One time we had some neighbors who engaged in such behavior and we were an involuntary audience to many such arguments. This is not the way Jesus went about His work. We wonder about pulpit ministries which employ such tactics.

The humble Nazarene Jesus came unobtrusively, without much fanfare and grew up “before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him.” Isaiah 53:2. Notice carefully the context of Matthew’s quotation. “But when Jesus knew it (the reaction of the Pharisees to His healing the man with a withered hand), He withdrew from there; and great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them all. And He warned them not to make Him known, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying,” and then Matthew quotes the passage from Isaiah. Jesus’ ministry did not seek acclaim or confrontation. His method of working was not like the quarrelsome voice which reached the streets. His approach was of a more gentle nature.

What is this matter of “smoking flax”? The picture that Isaiah gives of Christ’s work is that of protecting a spark from being extinguished. “Smoking flax He will not quench.” Flax was often used as lamp wick material. The Bible teaches us that we are to be the candle of the Lord, the light of the world. The virtuous woman of Proverbs, a fit symbol of the Church, is one whose “candle does not go out by night.” Proverbs 31:18. The wicks of the seven-branched lamp stand of the sanctuary were trimmed daily so that their flame would be constant.

Our passage is describing a dimly lit lamp, a smoldering light about to go out which He carefully protects. He is looking for the slightest sign of spiritual life in our hearts, the smallest spark and when He sees it, it brings a smile to His face and a song to the angels. He guards that spark, He protects it from being blown out, He trims the wick so that it will burn ever brighter. Jesus and His Spirit do not give up easily! This is a picture of your life and mine. It is true what Paul stated, “Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ.” II Thessalonians 3:5.

In the New International Version this texts read, “A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.” The New American Standard Bible has it, “A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish.” The Contemporary English Version reads, “He won’t break off a bent reed or put out a dying flame.”

John Wesley wrote about this passage with these comments. ““A bruised reed’: Christ will not deal rigorously with those that come to him, but he will use all gentleness, cherishing the smallest beginnings of grace, comforting and healing

wounded consciences. ‘Quench’ — That wick of a candle which is almost extinct, he will not quench, but revive and kindle it again.

Matthew Henry said this: “His (Christ’s) kingdom is spiritual; he was not to appear with earthly honors. He is tender of those oppressed with doubts and fears, as a bruised reed; those who are as smoking flax, as the wick of a lamp newly lighted, which is ready to go out again.”

How the heart of Christ was thrilled at the response of the woman at the well as the spark of faith was ignited within her; of the faith of the Syro-phenician woman who begged for the “crumbs from the table;” of the nobleman who had faith to believe in His healing power; of the Greeks who sought Him in the temple; of the thief who confessed Him on the cross. These were smoldering wicks that were encouraged rather than being snuffed out. How often the disciples were ready to discourage those who were seeking Him, like poor blind Bartimaeus. “Don’t bother the Master,” they said to him. The tax collector Zacchaeus many would have thought was beyond salvation, but Jesus didn’t!

He is looking for the slightest indication of response to His calls of mercy. Like a mother who looks for that first glimpse of recognition in her child’s eyes, Jesus searches our hearts for a response to His Spirit. He is like Elijah in his persistent prayer, begging for rain, sending his servant out to look for a cloud, a sign. After the showdown on the top of Mt. Carmel, Elijah went back up to the top of the mountain to pray, this time by himself. He sent his servant out to look, and the servant came back with the news that, “there is nothing. And seven times he (Elijah) said, ‘Go again.’” I Kings 18:43.

After the seventh prayer the servant came back with the report that he saw a small cloud, about the size of a man’s hand, and Elijah said to Ahab, “prepare your chariot,” because he knew this was the token of something big. This depicts Heaven’s interest in our spiritual awakening. If the response seems at first to be “nothing,” God doesn’t give up.

Heaven is like Noah after the flood, sending out the birds from the ark, searching for a place to land. When the dove returned with just an olive leaf, the smallest token of new life, in her mouth, Noah was encouraged and knew that it was time to take action. A “new life” was about to begin. Heaven is the Prodigal’s father waiting, peering down the road, apparently every day, looking for the faintest shadow of his son’s return. Heaven is the emergency room doctor with His stethoscope out, listening for the slightest whisper of a spiritual heartbeat.

Then what does He do? Oh, then with tender love and pity He protects the flame, He trims the wick, He guards the spiritual infant. I heard this week of troubled pregnancy concerning unborn twins. It looked like they would not be able to save them both, but thank God, both of them were born alive and are doing well, though each of them weighed about two pounds or less at birth. What kind of care will be given those twins? Do you think God gives any less a degree of care to His children? “A smoldering wick He will not snuff out.”

As you probably know, we enjoy growing fruit in our yard. The Lord has blessed us with an abundance of fruit this year! We were blessed to make more than 15 gallons of applesauce just from the fruit of one tree. Years ago, we planted a peach tree that wasn't doing too well. In fact, it looked completely dead. One day I decided it was time to remove it and perhaps replace it with something else. Just about the moment I raised my saw to attack the dead wood, I noticed something. There was one branch, among the bramble of dead limbs, which seemed to have some life in it still. I thought it was worth a try.

So I carefully cut all the dead branches away, leaving the one branch that showed signs of life. Take a look at these pictures. I wish I had thought to take a picture of what the tree looked like it before I began cutting so you could see how dead it looked. The first shows how many branches were cut away. The second shows, from a larger angle, what the tree looks like today! That one small, remaining branch has produced an abundance of fruit! I believe that the peach tree is a picture of my life. He is looking for the smallest sign of spiritual life; the smallest indication that there is a spiritual awakening, then He trims and prunes so that fruit can grow. Gently and carefully He trims the wick so that the flame can burn brighter.

