

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

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation. This is the fourth of our five week Reformation series, giving us the opportunity to examine another very important subject that will help revive us and cause us to grow in Christ.

1. We started with Christ’s love and compassion toward us to comfort and build us up by reminding us that whatever He brings into our lives – even the bad – will be for our good and will never be so great that it ultimately breaks us and causes us to fall away – He will bring us to heaven.
2. We saw in the second week how to be content in every situation: when we realize that the Lord has not only promised to work everything together for our good, but that He even ordained whatever happens for our good, then whatever happens, we can be content knowing it will help us in some way.
3. We saw last week how to be prepared for Satan’s attacks.
 - a. Satan is real; his demons are real; and he really is doing all that he can to keep you and me from being and doing what the Lord would have us to do – at least he’s doing as much as the Lord will allow.
 - b. He has very great wisdom and has studied human nature long enough, as well as us in particular, to know what our most vulnerable areas are.
 - c. To know that he is out there, that he has this knowledge, that he has this goal, and to do nothing about it is really quite foolish.
 - d. Brooks shows us the directions from which Satan will attack, and he shows us how to fend him off successfully.

B. Preview.

1. This morning, we break ground on another important subject that is related to last week’s lecture.
 - a. We’ve seen how Satan will attack from without and how to be prepared for him.
 - b. This week, we’ll consider more specifically how to be prepared within as well – how to fight against our sins/our flesh/our corruption/Satan’s inner ally using the means of grace.
2. As we’ve done before, we’ll begin with an examination of the text in its context in the morning to prepare for a more extensive practical application this evening; what we’ll see this morning are two things:
 - a. First, that the preaching of John and Jesus (and the disciples) moved many of those who heard to press forward into the kingdom.
 - b. Second, what it means that they pressed forward into the kingdom.

II. Sermon.

A. First, the preaching of John and Jesus moved many of those who heard to press forward into God’s kingdom.

1. We see first John sending some messengers to find out who Jesus was, but Jesus using the opportunity to tell His disciples something of who John was.
 - a. After John was imprisoned, he heard about the works Jesus was doing and sent some of his disciples to ask Him whether He was the Messiah.
 - (i) John had been the first one God used to reveal Jesus: When Jesus came to be baptized, he was the one who said, “Behold the Lamb of God.”
 - (ii) But now he seemed to doubt whether Jesus was the Messiah.
 - (a) Perhaps it was because he had been so long in prison – he was only human after all.
 - (b) Or maybe it was because Jesus wasn’t doing what John expected of the Messiah – John, even as a prophet, didn’t understand everything ().
 - (c) Or perhaps John knew the truth, but he wanted the disciples he sent to know firsthand who Jesus was.
 - (iii) For whatever reason, John sent his disciples to ask Jesus – are You the Expected One – are you the Messiah – or should we be looking for someone else?
 - b. Jesus didn’t answer their question directly, but pointed instead to the evidence the Father had given Him – His works.
 - (i) The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, “the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them.”
 - (ii) Jesus could simply have said yes, but He gave them a more persuasive answer – the facts speak for themselves.
 - (iii) If you’re ever tempted to doubt the truth, just step back and look at the facts, and they will convince you again.
 - c. After they left, Jesus used their coming as an opportunity to speak to the crowds; and the message He gave them is not only very instructive, but very useful, if we are to enter God’s kingdom at last.
 - (i) First He asked, when they went out to see John, what did they go out to see? A king? One who was rich and influential? No, men like that don’t live in the wilderness, but in the city, in king’s palaces.
 - (ii) If not a king, then what? A prophet? Yes, but Jesus tells us no ordinary prophet – rather one who was sent in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way for the Messiah.
 - (iii) Jesus said of John that among all those born of women, there was no one greater.
 - (a) That is, no one except one – He who is least in the kingdom is greater than he (v. 11).
 - (b) Jesus told us that the one who humbles himself to become the least is the greatest in the kingdom ().
 - (1) John humbled himself by living in the wilderness in very meager circumstances, having very humble food and clothing that he might serve his Lord. He opened himself to the hatred and attacks of others by speaking the truth. Only one who would stoop lower than him would be greater.

