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Matthew 11:12



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this content, Steve Gregg discusses Matthew 11:12 and the violent opposition that Jesus and his followers encountered. Gregg states that the word "violent" in this passage refers to those who are forceful and determined to enter the kingdom, even if it means facing opposition. He further explains that the New Testament represents a new covenant, with Jesus as its primary messenger, and that John the Baptist was the final voice of the Old Testament prophesying the coming of the Messiah. Overall, Gregg emphasizes the idea that those who truly seek to enter the kingdom of God must do so with determination and perseverance in the face of opposition.

Transcript

In this session, we're going to continue looking at the things that Jesus said about John the Baptist. He said, beginning in Matthew chapter 11 and verse 11, Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women, there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist. But he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

And then in verse 12, we talked about that verse last time, and then verse 12 says, And from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. He that has ears to hear, let him hear.

Now, this statement in Matthew 11 and verse 12 has confused people from time to time. Jesus said, From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. Now, what does it mean that the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God as it's also called in the parallel account in Luke, Why is it that the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and more particularly, what does it mean that the violent take it by force? Now, Jesus is describing a condition that has prevailed from the beginning of John's ministry until the time that Jesus was speaking.

He says, From the days of John the Baptist until now. And what he apparently means by that, from the days that John began to preach that the kingdom of God was at hand, and

began to introduce the king, Jesus, and his kingdom. From that time until the very time that Jesus was speaking, there had been a certain reception that the kingdom of God had received.

And it was a violent reception. From that time until now, Jesus said, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence. Now, it's not entirely difficult to make sense of that statement.

Since the kingdom of heaven is to be identified with the subjects of the king of heaven. Jesus is the king, and those who are his subjects are his kingdom. And therefore, the followers of the kingdom began to be gathered together in the days of John the Baptist.

John began to call the nation to repentance. He gathered some disciples around him, some of whom later became disciples of Jesus. John prepared the way for Jesus to be introduced, and finally pointed to him and said, This is he, this is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, this is the Messiah.

And in doing so, of course, John basically was organizing or gathering together that remnant of Israel, who really were subject to God, who really belonged and could rightly be called to be in his kingdom. And of course, these people eventually became the disciples of Jesus, and later were known as the church, the body of Christ, the disciples of Jesus. And so, the kingdom of heaven is the subjects of the king.

Now, when Jesus says the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, beginning with the days of John the Baptist, and even up until the present, he certainly must be thinking of the violent manner in which John had been arrested and imprisoned, and of course, soon after this, was put to death. That is to say, there has been a violent reaction to the announcement of the kingdom of God. John began to announce that the kingdom of God is at hand.

Jesus later, after John was imprisoned, began to preach that the kingdom of God was at hand. This preaching was received well by those who were ripe to be picked, those who were worthy citizens of the kingdom, those who were of that faithful remnant of Israel. They came to Christ, as they had earlier come to John the Baptist.

But not everybody was pleased to hear about the coming of the kingdom of God. Remember how Herod the Great, when he had first heard from the wise men that one was born who was the king of the Jews? This was one of the early announcements that the kingdom of God was about to emerge, because the king who had just been born, well, King Herod was the Roman ruler of that time, and he didn't like any rivals, and so he did not welcome the news with happiness at all. He, in fact, ordered the massacre of all infant boys under two years old in the districts of Bethlehem.

That is a violent reaction to the announcement of the kingdom of God. John the Baptist was proclaiming that in the kingdom of God, there are standards set by God himself, and

that Herod's marriage, this was now the son of that other Herod, Herod's marriage to his brother's wife, whom he had stolen from his brother and seduced, that that marriage went against the laws of the king. And therefore, he was declaring that though Herod occupied a position which was nominally that of a king, yet in the terms of the kingdom of God, God is the king, and by God's laws, Herod is condemned in his behavior.

He is a violator of the laws of God. He says, it's not lawful for you to have your neighbor's wife or your brother's wife. So that Herod reacted violently too, and he put John in prison.

