

TAKING THE KINGDOM BY FORCE

A verse of Scripture that has always puzzled me is Matthew 11:12: "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force." Jesus is talking to the crowd about John after John's disciples ask Him if He really is the Expected One. He tells them John was not some natural phenomenon – a reed swaying in the wind – nor was he a product of human enterprise – a man in fine clothes. No, he was a prophet, but not just any prophet. He was the one who would be the forerunner of the Messiah. Then He makes this statement about the kingdom of heaven.

There is no lack of evidence that the religious leaders of the day opposed both John and Jesus and even to the present God's kingdom and its subjects are the target of opposition, if not persecution. But those who want to do violence to the kingdom are not trying to force their way into it, but to eradicate it.

My NIV Study Bible translates it, "The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it." This makes more sense. Several of Jesus' parables speak of the kingdom as growing beyond what would be expected and by its own power. And Jesus told Peter that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church. Nothing will ever stop the advance of God's kingdom.

But most of the people who were coming into the kingdom, those who were baptized by John and those who flocked to Jesus, were the disenfranchised of their society – sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, and soldiers. These hardly seem to qualify as "forceful" people. Needy, to be sure, and possibly even desperate, but not forceful.

Were the disciples "forceful men?" Jesus' calling James and John, "sons of thunder" indicates they might fall into this category. And Matthew's occupation of tax collector, a.k.a. extortionist, might qualify him, as well. And giving Simon the nickname Peter (or "Rocky") tells me that Jesus at least saw the potential for it in him. But none of the disciples initiated his relationship with Jesus. They didn't leave their fishing nets or tax booth to go after Him. He called each one of them away from his occupation.

The example that helps me most is that of Jacob who wrestled with the angel (Gen. 32). His name, meaning "Supplanter," fit him well. He knew what he wanted and went after it. But the prospect of reuniting with his brother, whom he had defrauded not once, but twice, brought him to the end of himself. The wrestling match lasted all night, and was so severe that, in order to extricate himself, the angel dislocated Jacob's hip. But even after that, Jacob would not let go until he blessed him. This shows me what it means that "violent men take it by force."

Matthew Henry's commentary sums it up well. "The kingdom of heaven was never intended to indulge the ease of triflers, but to be the rest of them that labor. Oh that we could see a greater number with a holy contention thrusting themselves into it."

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