

# Taking The Kingdom By Force

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*"And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force." —Matthew 11:12*

In the midst of His explanation of the role and character of John the Baptist, Jesus Christ makes an easily misunderstood statement, raising a number of questions: "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matthew 11:12). A parallel verse in Luke's gospel is likewise prone to misinterpretation: "The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it" (Luke 16:16).

Part of the difficulty in understanding the meaning of these verses stems from the fact that the pivotal Greek words are rare, which means we cannot examine their usage in other places in the Bible to understand how they should be used here. In addition, the preconceptions and biases of the translators influence the way they render passages. But it is vital to understand what Jesus Christ is saying here, so it is worth the effort to more thoroughly examine His words.

In Matthew 11:12, the Greek word translated as "suffers violence" (*biazo*; *Strong's* #971) is used in only one other place, as we will see. The word rendered as "the violent" (*biastes*; *Strong's* #973), a closely related word, is used nowhere else in the Bible. The verse revolves around these words, but their narrow biblical usage limits our technical understanding.

In Luke 16:16 ("the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it"), the Greek word translated as "pressing" in the New King James is the same word translated as "suffers violence" in Matthew 11:12 (*biazo*). In secular usage, this word means "to use force on; to use power; to behave violently; to assault; to afflict; to oppress; or to constrain." The translation "suffers violence" in Matthew 11:12 springs easily from this meaning, but "pressing into" in Luke 16:16 obscures it. "Pressing" is a weak translation, suggesting a group of people squeezing together to get in the doors of an amusement park. We must keep in mind that it is the same verb translated as "suffers violence."

To briefly summarize these two verses, then, everyone is pressing into the Kingdom, the Kingdom suffers violence, and violent people take it by force. But this raises some questions: What sort of violence is indicated? Who are the violent people? How do they take the Kingdom by force? We will see that understanding these verses begins with a more complete understanding of the Kingdom of God.

## What It Is Not

Another word plays an important part here—the word "into" in Luke 16:16. The Greek word behind it, *eis* (*Strong's* #1519), a common preposition, is indeed frequently translated as "into." However, depending on the context, it can also be translated as "against" or "toward."

So, the Greek allows for the subdued translation of "everyone is pressing into [the kingdom]," but it could just as accurately be translated as "everyone is *behaving violently against it*." The *Douay-Rheims Bible*, which predates the King James, renders the last part of Luke 16:16 as "everyone use[s] violence towards it." In this way, it matches perfectly with Matthew 11:12: "the kingdom suffers violence, and the violent take it by force."

Before plunging into what Jesus is saying in these verses, it is helpful to consider what He cannot be saying if Scripture is to remain unbroken (John 10:35). In the various translations and commentaries of these verses, certain prejudices influence how scholars interpret them. The New King James translators chose the phrase "everyone is pressing into it," despite the Greek just barely supporting it. Other translations at least acknowledge the forcefulness inherent within the Greek words, rendering it as "everyone *strives violently to go in*" (*The Amplified Bible*; emphasis ours throughout) or "everyone *forces his way into it*" (*English Standard Version*). These all suggest the idea that the gospel message was so popular that everyone who heard it was beating down the doors of the Kingdom, as it were. They also contain the idea that everyone could enter the Kingdom at that time.

But both of those ideas are false.

It was *not* possible for everyone who heard the gospel to enter the Kingdom, no matter how vigorously one might try, and that is true even now. Only those whom God draws to the Son can enter the Kingdom (John 6:44). Matthew 16:17 shows that only by an act of the Father did Peter recognize Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Acts 13:48 says specifically that "as many as had been *appointed* to eternal life believed," indicating that those who have not yet been appointed to eternal life did not (and cannot) believe.

The idea that everyone hearing the gospel of the Kingdom is pushing to get in completely overlooks the specificity of God's calling and election (Romans 8:30) and the fact that He is working with only a few during this age, the firstfruits of His spiritual harvest. A person cannot truly seek the Kingdom or its King until God changes something in his mind (John 5:39-40), and simply hearing the words of the gospel does not necessarily accomplish that.

True Christianity is not a popular way of life today, and it was no different during the first century. After three and a half years of preaching, Jesus Himself had only about 120 disciples (Acts 1:15), which does not support the idea that "everyone" was trying to enter the Kingdom upon hearing the gospel. God was not calling everyone then (or now), and so everyone was not "pressing" to get into His Kingdom.

In addition, the way that one enters the Kingdom is not simply through a confession or profession of faith. Rather, Jesus says in John 3:5 that one must be "born of water and Spirit" to enter the Kingdom of God, a reference to the Father's cleansing and engendering of a person that makes him a new, spiritual creation within a physical body. It is something that only the Father does—no amount of human effort forces Him to open the door. However, once that regeneration has taken place, then we are "conveyed into the kingdom of the Son of His love," as it says in Colossians 1:13. We are already a part of that Kingdom! But the bottom line is that this is an operation that happens according to the Father's will, not any human's.

Therefore, "everyone is pressing into it" not only misrepresents the underlying Greek, but it is also out of sync with what the scriptures reveal concerning God's calling and election. A rendering that is

faithful to the rest of Scripture and fits with the Greek would be something like "everyone *uses violence towards it*" or "everyone is behaving *violently against it*." This may raise other questions—to be examined shortly—but it is at least not contradictory.