Now, Jesus had not up to this point suffered much in the way of violence against himself, though there had been one time when he was preaching in Nazareth, and he preached that he was the Messiah, essentially. And the people did not like what he had to say as he continued his sermon, and they took him violently and endeavored to throw him off a precipice to his death. However, on that occasion, Jesus walked away safely and escaped their plans.

There were other times when they took up stones to throw at Jesus, but never ended up throwing any. But, of course, we know that finally, they did arrange for Jesus' crucifixion and later persecuted violently the disciples of Jesus. So what Jesus seems to be saying is, the kingdom of heaven has been announced, and its reception that it has received is not altogether a good reception.

There are violent reactions to it. And the kingdom, that is, in the person of its announcers and citizens, and even in the person of the king of the kingdom, suffers violence. That means that there are people who violently attack Christ, John the Baptist, and the other participants in the kingdom of God.

So that's apparently what is meant by the statement, From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven, or kingdom of God, suffers violence. It suffers violence at the hands of its persecutors who do not welcome its message. But what this last line is the more confusing of the two.

He said, Now, the violent take it by force? What does this mean? Now, there are two possibilities, because the wording would allow the two. There's a sense in which this statement could mean the same thing as the previous statement. When it says, the kingdom of God suffers violence, it could be a further explanation of that statement.

Violent men are taking it. That is, taking men like John the Baptist forcibly and putting them in prison. The violent take it by force, it being the kingdom as embodied in its spokesmen and its citizens.

So, there's a sense in which this last line of the verse could be simply a repetition and expansion on the previous line. The kingdom suffers violent, namely, violent people take it in the person of its citizens forcibly. They forcibly take them into captivity and do what

they want with them.

Now, that is a possibility, but the wording can lend itself to another meaning as well. When it says, the violent take it by force, it could mean that the citizens of the kingdom themselves, the ones who are seizing for their own the kingdom of God, those that are laying hold on the kingdom so that they might apprehend it and be part of it, those that are advancing its cause, those who are taking the kingdom, as it were, to the nations. Those persons who are, in other words, favorably disposed toward the kingdom of God and its proponents, those people must be violent men in a certain sense.

Now, not violent in the sense that Herod was who killed the infants of Bethlehem, or the other Herod who arrested John the Baptist, or the Jews who killed Jesus, but violent in another sense. It is conceivable that Jesus' words could mean this. The kingdom of God, the announcement of its arrival, has been met with a violent reaction on the parts of some.

And therefore, the kingdom of God has come into a hostile environment where it suffers a violent reaction. Now, if that is so, then those who wish to be part of it, those who wish to take the kingdom in a favorable sense and advance the kingdom and seize it and possess it, those who wish to be a part of it, in other words, they must have an equal violent spirit, as it were, in order to seize and hold the kingdom in the midst of a violent attack against it. It's like holding the fort against a violent attack.

You've got to have the same kind of determination as those who are attacking it. The person who has the more determination is more likely to win the conflict. Now, this second meaning would be a way of not repeating what was said earlier, but giving the reasonable result of that.

Because the kingdom of God is suffering violence at the hands of wicked men, those who are good men who favor the kingdom must be men of forcefulness, men of violence themselves, in a sense. Now, which of these two understandings of this line are more likely to be what Jesus meant? Well, the word violent in the second line, the violent, take it by force, is a word in the Greek, it's *biastis*, which means a forcer or one who crowds himself in. That's what the word violent here, the word violent is not so much an adjective, in this case it's a noun, it's the subject of a sentence.

The person who is violent, the violent one, takes the kingdom by force. Now, as I said, the word that is there translated violent in the Greek means a forcer, one who's forceful, one who crowds himself in. Now, that is, you know, the person who crowds himself in is the one who's going to take the kingdom forcibly, in the midst of a hostile environment where there are forcible foes trying to prevent the kingdom from being obtained.

