

FORCEFUL MEN

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. Matt 11:12^{NIV}

Compare: *And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. Matt 11:12^{NKJV}*

The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. Luke 16:16^{NIV}

Compare: *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 of the passage in Matthew is Jesus' commendation of John the Baptist. It is preceded by his statement, "I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (10:34). John's role was being misrepresented and misperceived as if he was weak and ineffective. Jesus was edifying his reputation by pointing out that John was a man of force, not distracted by or arrayed with the normal trappings of power.

The parallel passage in Luke is given in the middle of Jesus' comments to the Pharisees that you cannot serve two masters, God and Money. "Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other." He accuses them of justifying themselves and their behavior. They were creating a kind of wall or facade that blocked people from seeing and entering the kingdom (Mt. 23:13).

In this context of false trappings and man-made walls, Jesus likens entering the kingdom of God to the struggle of one army overcoming another. He pointed out that since the time of John the Baptist when the preparation for the kingdom began through repentance, the kingdom of God had been forcefully advancing in its battle against the armies of darkness. Those who desire to enter the kingdom of heaven must overrun their enemy, storm the walls and seize possession of the territory that rightfully belongs to them.

This is how the Matthew verse was understood by Augustine in his *Meditations*, and by William Gurnall in *The Christian in Complete Armour*. Some translations don't convey that very well, as you can see above.

The Greek word for "pressing" or "forcing" in Luke 16:16 is (NT:971) *biazo*. It is only used twice in the Bible in these two verses from Matthew and Luke. The root *bia* means force or violence, as when Paul's ship ran into the sandbar in Acts 27:41. The violence of the waves broke up the ship. The meaning of the word *biazo* varies with what's called "the voice." In the passive voice, which is what we find in Matthew, it means to be forcefully seized. In the active voice, as in Luke 16:16, it means to seize or push past.

The Greek word for "forceful men" in Matthew 11:12 is (NT:973) *biastes*, which means "a forcer" or "energetic person." The only time the word is used in Scripture is in this passage.

And finally, the phrase in Matthew, "take it by force" or "lay hold of it" is (NT:726) *harpazo*. It is used twice in succession for emphasis: "they take it, *take* it!" The word is variously translated pluck, take, or snatch. It is used in John 10:29 when Christ says "no one can snatch them out of my father's hand." Matthew Henry says of this passage that the kingdom of heaven must be stormed. It is taken by those who are strong, vigorous, and earnest (serious) about what they are doing. They must *strive* to enter. The self must be denied, the frame of mind tempered, sufferings borne, and old habits wrestled with until they are overcome. *That* secures the blessing (Gen. 32:25-29). We are to make our calling and election sure by acting out our faith (2Pet. 1:10). We *will* overcome the world (Mt. 16:18; Rom. 12:21; 1Jn. 2:13, 4:4; 5:4).

None of this indicates a passive endeavor. Christ is warning us that what we do, which is to love God, we do with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind (Dt. 6:5; Lk. 10:27). We are to be single-minded about it (Jms. 1:8, 4:8), and quick to humble ourselves before the Lord (Jm. 4:10). We are not to allow ourselves to be distracted (Lk. 10:40) or we will miss the blessing. And we are to practice our faith in love (Mt. 7:24-26; Lk. 8:21; Ph. 4:9; 1Tim. 5:4; 1Cor. 13:1-3). We are to exercise the power of God for the glory of God and the salvation of his children. We are the saints, holy and righteous, united in love and purpose. Even the Gates of Hell cannot withstand us! We need to act like we believe that.