



“The Violent Take It by Force”  
(Matthew 11:12)

Introduction: When John was in prison for his bold preaching of the Gospel, he heard about the works Jesus was doing. And even though he was the one who originally pointed to Christ and declared Him to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, yet his faith began to waver because of the difficulties of having been in prison for so long. So John sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask Him if He was the Messiah, or if there was someone else they should expect. You will remember that Jesus didn't simply tell them who He was, but pointed these messengers to the evidence which proved that He was in fact the Messiah, and after they had departed, He used that occasion to speak to the multitudes about John. The first thing He did, as we saw last week, was to reveal to the people just how great John was. He was more than simply an ordinary prophet. He was the one God sent to be the forerunner of the Messiah, the one who would prepare His way. He was the one who went before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah. He was so great and godly a man, that Jesus said of him, “Among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (v. 11). “Yet,” Jesus said, “He who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (v. 11b), that is, the one who stoops even lower than John in becoming a faithful servant of God and of His people, is even greater than he is. Perhaps the only one who ever did this was Christ Himself, for though He existed in the form of God, yet He humbled Himself by taking upon Himself our nature, and in our nature, became a servant to us by dying the cursed death on the cross to free us from our sins. It was for this reason that God highly exalted Him and gave Him the name which is above every name. Jesus said this that He might point us to the way of true greatness in the kingdom of heaven as well.

But there is something else Jesus points to to show us that John was no ordinary prophet. He says, “And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force” (v. 12). John's preaching was so effective that it stirred the people up to press earnestly forward into God's kingdom. What I would like for us to consider this morning is not only the effect of his preaching on his listeners, but also the intensity with which the people who heard him were seeking to enter the kingdom of heaven. What we need to see here is that

***There is a holy violence, a striving, a pressing forward, which we must do, if we are ever to enter into God's kingdom.***

**I. First, I want you to see the effectiveness of John's preaching.**

- A. Remember that John marks the dividing line between the Old Covenant and the New.
  - 1. The Old Covenant Law and Prophets, the Old Testament, was fully in force until John arrived. It is said to have prophesied until John, which means that it was the voice of God to the people to declare His will to them (v. 13).
  - 2. But now John has come to announce the arrival of the kingdom of God, that kingdom which is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant types and shadows, the pictures which God had given them in the prophecies, dreams, visions and sacrificial system.
  - 3. This didn't mean that the Law and the Prophets were now useless, but that their full meaning had been revealed by the coming of Christ. It is really all still in force. It is only our way of observing it that has changed. For instance, we no longer bring sacrificial animals to the Lord to atone for our sins, for the Lord Jesus Christ has once for all offered up Himself as a sacrifice for sins. The law still requires that we offer a blood sacrifice, but now we look to the sacrifice of Christ to take those sins away.
- B. But now I want you to notice the effectiveness of John's preaching as he begins to preach the fulfillment of these promises to the people.
  - 1. Jesus says that his preaching started a movement which continued up to the present time, a movement of people striving to enter into the kingdom.
    - a. The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and violent men take it by force.
    - b. Luke writes, “The Law and the Prophets *were proclaimed* until John; since then the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it” (Luke 16:16).
    - c. Things were being shaken up. People were affected by the preaching of the kingdom, so much so that Jesus says *everyone* was forcing his way into it.
    - d. Now we need to realize that when Jesus said “*everyone*,” He did not mean that absolutely everyone. After all there were many people who were still opposed to Christ. At the end of His ministry, the vast majority cried out for His death.
    - e. But what Jesus meant was that John's ministry was affecting all kinds of people. The Bible often means this when it uses the word “all” or “every.” It means all kinds, not each and every individual. The Pharisees, who were known for their religious scrupulosity, came to hear him. The Sadducees, the religious liberals of

the day who denied the existence of angels, spirits, the resurrection and the future state, came out to hear him. John himself was surprised at this. But he was not a respecter of persons. He still preached the truth to them. Matthew writes, "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'" (3:7). These men didn't come just to hear him preach, they also submitted themselves to his teaching by being baptized.