Now, is this applied to the opponents of the kingdom or is it applied to those who are favorable toward the kingdom? Well, it seems to me that we could not really decide that

matter beyond question. If not for the fact that there is actually a parallel to it in Luke, which may answer that question very well for us. If you'll notice in Luke chapter 16, we have essentially the parallel statement but worded a little differently.

In Luke 16 and verse 16, Luke 16 and 16, Jesus said, the law and the prophets were until John. Now, that agrees with Matthew chapter 11 in context. And Jesus says, and since that time, apparently since the time of John, the kingdom of God has been preached and everyone is pressing into it.

Now, obviously, this is a much shorter statement in Luke than that which we have in Matthew, but it's the same context and it's the same kind of statement. It seems to be either a paraphrase or another way of saying the same thing. In other words, where Matthew's version says, the violent, take it by force, Luke's version says, everyone presses into it.

Now, pressing into the kingdom suggests that the persons are entering the kingdom. There are people who want to be a part of the kingdom. There are people who are taking sides with the kingdom.

But they can't just find an easy entrance to the kingdom because they are living in an environment that will oppose them all the way. Violently. And therefore, they must be forcible people who will press in to obtain the kingdom.

Remember when Jesus said elsewhere that those who, he said, strive to enter at the narrow gate because many will seek to enter in and will not be able to do so. This is something Jesus said in, I believe it's the 13th chapter of Luke. In Luke chapter 13, he said this in verse 24, strive to enter through the narrow gate.

For many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen up and shut the door, etc. Now, he said that if you want to enter that narrow gate, you need to strive to enter in.

It's not going to be the easiest thing in the world. There are going to be many things opposing you, not the least of which are people who are opposed to you following Jesus. And you're going to have to be more determined to do it than they are determined to stop you from doing it.

And this, apparently, is what Jesus means when he said the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, suffers violence and the violent take it by force. Because there is a determination on the part of those who oppose the kingdom of God, there must be a like determination on the part of those who wish to obtain the kingdom of God. To take it and to possess it and to be a part of it.

They must be persons who will crowd themselves in, as the word in Matthew means, or as Luke says, who press in. Pressing in suggests an effort is being made, some effort is

being exerted. And that is what Jesus seems to be saying.

John the Baptist has been arrested and he's just the beginning. From the days of John until now, even as I speak, Jesus is saying this violence against the kingdom of God is continuing. And if you want to be a part of it, you just better be prepared to bring the same determination to the task of entering the kingdom that these enemies of the kingdom have determined to keep you out.

And that is, I believe, what Jesus means. And his statement in Matthew 11, 13 then, For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. Now the statement, all the law and the prophets prophesied until John, is an interesting one.

Because it suggests that, on the one hand, it seems like the law and the prophets had a prophetic role that came to their culmination and end in the ministry of John the Baptist. Now we know that Jesus, when he came, introduced a new economy. A new covenant, as he called it.

He said, this cup, in the upper room, he said, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. The old economy of the Jewish covenant was obsolete. And Jesus introduced a new one to replace it.

But the law and the prophets, which anticipated this new covenant, which anticipated the coming of this kingdom, prophesied in the Old Testament times and all the way up until and including John. You see, John himself was an Old Testament prophet. It's true that we read of him in the book that we call the New Testament.

But the actual new covenant or New Testament was not inaugurated until Jesus was in the upper room with his disciples. John, by this time, was dead. And therefore, John lived his life, fulfilled his task, and died all within the economy of the Old Covenant.

He was an Old Covenant man. And because of that, he is added as the last capstone on the whole edifice of Old Testament prophecy. You've got Moses, you've got the prophets, and you've got John the Baptist.

And then, you know, that's it. The law and the prophets prophesied until John, meaning that they anticipated the kingdom of God, and John was the final announcer. And then, of course, after John, we have Jesus establishing the new covenant, and there are no more announcers of the Old Covenant or any that need to prophesy of the coming of the kingdom.

It has come. The announcement and the prophesying of the kingdom took place until John. It doesn't have to be prophesied anymore because it has come into reality in the person of Jesus.

