

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS BEEN FORCEFULLY COMING

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### Matthew 11:12

When John the Baptist began to proclaim the kingdom of heaven, a new situation happened which is described in terms of ‘violence’ in Matthew 11:12. Let’s read that intriguing verse. I will use the New King James translation.

*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.*

### An ambiguous word

What exactly does this mean? This verse is regarded by commentators as a difficult verse to interpret. ‘From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force.’ And to add to the difficulty, some Bibles make the observation that it can be translated in quite a different way. Instead of ‘The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence,’ they offer this other possible translation: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come violently,’ or ‘has been coming violently.’ For example, in the NIV, we read that *the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing*.

The difficulty in this verse stems from the ambiguity of the Greek word *biazetai* which can be either in the passive or in the middle voice. In the passive voice, we have the sentence, *The kingdom of heaven suffers violence*. The kingdom of heaven is the object of violence. It is forced, taken by men of violence. These violent people seize it like a conquered city. On the other hand, in the middle voice, which indicates that the subject performs the action for himself or itself, the idea is that it is the kingdom that forces its way. It can be compared to a strong wind or a storm that breaks through with great force. Therefore the sentence becomes, ‘The kingdom of God has been coming violently.’ The kingdom of God is doing the action of advancing forcefully.

The only other occurrence of this word in the NT is in Luke 16:16. The context is different. We read that *The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since then the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone is forcing his way (biazetai) into it*. There also we struggle with the same question. Is *biazetai* in the middle voice or in the passive voice? In this case, the context seems to support the middle voice interpretation, that people were forcing their way into the kingdom of God.

In fact, in Greek sources relevant to the NT, *biazetai* is much more common in the middle than in the active or in the passive. However if we say that the form is middle in Matthew 11:12, then the problem is that the notion of a kingdom forcing its way deals poorly with the last clause of the

sentence which mentions that men of violence are trying to force their way into the kingdom. From the point of view of the Greek language, it is not possible to determine with certainty whether the form is middle or passive.

Personally, I prefer the NIV rendering where *biazetai* is in the middle voice. The idea that ‘the kingdom of heaven suffers violence’ is not very suitable simply because from the days of John’s public appearance to the time when Jesus was speaking in Matthew 11:12, it is a very short time. It was probably a period of less than a year. And the kingdom of God was not particularly suffering any violence at the time. That is why I am more comfortable with the idea that ‘the kingdom of God had been coming violently.’

### **The kingdom came with great power**

Now, ‘coming violently’ here means ‘coming with great power.’ It was a power that was pressing forward. So what Jesus is saying is this: the kingdom of God had been coming with great power since the days of John the Baptist until now. The ‘now’ is when Jesus was preaching – not ‘now’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And people were responding to it with the same kind of vigor. In other words, the power of the kingdom seems to provoke a very strong response.

The point of this verse is that when the kingdom of God was preached by John the Baptist and by the Lord Jesus, nobody could remain indifferent. It came with a special power and nobody could ignore it. When John the Baptist was preaching, crowds of people came out to listen to his message. Remember that John didn’t do anything of a miraculous nature. And yet, people flocked out from all over to listen to his preaching. There was a peculiar power in this man. And when the Lord Jesus preached, the same thing happened with an even greater measure. People responded by coming in crowds to listen to Jesus. ‘The kingdom of God has been coming with great power.’ ‘Power’ is what we want to emphasize in this lesson.

### **Power: a matter of response**

There is something that emerges about the kingdom in this verse. And it is that the kingdom of God cannot be ignored. People cannot ignore a thing because it attracts their attention. There is something distinctive about it. You don’t pay attention to something that is lost in the crowd. You pay attention to something that is distinctive, that stands out from the rest.

When we think of John the Baptist, we think of someone who stood out in his generation. What made him so different? Is it the fact that his clothing was very special and that he had a very special diet? I don’t think that the crowd went to him just because he wore clothes made of camel’s hair, and that his food consisted of locusts and honey. What attracted people to John the Baptist? People noticed a certain power about him. A servant of God carries a certain power, the power of the Spirit of God.