- f. John's ministry also affected tax-gatherers and Roman soldiers, besides, of course, the common people. All were feeling the effects of John's ministry, from the highest to the lowest.
2. And why were they?
    - a. Well we've already seen something of the godliness and zeal of this man. He ministered in the spirit and power of Elijah the prophet. He was the greatest man ever born of women. And yet we need to remember that these things in themselves did not make him popular or effective to those to whom he ministered. Consider that our Lord Jesus was much greater than John in this regard, and yet who was more hated by the people than He?
    - b. No. It wasn't John's gifts, his godliness or his zeal that made him effective. It was the outpouring of God's Spirit. This was a time of revival. God was pouring out His Spirit in a greater measure than He usually did. Things were happening that did not normally happen. The fact that so many, even the most wicked of men, would find John's ministry so appealing, even to the point that they would submit to his baptism, meant that this was an extraordinary visitation from God.
    - c. Now I wanted you to see this because here is a clearer and more intense example of what the Spirit will produce in us when He really takes hold of us and turns us to Christ.

## II. Let us consider secondly, then, the effect the Spirit produced through John's preaching.

- A. Jesus tells us that it made the people put forth a violent effort to get into God's kingdom, so much so that He said "the kingdom of heaven suffers violence."
1. What He meant was that the people who heard him had such a sense of the urgency of entering into the kingdom that they were willing to do whatever was necessary to get in. And so they pressed forward with such force that they were like an army trying to take a fortress. They were violent men striving to break the doors of the kingdom down if necessary, to get in.
  2. Now this raises two questions? Why were they so anxious to get into the kingdom, and why does entering the kingdom require this kind of effort?
    - a. The answer to the first question should be obvious. What are the consequences of remaining outside of God's kingdom? It is to face God's wrath for sin. It is to be swept away in His judgment. It is to suffer forever in an eternal lake of fire from which you can never escape. To remain outside is to face God not as a father, but as a judge. It is to answer personally for every sin you have ever committed against an infinitely holy God. And since it is impossible for you ever to atone for your sins, even throughout an eternity of suffering, it is to endure those sufferings forever. Why were the people who heard John, Jesus, and the apostles forcing their way into God's kingdom? It was to escape the wrath of God.
    - b. But now the second question is, Why does entering the kingdom require this kind of effort? Well first, so that we will more fully understand this, I would like to show you from other places in Scripture that it does require this effort.
      - (i) If this was the only passage in Scripture which said anything about it, we might be tempted to conclude that these were putting more effort into it than was necessary. Certainly in this day of easy believism, we would all be tempted to draw this conclusion. But this is not the case.
      - (ii) Jesus tells us plainly that this is what is necessary to enter into it. When someone in the crowd asked Him, "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" He answered, "*Strive* to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:23-24). Jesus said that you must strive to enter into the kingdom. You must strive because there will be some who will try to enter, but will not be able.
      - (iii) The author to the Hebrews writes, "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, *let us also lay aside* every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and *let us run* with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin" (Heb. 12:1-4). He says, "*Pursue* peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord" (v. 14). He warns us, "For you have need of *endurance*, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For yet in a very little while, He

who is coming will come, and will not delay. But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in Him" (10:36-38).

- (iv) And of course the apostle Paul, also drives us to this same conclusion, when he writes, "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only* one receives the prize? *Run in such a way that you may win.* And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then *do it* to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:24-27). He writes in Philippians 3:7-16, "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained *it*, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet; but one thing *I do*: forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same *standard* to which we have attained."
- (v) Entering into God's kingdom, His eternal kingdom, requires effort, all the effort you can muster. It requires a holy violence. Perhaps you haven't thought of it this way, but this is what the Bible clearly tells us.

c. Second, I want us to consider why entering into God's kingdom requires such effort. Just who are we struggling against? Who's trying to keep us out?

