

*“And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.” - Matthew 11:12-13*

### KEY ISSUES:

1. Is the Greek verb *biazetai* (= “suffers violence”) to be translated as a middle voice (= “forcefully acts for itself”) or a passive voice (= “is forcefully acted upon”)?
2. In line with the answer to #1, who are the *biastai* = “the violent”?
3. How does this interpretation square up with the parallel passage in Luke 16:16 - “The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces (*biazetai*) his way into it.”

### POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS:

- I. Option 1: The kingdom forcefully expands in the world by the gospel. (J. P. Lange)
  - A. Meaning
    1. The verb *biazetai* is taken as *middle voice*: “... the kingdom of heaven *extends itself forcefully*, and the forceful seize it.”
    2. The “violent” are John the Baptist; Christ; and the apostles.
    3. Luke 16:16 would say that, as a result of the preaching of the kingdom, all kinds of people are “being pressed” into it.
  - B. Objections:
    1. Sounds almost hyper-calvinist. Is preaching the gospel the same as pressing people into the kingdom? Does God force people into salvation?
    2. It is hard to see how the advancing of the kingdom by preaching can be called “seizing the kingdom”. How did John and Jesus “seize” the kingdom?
- II. Option 2: The kingdom is forcefully pressed upon by those wishing to enter it (e.g. Spurgeon; Bunyan; lots of Puritans).
  - A. Meaning
    1. The verb *biazetai* is taken as *passive voice* “... the kingdom of heaven *suffers violence* and the violent seize it.”
    2. Unlike I. above, this view sees “the violent” as referring to the converts. Those who believe the gospel forcefully take the kingdom by persevering prayer and effort.
    3. Luke 16:16 would say the same. The kingdom is preached, and all who are entering the kingdom do so by forcefully pressing into it.
  - B. Example - Charles Spurgeon, sermon #252, May 15, 1859 (Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens):

“WHEN JOHN THE BAPTIST preached in the wilderness of Judea, the throng of people who pressed around him became extremely violent to get near enough to hear his voice. Often when our Saviour preached did the like scene occur. So intense was their desire to hear the Saviour that they pressed upon him.... The crowd became so violent to approach his person, that some of the weaker ones were cast down and trodden upon. Now, our Saviour, when he witnessed all this struggling round about to get near him, said, "This is just a picture of what is done spiritually by those who will be saved.

As you press and throng about me," said Christ, "and thrust one another, with arm and elbow, to get within reach of my voice, even so must it be if ye would be saved, 'For the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.'" He warned his hearers, that unless they had this earnestness in their souls, they would never reach him savingly.... Go home, go to your closet, fall on your knees, put your trust alone in Christ; ... you cannot seek in vain. But mark, you must not think that your once seeking is enough; continue in it. If God has given you his Spirit you will continue -- you will never leave off praying until you get the answer.... Be of good cheer; use violence again and again, and thou shalt take it by force."

C. Objections

1. The verb for "take it by force" refers to a singular act, not a repetitive act.
2. It confuses the process of conviction with the moment of conversion/faith. Conviction is often a process, in which the Spirit sovereignly struggles with the person. Conversion, however, is not a process, but an act of faith and repentance.

III. Option 3: The kingdom of heaven is the target of violent men (unbelievers) who are striving to kidnap or co-opt what John the Baptist started.

A. Meaning

1. The verb *biazetai* is interpreted as a *passive voice* verb. "... the kingdom of heaven is undergoing violence and the violent seize it."
2. The violent are the unbelievers who, having heard that the kingdom is at hand, strive to take over the movement for their own advantage.
3. Luke 16:16 means that, since the kingdom has been announced by John, all kinds of people have been pushing their way into the movement started by John.

B. Arguments for

1. It seems easiest to fit with most major translations ("... suffers violence... violent take it by force.")
2. It fits best with the context.
  - a) Matthew 11 explains John the Baptist's ministry. John is the greatest of the OT prophets, because he didn't just *prophesy* about Christ; he *pointed Him out* (see verse 13). Jesus tells us that, since John began announcing the kingdom, many have by force tried to take over what John started, for their own ends. They resisted John's real message, and denounced John. Such are the Pharisees, and the respected synagogues of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum - who whimsically denounce first John, then Jesus, on opposite charges (see vss. 16-19); and who ignore the signs performed by Jesus (vss. 20-24).
  - b) Matthew 12, then, continues this theme by showing how the Pharisees had tried to take upon themselves the role of rulers of the kingdom: i.e. by making their own rules to be more important, and more binding, than God's.
  - c) Matthew 13 then gives the parables that tell the disciples how to tell real disciples of the kingdom from the false.