

The Gospel Unashamed

"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half-truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O, God of Truth, deliver us."

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Kingdom Progress

Question: Could you please explain what Jesus meant in **Matthew 11:12**?

"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 (NKJV)**

Answer:

This is admittedly a difficult passage for many reasons. Commentators are all over the place as to what Jesus meant in this passage. Translators have rendered this passage in several different ways. Some see **Luke 16:16** as a parallel passage, others would disagree with this.

"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 (NKJV)**

The context is cited in support of widely different views. The Greek words in question are found rarely in the New Testament. Those words can be used in both positive

and negative ways. Even the form of the verb is not certain in this passage.

Despite all these difficulties, I believe that we can unravel the meaning that Jesus intended in this passage if we do it carefully. There are various understandings that can be shown to be true. However, the question is not merely whether an understanding is true; it is whether that is what Jesus meant in this passage.

At the very start of *The Hobbit*, Bilbo says "good morning" to Gandalf. Gandalf then asks Bilbo what he means by this saying, "Do you wish me a good morning, or mean that it is a good morning whether I want it or not; or that you feel good this morning; or that it is a morning to be good on?". Bilbo replies, "All of them at once". This humorously and wonderfully illustrates the inherent ambiguity that can sometimes be found in human language. The question is not what "good morning" can mean, but what Bilbo intended when he said those words to Gandalf. Similarly, the question here is not what Jesus could have meant in this verse, but what He intended to communicate by the words that He spoke.

With all the questions and various opinions surrounding this passage, it is difficult to know where to begin in understanding it properly. Hopefully, the approach that I have chosen here will be helpful to most people.

Is Luke 16:16 a parallel passage?

As you can see above, both passages speak of John the Baptist, and both passages speak of the Kingdom of God (or heaven). Both verses speak of what has been happening since John's appearance as a prophet of God. Further, both passages contain the same Greek word, *biazo*. In the Matthew passage, it is translated as "suffers violence", but in the Luke passage it is translated "pressing" in the NKJV. Right away, we see that the same Greek word is translated very differently in these two passages by the same translators. In fact, these are the only two places where this word, *biazo*, appears in the New Testament. So, there is a lot of similarity between these two verses.

However, when we look at the context for these two verses, we

see that they are very different. The context in Matthew is the greatness of John as a prophet. In Luke, Jesus is warning the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, about justifying themselves before men rather than God. When considering the radically different contexts of these verses, they cannot really be considered parallel passages despite the similarity of their language. In fact, the different context is why some, like the NET translators as well as others, render the Greek word *bazio* differently in Matthew than they do in Luke.

Various Translations and Paraphrases

Matthew 11:12 is translated in several different ways. Below is a sample of these variations:

“And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven **suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.**” (NKJV)
“From the time when John *appeared* until now, the kingdom of heaven **is being attacked; violent men are trying to capture it.**” (Simple English Bible)

“Ever since the appearance of John the Baptist until today God’s Kingdom **has been subjected to violence. Violent men, like the Zealots, try to seize control of it.**” (Paraphrase by Harold Fowler in his commentary on Matthew)

“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom **is pressing forward vigorously, and vigorous men are eagerly taking possession of it.**” (William

Hendrickson in his commentary on Matthew)

“And from the days of John the Baptist till now, the kingdom of heaven **is forcing its way in, and men of force take it.**” (BBE)

“From the days of John the Baptist until now, **the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.**” (NIV)

“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven **has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.**” (ESV)

The ESV includes a footnote that reads, **“Or has been coming violently”**. The Simple English Version has a similar footnote.

It might seem puzzling that the same verse can be translated so differently.

The NET translates this verse very similarly to the NKJV, but they do offer a helpful note about the translation of *bazio* which they rendered as “has suffered violence”. They suggest that it could also be rendered “is entered by force” because the Greek word can be understood as either passive or middle voice. They go on to say that in the middle voice it can be rendered as “has been coming violently”, “makes its way with (triumphant) force”, or even “to seek fervently”. Finally, they state that, “Resolution of the problem is not easy...”, and “...contextual differences point to a somewhat different meaning...in **Luke 16:16**.”

Robertson’s Word Pictures also admits the difficulty here and says,

“...in **Matt. 11:12** the form can be either middle or passive and either makes sense, though a different sense.”

Hendrickson also points out that this Greek verb, *bazio*, can be either passive or middle voice in the form in which it appears in this verse. He takes it in the middle voice in his translation to render it, “is pressing forward vigorously”.

What this means is that the Greek itself is somewhat ambiguous. It can certainly be translated in several different ways, each of which has a different meaning.

Various ideas about the meaning here

There are too many ideas about the meaning of this verse to list and discuss here. However, the following are some of the more common ones.

1. Jesus is talking about the violence that has been perpetrated against the Kingdom of God. He is talking about the persecution that has come to Christians throughout the history of the Church.

It is certainly true that all who live Godly lives will suffer persecution, **II Tim. 3:12**. Further, John was in prison for his faith when Jesus spoke these words. Persecution has followed the Kingdom throughout the centuries. Yet, I am not convinced that this is what Jesus meant in this verse.