This same spirit of gentle guidance He wants to cultivate in us as we relate to others. What did Jesus say with regard to those who cause the “little ones” to lose their way? It would be better if they had a millstone tied about their neck (large millstones could weigh anywhere from several hundred pounds to a ton) and were tossed in Galilee. Why did He say that? He wanted to enforce clearly our duty to be gentle with each other. There are already too many stories of people driven away from the church, and from Christ, by harsh criticism or sharp words. Too many times the smoldering wick has been snuffed out. Too many times, just when the process of a new birth is ready to take place “spiritual miscarriage” has been caused by the abuse or mishandling of thoughtless saints. Never let that happen among us!

Once long ago, during the days of the infancy of our church, there was a man who had been a school teacher, then became a preacher. Later in his life the characteristics of sternness and austerity became prominent and he became difficult to work with. Ellen White one night had a dream in which she saw this school teacher in his schoolhouse giving instruction.

Here, in her own words, is what she saw in her dream.

“He was standing by one of his pupils who was writing. The teacher would direct, ‘Put your pen there. Make a heavier stroke here and a finer stroke there. There you are, commencing wrong again!’ Then, ‘Put your pen there.’

“The copy proved to be a miserable affair. The teacher took up the book and after looking at the copy threw it down impatiently.

‘That copy is an entire failure, a botch work. I have taken particular pains to tell you just what to do and after all my care this is the work you have to show. If this is the best you can do you might as well leave school at once.’ The young man [the student] was angry and with flushed face arose and left the room.

“The young man that I had often seen in my dreams seemed to be by the side of the teacher. He said to the teacher, ‘You are to a very large degree responsible for that miserable copy; the best of writers would have failed under similar circumstances. If the boy had been left to himself and written without so much dictation, he could have produced a fair copy. He could not follow your directions without being confused and spoiling the copy. That poor boy has had too little encouragement and love, and too much censuring for mistakes that are common to all.

““You make mistakes. You are an erring man. As you wish others to judge you mercifully, do the same to the erring. Give sympathy, give love, and you will find this power will soften and subdue the most wayward and the greatest good will be realized upon your own heart and life. You will feel the subduing influence of the power of that love you exercise and cultivate toward others. You are a teacher. You should represent the great Teacher in your sympathy and tender, pitying love. As you love,

you will be loved; as you pity, you will receive the same. “With what measure ye mete it shall be measured to you again.” Love is power. It will have a transforming influence, for it is divine.” Ellen G. White, by Arthur L. White, Volume 3, p. 17.

Who was the “school teacher” in her dream? It was her husband, James White, one of the faithful preachers and stalwart founders of our church! In his later years though, the aspects of sternness, severity and strictness had overshadowed the qualities of tenderness and love. How much we need the gentleness of Jesus in our relationships with people, be they believers or non-believers! The Bible counsel is “Be ye kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you.” Ephesians 4:32. We’re told of one child’s prayer, “Lord, make all the bad people good, and make all the good people kind.”

Like Christ, we should pray for and look for that one glimmer of spiritual spark; we should guard that smoldering wick so that the light isn’t extinguished by a careless word, a thoughtless criticism or a harsh comment. Paul said to the believers at Thessalonica, “For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness--God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us.” I Thessalonians 2:5-8.

A tragic but touching story has emerged near where I live. On February 13, 2009, 14-year-old young Amber Dubois went missing on her way to school in Escondido, California. So far, to the utter dismay of her family as well as our community, there are no clues as to her disappearance.

It was learned that on the day she left for school, she carried in her pocket a check which was to pay for the deposit for a lamb that she wanted to raise for the San Diego County fair to be held at Del Mar, California. When Amber disappeared, her family told Marc Reyburn, the school’s agricultural instructor and FAA adviser, that they wished to sponsor someone to carry out Amber’s wish to raise a lamb.

It happens that Nicki Horton had wanted to raise a lamb, but didn’t have enough money to do it on her own. She gladly accepted the challenge and raised a lamb in Amber’s name, daily feeding it, grooming it and walking it. She even gave it the name Amber had picked out, “Nenette,” a French word meaning “little animal.”

The day came when Nicki took her 135 pound lamb into the ring to be auctioned off at the fair. The bidding began, and the price per pound was recognized by the auctioneer. When the story behind this particular lamb was learned, the bidding rose higher and higher. When the price reached \$16.00 per pound, Mary Matav was announced the winner. But it didn't end there. Even after the gavel had fallen, members of the crowd raised their paddles to add another dollar or two. Fair officials found it difficult to keep up with the donations. In the end, the price per pound was \$54.55 per pound, or \$7,365, plus another \$8,370 directly given to the Amber Dubois Trust Fund.

At nearly \$16,000, Nnette became one of the highest-priced lambs in history! And yet, as touching as that story is, it doesn't come close to the value of another Lamb, the Lamb of God, Who came to this earth to save lost sinners. He gave His life to save us. More precious than gold or silver was the blood of Jesus spent at Calvary to provide a door of hope for you and me. Salvation of human souls is the only thing on His calendar today. He has purchased us, at a great cost, and wants to take us to His home. Patiently, tenderly He watches for our response to His love. He looks for the slightest spark of spiritual interest in our lives. What will you say to Him today?