Similar misconceptions need to be dealt with in Matthew 11:12. A common explanation is that believers with holy zeal and earnestness are laying hold of the Kingdom with absolute determination. *Barnes' Notes* is typical: "Since 'the kingdom of heaven' or 'the gospel' has been preached, there has been a 'rush' to it. People have been 'earnest' about it; they have come 'pressing' to obtain the blessing, as if they would take it by violence."

Zeal and earnestness are absolutely needed for the sanctification process. In one context, this can even include the implication of metaphorical violence: Paul speaks of disciplining his body to bring it into subjection, so that he is not disqualified (I Corinthians 9:27). Thus energy, determination, and self-discipline are wonderful traits—but they do not match with what Jesus describes in Matthew 11:12.

One problem with this interpretation is that it puts men in the position of "taking" or "seizing" the Kingdom, another false concept. Whether we are considering our being conveyed into the Kingdom after our regeneration or inheriting it when Christ returns, in neither case is it fitting to say that we *seize it* or *take it by force*. Instead, Jesus says, "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to *give you the kingdom*" (Luke 12:32). Any reward, prize, gift, or instance of grace that comes to us from God—including the Kingdom—can be received but not seized by force.

Perhaps the clearest statement of this is Luke 18:17, where Jesus says, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it." The kind of child He means does not violently seize anything, especially not the Kingdom. The child receives rather than takes it.

### **What Did He Mean?**

Having seen what these verses cannot mean, what then did Jesus mean? As mentioned earlier, the key lies in understanding how the phrase "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven" is used. We know that the Kingdom of God has a *future* aspect, when Christ will rule over the nations and His glorified brothers and sisters will reign with Him. There is also a *present* aspect, as we have already been conveyed into the Kingdom, and now our citizenship is in heaven. We are already part of that heavenly Kingdom. It is a present reality for the firstfruits—though not in its fullness—and in the near future, it will be a worldwide reality.

Yet, there is another way to understand the Kingdom. When Jesus said that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17)—meaning nearby—He was referring to Himself. When He told the Pharisees that the Kingdom of God was among them, or in their midst (Luke 17:21), He referred to Himself. The king is always the highest representative of a kingdom, so when the king is present, the kingdom is also present.

We can see this in a couple of scriptures: "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). Here, God's Kingdom is defined as Jesus' exercise of His power. The King, in exerting His authority over unclean spirits, displays the reign or the rule of God. The *Kingdom* of God is found in the Person of Jesus Christ.

This can also be seen in Mark 9:1-2:

And He said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power." Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves; and He was transfigured before them.

Jesus tells them they will see the Kingdom of God present with power, and within a week they see Him transfigured. His being revealed to them in glory was a demonstration of the power of God's Kingdom. Even without the glory, what stood among them was still the Kingdom of God. Because He is the King, as the central figure of the Kingdom, wherever He went, the Kingdom was present. In the book of Acts, the message of the Kingdom is inextricably tied to the central Being in that Kingdom (Acts 8:12; 19:8-10; 28:23, 31). To take this a step further, where the King abides in any person or where a person is in Christ, the Kingdom is also present.

We can now apply this principle to Christ's statements. Matthew 11:12 says that from the days of John the Baptist's preaching until that of Jesus—and even to today—*Christ and those in whom He dwells* suffer violence: physical or verbal assault, affliction, oppression, constraint, and perhaps even martyrdom. This world's forceful and self-willed people "seize" that Kingdom as they would a fortified city, through opposing its citizens in some way.

Similarly, in Luke 16:16, Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone uses violence against it, signifying opposition in one form or another, to constrain or repress the King and His citizens. As John records, "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11).

In other words, the gospel message was *not* popular. It bore fruit in those who were being called (Isaiah 55:11). Others hoped that the kingdom of Judah would be restored, and they were probably content to wait and watch this Man as He went about—as curiosity-seekers rather than opponents. However, for those who had a vested interest in maintaining the political and religious status quo, the gospel was seen as a threat, and those linked with the Kingdom of Jesus Christ were the object of all manner of resistance and persecution, both before and especially after His death.

Notice, for example, Jesus' words in Matthew 23:13: "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, *nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.*" Some were then in the process of entering the Kingdom, and the resistance and oppression of the scribes and Pharisees were obstacles to that entrance. John 9:22 records that "the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue." The scribes and Pharisees, as well as those influenced by them, persecuted those God was drawing into His Kingdom. There was such animosity that the King Himself suffered the most awful violence that has ever been perpetrated: a mob of creatures wantonly crucifying their sinless Creator.

We face a similar circumstance today. Even nominal Christians suffer Muslim persecution in one part of the world, while others are blocked, ridiculed, and constrained by secularists and humanists in another. True Christianity is denounced as being heretical and cultic, and its adherents suffer violence in various ways. This violence does not have to be physical violence. It can be verbal. It can be passive. It can be persecution or opposition in any number of ways.

Wherever the spirit of Satan is present, his children make the way difficult for those who are in Christ or who are being drawn to Him. They reject the royal law of the Kingdom and ridicule God's

sovereignty. They sneer at His inspired Word. The violence that the Kingdom suffers will vary by degrees, but it is found wherever the ruler of this world has influence.

This is why Jesus says in John 16:33 that in the world, we *will* have persecution, but He also says to "be of good cheer." He does not say He will remove persecution right away, but instead, He says that He has overcome the world. He sets limits on how much violence He will allow, and what He does allow He will redeem for His own good will. The violence we suffer will never compare to the violence that He suffered for us. One day soon, though, the violence against the Kingdom will be defeated, and the violent will be given the opportunity to worship the King whom they have pierced (Zechariah 12:10).