And so, what's interesting, too, about this statement is that Jesus indicated that the law was prophetic. He said all the prophets and the law prophesied. Well, we understand how the prophets prophesied.

They said, Thus saith the Lord, it shall come to pass that such and such will happen. That was a prophecy. But how did the law prophesy? Well, it prophesied by foreshadowing things that were going to come into reality in the kingdom when Jesus would come.

The sacrificial system, the festivals the Jews observed, their dietary restrictions, their laws of purity, of cleanness and uncleanness, and so forth. All these rituals, in a sense, prophesied because they anticipated something that had not yet come in the days when the law was valid. That thing came in Christ, according to Colossians 1, verses 16 and 17.

It tells us that the dietary restrictions and the festivals and the ceremonies of the Jews were a shadow for the time that was then present, but the fullness has come as Jesus has come. So, the law in these ordinances and so forth would, in its very statutes, were predictive of something spiritual, something that related to the kingdom. So, Jesus said that the prophets and the law prophesied until John.

John was the capstone. John was the final voice of the old covenant, predicting, prophesying that the kingdom would come and the Messiah would come. However, since Jesus came in John's time, there would need be no other prophets anticipating or predicting his coming.

Now, it says this in verse 14, And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. Now, what does Jesus mean, John is Elijah who is to come? That last phrase, who is to come, suggests that he was anticipated. Elijah was anticipated.

And Jesus said, if you will receive it, if you're willing, he said, to receive it, John is Elijah who is to come. That is, he is the anticipated Elijah. Now, what do we mean by an anticipated Elijah? Who was anticipating Elijah? And Elijah was an Old Testament prophet who lived at least 700 years before Christ and was taken up in a whirlwind in a fiery chariot.

And we do not, I mean, why would anyone in Jesus' day be anticipating Elijah, who was, in fact, a historical character who had lived and fulfilled his role centuries earlier? Well, what Jesus is referring to is the fact that there is one place in the Old Testament, it's in Malachi chapter 4, it's actually the last prophecy in the Old Testament. Remember, Jesus said the law and the prophets were until John. Well, in another sense, they were until John.

The very last words of the Old Testament prophets were fulfilled in John. They were about him. Now, much of the Old Testament was about Jesus, but the few things in the

Old Testament, including the very last words in the Old Testament, were about John.

And, therefore, the law and the prophets were until him. But what is the prophecy? In Malachi 4, verses 5 and 6, God said, Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a curse.

In other words, God would, before sending a curse upon the land, and I believe that curse came in 70 A.D. when the land was indeed judged and came under the curse of Deuteronomy 28, but before striking the earth with the curse, he would bring, send Elijah to turn the hearts of the Jewish people around. Jesus said, If you're willing to receive it, John is that man. John is Elijah who was to come.

What Jesus is saying, of course, is that Malachi was predicting John. Well, we know that Jesus believed that Malachi predicted John because earlier in this same chapter, Matthew 11 and verse 10, in speaking of John, Jesus said, This is he of whom it was written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you. Well, that prophecy Jesus said was fulfilled in John was in Malachi 3 and verse 1. And now he's referring to Malachi 4, verses 5 and 6, which speak of Elijah.

And he says, You know, if you are willing to receive it, John is this one of whom Malachi spoke. He is the one that is anticipated by the Jewish people today. They still anticipate, by the way, in our time, the coming of Elijah as a fulfillment of Malachi's prediction.

But Jesus said, He's come. He's already been here. He's fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi by coming.

We do not look for Elijah to come again if we understand what Jesus said because Jesus said, If you're willing to receive it. Now, John is not physically Elijah, and he denied that he was, but he came in the spirit and power of Elijah. And spiritual things cannot be received by natural men.

So if you're able to receive it, if you're a spiritual man like Jesus is, John was the fulfillment of the prediction of Malachi about Elijah coming. Well, we'll have more to say about John and more about Jesus in the next session, but we've run out of time for this one. Tune in again.