

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS FORCEFULLY ADVANCING

Matthew 11:1-15

Key Verse: 11:12

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

This passage deals with transition in God’s work and history. There is a transition in time from the foretelling period of the Law and the Prophets to the fulfillment by the coming of the kingdom of heaven. There is a transition in the principle of God’s work from the time of law to the time of grace. There is also a transition in leadership from John the Baptist to Jesus Christ. Times of transition are difficult. Changes in principles and styles of leadership affect all supporting members. As roles are defined and redefined, it is easy for anyone to feel unappreciated or ignored. Our church is experiencing this as we reorganize from a fellowship-oriented to a campus-oriented approach. During such times anyone can struggle with feelings of alienation which give rise to doubt. In such a situation, Jesus taught that he was doing the work of God according to the Scriptures. Jesus further taught that the kingdom of heaven was forcefully advancing. When we accept this, our root problems are solved, and we are blessed. Let’s listen to Jesus.

First, John’s disciples brought the problem to Jesus (1-3).

Look at verse 1. “After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.” In contrast to both Mark and Luke, Matthew does not tell us how the disciples responded to Jesus’ instructions, or what the result of their fieldwork training was (Mk 6:14-30; Lk 9:7-10). Rather, Matthew focuses on what Jesus did next, which was to go through the towns of Galilee, teaching the word of God and preaching the good news of the kingdom. Jesus did not supervise from the rear. Jesus went out to ordinary people and taught the word of God. Matthew does not mention miracles, but that Jesus taught and preached. Many people think of gospel work in terms of sensational healing or fantastic signs. But the daily work of Jesus was to teach and preach to ordinary people.

Look at verses 2-3. “When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’” John was in prison. It was not because he had done something wrong, but because he had rebuked Herod the tetrarch for his sin of adultery (Mt 14:3-5). John’s imprisonment would end in martyrdom. Spiritually speaking, this was God’s blessing for the great prophet to seal his testimony about Christ with his blood. Politically speaking, however, John’s imprisonment and martyrdom were orchestrated by the adulterous woman, Herodias. John’s ministry was most hated by a wicked woman, like that of his predecessor Elijah. This had caused Elijah to run into the desert and ask God to take his life (1Ki 19:4). Perhaps John had a similar sentiment. Humanly speaking, John looked defeated by the power of evil. He had preached a message of God’s judgment, claiming that the Messiah would burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire (3:17). According to this message, the evil King Herod should be judged immediately. Yet, the reality was that Herod seemed to do whatever he wanted, while John was unjustly imprisoned, and Jesus was going around Galilee preaching to ordinary people. Jesus did not even send John a sympathy card that said, “I am praying for you. Get out of jail soon.”

Scholars have debated whether John was struggling with doubt, or his disciples were the ones struggling and John was trying to help them. Formidable spiritual giants such as Augustine, Luther and Calvin have said that John was helping his disciples. In either case, the underlying issue is one of doubt about Jesus’ identity and about the future of gospel ministry. Let’s consider John’s disciples. They had left their families and jobs to follow John into a lifestyle of strict self-discipline and full devotion to the mission. They might have expected that when the Messiah came they would experience God’s righteous reign on earth. Perhaps they expected compensation like devoted campaign workers in a political movement. Jesus had come and they thought he was the Messiah. Yet their situation seemed terrible: John was in prison and they were jobless. To make matters worse, Jesus’ disciples seemed to prosper, even though they rarely fasted and usually just hung around Jesus. Anyone can fall into doubt when his sacrificial life seems to end with an unfavorable result. At such times, we must go to Jesus.

Second, Jesus encourages John and his disciples (4-6).

When Jesus heard the question of John's disciples, he could have been quite surprised. John was the forerunner who had led the way. For him to ask if Jesus were really the Messiah may be like Vice President Cheney asking George W. Bush if he were really the president. However, Jesus was not upset. Jesus understood that John and his disciples were in a spiritual crisis. Jesus took great care in his response. Jesus turned their eyes upon God's work and gave them a promise.

Look at verses 4-5. "Jesus replied, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."'" Jesus did not say, "Yes, of course." Jesus told them what God was doing. Let's briefly review what Matthew has written thus far. Jesus touched a man with leprosy and he was completely healed (Mt 8:3). Jesus told a paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home." He immediately got up and walked (Mt 9:2, 6-7). Jesus took a dead girl by the hand, and she rose to life (Mt 9:25). Jesus touched the eyes of the blind and their sight was restored (Mt 9:36). Jesus drove out a demon, and a mute man spoke (Mt 9:33). Jesus was doing what only God could do. This was precisely what the Scriptures foretold of the Messiah (Isa 26:19; 29:18; 35:5-6; 61:1).