2. Jesus is talking about some of the Jewish leaders in His day that

were trying to take control of God's Kingdom by force. The Zealots, for example, were looking to throw off the Roman yoke of oppression by force of arms and make themselves the leaders of God's people. A similar flavor of this view points to the rejection of the message of John and Jesus by the Pharisees and Sadducees and their efforts to maintain their control of God's Kingdom even by forceful or violent means if necessary.

There is no denying that the Zealots wanted to "take the kingdom by force". It is also true that the Pharisees and Sadducees were willing to use force to retain control over God's people. After all, they orchestrated the crucifixion of Jesus. These assertions are true, but I do not believe that is what Jesus was addressing here.

3. Jesus is talking about the forceful men and women like the harlots and publicans who, He said, would enter the Kingdom before the chief priests and elders of Israel who did not believe John, **Matt. 21:31-32.** They were eagerly seizing the kingdom from the Jewish leaders.

Certainly, the harlots and publicans were responding to the preaching of John and Jesus while the religious leaders were resisting them. The

common people recognized the hand of God while those who should have seen it were blinded by their own lust for power. Once again, we have an idea that is true, but I do not think that Jesus had this in mind.

4. Jesus is talking about how the people thronged to hear both John and Jesus. They demonstrated the zeal and fervor needed to enter and possess the Kingdom of God. As Hendrickson says, "...one cannot sleep his way into the kingdom. On the contrary, entrance into the kingdom requires earnest endeavor, untiring energy, utmost exertion."

This is certainly a thought that will preach. There is no doubt that we need to be zealous and fervent in our pursuit of righteousness and the Kingdom of God. We must strive to enter in by the straight and narrow gate. This is a very real and Biblical thought that Jesus certainly taught. But one more time, I doubt that Jesus had that in mind when He spoke these words.

All the above ideas are true and Biblical. They are all possible, even plausible, understandings of this statement. However, considering the context, I am not convinced that any of them are what Jesus meant here. Like Gandalf, we must strive to understand what is intended by the speaker of the words, not what

they could possibly, or even plausibly, mean.

Context must decide the meaning

Since the language itself is somewhat ambiguous, the context must determine what Jesus meant in this verse. I have already noted that the NET translators rendered the Greek word, *biazo* differently in Luke than in Matthew because of the different context. They are not the only ones to do this. You can say the same for the NKJV, the Simple English Bible, the ESV, and the NASB among others. If we want to know what this verse means, we need to consider the context carefully.

At the beginning of the chapter, John was in prison, and he sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask Him if He is the coming one or whether they should look for another. Jesus responded that they should go and tell John what they heard and saw.

"5 'The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. 6 And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.'" Matthew 11:5-6 (NKJV)

When these disciples of John left, Jesus asked the crowd what they went to the wilderness to see.

"7 As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?' 8 'But what did you go

out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.” Matthew 11:7-8 (NKJV)

Jesus then proceeded to speak to the crowd of the greatness of John as a prophet. Jesus said he was:

1. More than a prophet
2. The fulfillment of prophecy in preparing the way for Messiah
3. A greater prophet than any born of women
4. Elijah who was to come

Yet, Jesus said that the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than John. In fact, Jesus makes the case that John's ministry marked a turning point in the Kingdom of God. All the prophets and law prophesied until John. From his days, things had changed in the Kingdom. He was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi about the one coming to prepare the way for Messiah.

“Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,’ Says the LORD of hosts.” **Malachi 3:1 (NKJV)**

John was also the fulfillment of the prophecy in Malachi about Elijah coming.

“5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. 6 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 earth with a curse.” **Malachi 4:5-6 (NKJV)**

It is in the midst of Jesus speaking of John's ministry as a turning point, or new phase, for the Kingdom, that Jesus made the statement in verse 12 about the Kingdom of heaven that we have been trying to understand.

The main point that Jesus is making in the context of this verse is that, with John, a new time had begun. Prophecies were being fulfilled, the Kingdom that John said was at hand was indeed making progress, and men were eagerly working to enter it. The law and prophets had all pointed to this time in history when Messiah would come. John was the one who had prepared the way for Messiah; he was Elijah who came to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers. John was the greatest prophet born of women because he had prepared the way for Christ.

But the least in the Kingdom was greater than John because they could experience citizenship in the Kingdom for which John could only prepare the way. In the words of G. Campbell Morgan, “...one five minutes of experience is worth long years of anticipation”.

In short, the message of this context is the progress of the Kingdom of Heaven. The ministry of John was all about preparing the way for the King who was then speaking. This is why John was great.

“For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.” **Matthew 11:13**

The King's way had been prepared, and the King had arrived. The kingdom of heaven was pressing forward vigorously, and men were vigorously working to enter it.

This does not mean that the Kingdom, the Church, was established by John or even in John's time, nor does it mean that the Old Testament prophets and law were no longer in force. It means that Jesus is King and His Kingdom was progressing just as the prophets and law had predicted.

Jesus emphasized this by calling upon all who had ears to hear. He then rebuked those who had not responded to the preaching of John or Jesus Himself. Despite their differing styles, some refused to respond to the preaching of either. They thought they were wise in justifying their refusal of the message, but they could not have been more wrong.

God's Kingdom will move forward just as He intends. We can either strive vigorously to enter it, or we can strive against it. Either way, the Kingdom will press forward vigorously and triumphantly. Strive for triumph in the Lord and His Kingdom.