- (2) The only One who has done so is Jesus Himself, who being in the form of God stooped infinitely low to become a humble servant, and more than this, that He might die the cursed death on the cross, to lift us up to God (Phil. 2:).
 - (3) Jesus isn't saying that as great as John the Baptist is, anyone who trusts in Christ and enters the kingdom is greater – that would make all of us greater and put John outside of the kingdom.
 - (4) No, He's saying that John is second only to Himself. If no one surpasses John, he might well be the one who sits at Christ's side in His kingdom. Perhaps Paul will be the other.
 - (5) If we would have a place of honor, we must also humble ourselves and become servants to others.
2. But what Jesus had to say about John's rank in the kingdom isn't quite as important as what He had to say about the effect of his preaching.
- a. It's what we would expect from someone who had been sent to prepare the way for God's Son – it woke them up and moved them to begin pushing forward with great effort into the kingdom of heaven.
 - (i) "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force" (v. 12).
 - (ii) John began the work; Jesus and His disciples continued it.
 - (a) This is implied in our passage: from the days of John . . . until now.
 - (b) John was in prison "now", but men were still pressing into the kingdom through the preaching of the Gospel.
 - (c) In a parallel passage in Luke, Jesus says, "The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the Gospel of the kingdom has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it" (Luke 16:16).
 - (d) It began with John, but was continued by Jesus and His disciples with the same effect – they preached, and not only the common people of Israel, but also the tax collectors and Roman soldiers were pressing into the kingdom (Luke 3:12-14).
 - (e) It was the preaching of the Gospel that moved those who heard to press forward.
 - b. Why was their preaching so effective?
 - (i) John's was certainly effective because of his godly zeal.
 - (a) He ministered in the spirit and power of Elijah.
 - (b) He was the greatest man ever born of women, except One.
 - (c) Jesus' was because He was the greatest man born of women.
 - (ii) But this wasn't enough to create this effect by itself.
 - (a) Most were unmoved by what Jesus said and by the end of His ministry there were many who wanted to kill Him.
 - (b) It wasn't just their character or gifts, but also the outpouring of the Spirit of God that made their ministry effective.
 - (c) This was the time of one of the greatest revivals in history.

(d) Whenever the Spirit of God is at work, He will produce this kind of effect – He will cause men to press forward into God’s kingdom.

B. Second, what does it mean that they pressed forward into the kingdom?

1. The people who heard them preach had such a sense of the importance of entering the kingdom that they were willing to do whatever was necessary to get in: They were like men trying to take a fortress or to break down the doors of a stronghold.
2. Why did they want into this kingdom?
 - a. Because if they didn’t get in, they would be lost: Not to enter this kingdom is to face God as an infinitely holy Judge, to answer for every sin you’ve ever committed, to face God’s wrath for your sins, to suffer forever in a lake of fire from which you can never escape.
 - c. Those who heard pressed forward in the hope they would escape God’s judgment.
3. Does entering the kingdom really require a great deal of effort? Is anything else needed besides simply trusting in Christ? Yes and no.
 - a. The Bible tells us justification – being declared righteous by God and being entitled to heaven – is a free gift of God’s grace, apart from works.
 - (i) “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).
 - (ii) “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace” (Rom. 11:6).
 - b. But it’s also clear from Scripture that entering into heaven will require the greatest effort we can give.
 - (i) When someone asked Jesus whether there were only a few who would be saved, He said, “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 you must agonize to enter. Many will try, but only a few will succeed.
 - (ii) The author to the Hebrews, after showing us the many examples of those with the kind of faith necessary to enter the kingdom, then exhorts us to press forward towards heaven with all our might and not let anything stop 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 had warned earlier, “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).
 - (iii) Paul tells us nothing less is required than all we have.
 - (a) “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).

(b) “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” (Phil. 3:13-15).

(v) This is what James had in mind where he wrote, “For just as the body without *the* spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (2:26).

(vi) Justification is free; it costs us nothing; God pays everything. But if we receive that free gift, it will cost us everything if we are to enter heaven.

4. Why does entering the kingdom require this kind of effort? Who or what are we fighting against? Who or what is trying to keep us out?
 - a. We have three enemies: the devil, the world, and our flesh.
 - (i) We saw last week how Satan has his devices to deceive and trap us in our most vulnerable areas.
 - (ii) We will see tonight, and especially next week, how he also uses the world to try and keep us out of God’s kingdom.
 - (iii) But he also has an ally living in each one of us – our sin nature. That sin is doing, and will do, everything it can to keep us away from God and out of His kingdom. It’s trying to destroy us; but we must destroy it first.
 - b. Getting into heaven is not as simple as receiving Christ.
 - (i) Receiving Christ is where it begins – and if we truly receive Him, He will make sure we make it to heaven.
 - (ii) But there are enemies we must fight and overcome along the way. That is where holy violence comes in.
 - (iii) This is what we’ll consider this evening in Thomas Watson’s book, *Heaven Taken by Storm*.
 - (iv) For now, let’s be exhorted to press forward into God’s kingdom, because it’s only those who put forth this holy violence that will ever enter it.
 - (v) If you haven’t begun this fight, you must do so by turning to Jesus Christ in faith and trusting in Him alone to reconcile you with God.
 - (vi) If you have trusted in Jesus, then prepare to come to His Table to receive His grace to help you in this fight, and return this evening to learn more about how to use all the means of grace to overcome your enemies – especially the one within you – that you might finally enter into God’s kingdom. Amen.