Though John's disciples saw and heard what Jesus was doing, their hearts did not warm up right away. They had to go and tell what Jesus was doing. As they did so, their hearts were moved. They felt that God was living and that God's work was going on according to his perfect schedule. They realized that God was in control of the world and history. They realized that God's king Jesus would set the world on its right foundations. Their hearts began to burn with new hope and faith. As they reported to John, they must have sung the praises of God in a disciples' chorus with four-part harmony. Surely, John was encouraged.

Jesus wants us to see that God is working according to the Scriptures. This is the best medicine to help us overcome doubt. To be quite honest, I have been troubled from time to time over the changes we are making. I don't change easily. It took one year for me to adjust to having our main worship service at 11:00 a.m. instead of 3:00 p.m. So I kept saying, "Good afternoon" when it was really morning. Recently, I felt my head was spinning with change. At such times we must see the work of Jesus. This restores our hearts. When I attended the UIC student meeting on Friday, I could see and hear how Jesus is working among young people by listening to their Bible testimonies. For example, several weeks ago, Christian prayed to learn the compassion of Christ. She experienced God's answer that changed her heart. She began to understand and pray for others deeply. Whitney accepted the word of Jesus, overcoming her mother's misunderstanding. Other UIC students also testified to Jesus' work in their lives. After hearing them I was filled with new joy. The work of God is going on in the hearts of students.

Jesus went on to give a promise to John's disciples. Look at verse 6, "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." Jesus promises to bless us when we remain faithful to his work and history. We may not feel blessed at the moment. But when we do not fall away we will surely be blessed by Jesus in the end. Some years ago as a newly appointed fellowship leader, I gave my heart to teaching the Bible to UIC students. Many began to study the Bible with me. Then the devil attacked and the flock of God scattered. At the same time, another shepherd's ministry prospered. In my self-centered view, I felt that he was blessed but I was not blessed. I thought I was washed up and useless, a "has-been" in the work of God. So I felt like falling away. Fortunately, we studied this passage and Jesus' word came into my heart, "Blessed is the man who does not fall away...." Then I could see God's work as a whole, overcoming my self-centeredness. I felt greatly blessed to be a part of God's work. Jesus blesses those who do not fall away.

Third, Jesus honors John as the greatest man born of women (7-11).

The crowd heard Jesus encourage John's disciples and sensed their spiritual weakness in a vulnerable time. The crowd was tempted to look down on them. But Jesus would not allow this. Jesus taught the crowd that John the Baptist was a great man of God, worthy of highest honor. It is remarkable to see Jesus defend his servant.

Look at verses 7-9. "As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: 'What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in king's palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.'" When John was popular the crowd had gone out to see him in mass. They had trumpeted his praises, thinking he might be the Christ. But when he was in prison, they began to dismiss him. They

vacillated with every wind of change in the political landscape. They had no sense of history or insight based on the truth. Jesus enlightened them to see how great John was in the sight of God.

John was a man of truth, not a reed swayed by the wind. Here, a reed swayed by the wind refers poetically to a weak-minded person who changes his beliefs according to public opinion. Such people fear men and do their best to save themselves. They think it is most important to be politically correct. According to a recent Gallup Poll, 96% of Americans believe in God, and among them 82% identify themselves as Christians. However, our nation is deeply divided in a substantive way over moral and spiritual issues that are clearly defined by the Bible. We can only conclude that many so-called Christians are not standing on the truth. They may be compared to chameleons. John was not like that. John lived by the truth of God. John told the truth of God to anyone and everyone at any time and in any place. John lived before God moment by moment. This makes a person truly great in the sight of God. There is an old story about the English Bishop Latimer. One day he went to the palace and preached to King Henry VIII. When he came to the part of his message that rebuked the king's sin, he paused and said, "Latimer! Latimer! Latimer! Be careful what you say, King Henry is here." Then after a pause, he said, "Latimer! Latimer! Latimer! Be careful what you say, the King of kings is here." He had the spirit of John the Baptist.

John was not dressed in fine clothes. In fact, John wore clothing made of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist. No one came to John for a fashion show. The only thing John had to offer was the word of God. John was a prophet. He shared the word of God clearly. It did not tickle people's ears, but it was the truth that would solve their sin problem and give eternal salvation. John delivered God's message as it was to the end. This is great in the sight of God.