- (i) Is it God? Is God holding us back? Of course not! He is the one who calls us and bids us to come and receive what He has prepared from before the foundation of the world.
- (ii) If it's not God, then is there something else standing in our way? Yes. Certainly Satan and all his hosts of darkness are doing everything they can to keep us out of the kingdom. We must be aware of his devices, therefore, and be prepared to stand against them.
- (iii) But is there anything else? Yes, there is. We are standing in our own way. Our greatest enemy, that which will hinder us more than anything else is ourselves, or to be more specific, our own corruption.
  - (a) For the unbeliever, this is an absolute obstacle. If a person is dead in his sin, without the grace of God, he has no desire to get into God's kingdom at all, except for the fact that he does not want to suffer in hell forever. He will not even be alert to this danger, unless the Spirit of God opens his eyes to it. But if the Spirit does, it is enough to get him to move him towards the God he hates and away from the flames he wants to avoid. But it is not enough to give him the ability he needs to overcome his hatred and to love and embrace God from the heart. And so he will ultimately fail, unless God gives him His grace.
  - (b) But even those who have God's grace are faced with a battle. Our corruption is doing everything that it can to keep us away from God and His kingdom. It is doing everything it can to press us back toward our sins and to become entangled in them again. Therefore we must do a holy violence to ourselves, we must put to death our flesh and walk by the Spirit, if we are ever to enter God's kingdom.
- (iv) There would be no need to strive or to put forth a violent effort to enter into God's kingdom, if there was nothing hindering us. That something resides in our hearts, and it must be overcome if we are ever to enter at last into the kingdom of heaven.

B. What we all need to understand this morning is that whether we are converted or unconverted, we must strive to enter God's kingdom.

- 1. If you are outside of Christ this morning, if your heart is cold and dead to the things of the Lord, if you realize that you have not been seeking to enter God's kingdom by force and there is no true desire in you to do so, then this text calls you to awaken out of your sleep of death and begin to press into the kingdom.
  - a. John's preaching awakened those who were outside of God's kingdom to begin to press forward into it. God was working through his message to alert them to their need and to the possibility of entering it, so that they

began to strive to enter.

- b. If you are outside of God's kingdom, and the Lord has awakened you to your need this morning to enter this kingdom or face everlasting punishment, then this is what you need to do. The Lord tells you that you need to come to Christ and trust in Him for your salvation. You need to love and embrace Him as your Lord and Savior and serve and follow Him all the days of your life. If He has already granted you the grace to do so, then come to Him now, trust in Him to save you, and then take up your cross and begin the race.
  - c. If He has awakened you through His Word to see your need, but has not put this desire in your heart to trust in Him, then you must press forward toward Christ against your evil inclinations which will seek to keep you back, by praying, reading the Word and sitting under the preaching of His Word, until God in His mercy does grant you this blessing.
  - d. But if your heart is still completely unmoved by these things, then you need to pray that the Lord will open your eyes and change your heart, for if He doesn't, you will certainly die in your sins and be lost forever.
2. But what about those of you what are Christians this morning, what does this passage call you to do? It calls you to strive to enter into heaven as well.
- a. This striving which Christ speaks of here is not just for the unconverted, it is for everyone who hopes finally to enter into God's kingdom. Without this kind of striving, or holy violence or effort, you will not attain heaven.
  - b. Now what does this mean for the Christian?
    - (i) It means that we must make progress in the race. We make progress when we die more and more to sin, and live more and more to righteousness, when we put off the old man and put on the new, when we put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, when we by the Spirit put to death the sin in our members and walk by the Spirit as He leads us in His Word.
    - (ii) We must remember that learning God's will is only a means to an end. It is the means of dying to sin and growing in grace. But we don't actually advance in the Christian race at all until we *do* these things, and in doing them, *produce* the kind of fruit that the Lord saved us to produce in the first place.
    - (iii) If we are simply sitting back in our seats and not fighting this battle, not running in this race, not making progress everyday in the Christian life, this passage exhorts us to wake up and renew the race and to press toward the finish line. Jesus says to you this morning, "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:23-24).
    - (iv) We will not enter heaven unless we put forth the necessary effort to do so. We will not see God unless we pursue peace and holiness (Heb. 12:14). We will not win the prize unless we run in such a way that we will win. We are not competing against anyone else. We are fighting against our flesh, against the world and against the devil, and we must win, or be forever lost. And so if you are not engaged in this battle, if you are not moving forward in holiness, if you are not bearing the fruit Christ requires of you, be exhorted to put forth new effort. The Lord Jesus calls you to strive, to do holy violence to yourself to enter His kingdom. Lay aside then the things of the world, pick up your cross, and press forward, relying upon the grace which Christ supplies. It is the only way that you or I or anyone else will ever attain heaven. Amen.