John was truly a humble man. When Jesus came to him for baptism, John acknowledged his absolute need for Jesus to baptize him with the Holy Spirit (Mt 3:14). John was like a little child before Jesus who was ready to obey and ready to serve. Jesus said in Matthew 18:4, "Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." A humble man is truly great in the sight of God.

When Jesus acknowledged that John was a prophet, it was the highest honor before God and man in the nation Israel. Then Jesus said that John was more than a prophet. Why was it so? Look at verse 10. "This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'" John had the mission of going ahead of the Messiah to proclaim his arrival. It was the greatest mission given by God to man. To bear this mission, John had consecrated his life completely. Jesus must have been moved as he cried out, "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Jesus recognized John as the greatest man born of women. The ears of everyone who heard this must have buzzed. In this way Jesus corrected their view of John the Baptist.

Yet Jesus said that one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. Those who are in the kingdom of heaven are those who have been born of God through the work of the Holy Spirit. They have accepted Jesus' blood shed for their sins. They have been justified by faith in Jesus. They have eternal life through Jesus' resurrection from the dead. They will bear the full image of Christ when their sanctification is complete. In the amazing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, a terrible sinner can become a great child of God in his kingdom, even greater than John the Baptist. This is to the glory of Christ.

Fourth, the kingdom of heaven is forcefully advancing (12-15).

The crowd of people was like a reed swayed by the wind. The disciples of John had been struggling in a moment of weakness. This happened when they saw the situation of the world. In contrast, Jesus saw the kingdom of heaven. Jesus saw the work of God flowing steadily. Look at verse 12. "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it." The kingdom of heaven came when John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and began to work through Jesus to drive out evil spirits, heal diseases, forgive sins, and raise the dead. This was God's direct intervention in human history to reclaim his rightful rule over all things. God's kingdom was advancing with power, the power of the Holy Spirit. Nothing could stop it. It would continue to advance through Jesus' death on the cross, his resurrection from the dead, his ascension into heaven, and through the sending out of his apostles in the power of the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of heaven conquers all other kingdoms (Dan 2:44). It is irresistible.

Jesus said that forceful men lay hold of it. This does not mean that violent men enter the kingdom of heaven. If so, Muslim terrorists would all enter the kingdom of heaven. Forceful men are those who acknowledge Jesus as King and accept his death and resurrection personally. They receive the Holy Spirit, who empowers them to make decisions of faith that challenge the evil in their times. John Hus was a forceful man. Influenced by John Wycliffe, Hus began to preach the gospel of Jesus in Bohemia in 1402. He taught justification by faith in Christ alone, and that Scripture alone was the final authority. He taught the Bible in the language of common people so they could understand. A corrupted Roman Catholic church insisted that the pope was the head of the church, and the cardinals were the church, and that ordinary people could come to God only through them. When Hus would not agree with them, he was burned at the stake in 1415. As the flames rose around him, he cried out, "In 100 years God will raise up a reformer whom you cannot silence." The bishop in charge of his execution said, "Over my dead body." Just over 100 years later, in 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenburg Church. Ironically, according to Dr. R.C. Sproul, when Luther was ordained a priest, it was done on a stone pavement in a church. Under this stone pavement laid the body of the bishop who had executed John Hus. Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is forcefully advancing and forceful men lay hold of it."

The kingdom of heaven has forcefully advanced in the former Communist countries. Brother Yun's book, "The Heavenly Man," tells how the Holy Spirit has worked in China. It reads like the book of Acts. After America and Korea, China may be the next great missionary-sending country. Many Chinese Christians, seasoned by persecution, pray to evangelize Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist countries with the spirit of martyrdom. Throughout the former Soviet countries the Holy Spirit has done marvelous work to plant the gospel. In our generation, we have seen the kingdom of heaven forcefully advance to bring spiritual revival in the place of godless Communism. Surely the kingdom of heaven will forcefully advance through the Muslim world. It is a matter of time.

Look at verses 13-15. "For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear." The entire history of God's redemptive work had been focused on the very moment in which Jesus stood and addressed the crowd. John had come as the promised forerunner. The Law and the Prophets were fulfilled by Jesus. Anyone who believed could accept Jesus' invitation and enter the kingdom of heaven. This is true for us today by the great and enduring mercy of our God. Let's accept Jesus' teaching that the kingdom of heaven is forcefully advancing. Let's acknowledge Jesus as our King. May Jesus use us to advance the kingdom of heaven on each university campus.