Some people read the Bible in the same way that they would read a textbook. They can take in a lot of biblical information. And the more they read, the more they become knowledgeable about the word of God. They know for example when Romans was written and to whom Paul wrote this letter. They can give an outline of each chapter of the letter. This type of knowledge has of course a certain value but our knowing God should not be limited to that. We won’t go very far in our spiritual life if we are content only with information about God. Spiritual growth has to do with power. As we just said, a man of God carries the power of God. And power is not a question of knowledge. It is primarily a question of life.

Power is a question of life because it is dependent upon a person’s experience and response. You see, knowledge is not something that you have to respond to. If I tell you that Paul wrote the

letter to the Romans from the city of Corinth, you can just say, 'Ah, that's interesting.' And that's it. There is nothing for you to respond to. In other words, you simply accept that information. But it is not like this with power. To obtain power, there needs to be a response. If there is no response, there will be no power.

Where did John the Baptist get this kind of power? That power comes from the Lord of course. But this power, how do you have it? How do you receive it? God has the power but you don't have the power. How does it come to you? God has the life but you don't have the life. So how do you get the life? Again it is a question of response. Response to what? Response to the word of God. God has given us His word so that we may respond to it.

'The kingdom of God has been coming with power since the days of John the Baptist.' And people were reacting to its coming, either favorably or unfavorably. It is important to notice that even if there is power, it doesn't mean that people will respond for you. They may respond against you. Among those who listened to Jesus' teaching, some responded positively and yielded their life for God. Others rejected it. And some of them hated Jesus so much that they wanted His death. The greater the power, the more vigorous is the response, either for or against.

### **Responding by following Jesus**

What then is the word of God that one has to respond to? In the context of this passage, it is the command to follow in Jesus' path. A few verses earlier, in Matthew 10:38, Jesus said, *And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.* This is the kind of phrase that will make people either love you or hate you. Unless you take up your cross and follow Jesus, you are not worthy of Him.

In the parallel passage in Luke 14:27, the Lord Jesus says the same thing, using slightly different words. He says, 'If you do not take up your cross and follow Me, you cannot be My disciples.' You are not worthy of Him and you cannot be His disciples. In other words, He will not accept you. You cannot respond partially to this kind of command to discipleship. It is either all or nothing. You cannot partially take up the cross and partially not take up the cross. In the same way, you cannot partially follow Him and partially not follow Him. There is just no middle ground. This is the secret of power, that when you respond to Jesus, you respond wholeheartedly. I remind you again that power comes through response, response to these words of Jesus. 'Unless you take up your cross and follow Me, you cannot be My disciples.' How do you respond to that?

We have already studied this passage in Matthew 10:38. At that time, we explained why the disciple must take up his cross. But we did not touch on the other part of the command, 'Follow Me.' Becoming a disciple involves these two things, taking up the cross and following Jesus. Following Jesus is just as important as taking up the cross. We cannot be His disciples if we don't follow Him. We often hear that all we need to do to be saved is to believe, to believe with all our heart that Jesus died on the Calvary to bear our sins. The problem is that we don't necessary explain what 'believe' means. 'Believe' means that you follow Jesus.

God promised Israel that He will deliver them from slavery and that He will bring them to a new land where they will start a new life. When Israel came out of Egypt, the whole nation was following Moses. They believed that Moses was going to lead them to the promised land. They didn't wait for Moses to reach the promised land first. They knew that if they wanted to be saved, if they wanted to be free, they had to go with him. I can almost hear Moses saying to the Israelites, 'Follow me. I am going to the promised land and you are coming with me. That's the only way you are going to get there. I'm walking ahead. God walks in front of me. I follow Him, you follow me and together we will get there.' That's exactly what Jesus is telling us. 'If you want to become My disciple, you must follow Me.' How are we going to be where He is unless we follow Him?

Listen to these words of Jesus in John 12:26. This is what He says. *If anyone serves Me (that is, anyone who acknowledges Me as Lord in his life), let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also.* ‘If any man serves Me, he must follow Me.’ In other words, if we want to be where Jesus is, then we have to follow Him. There is no other way.

## **True belief**

When we say ‘believe,’ it is not just to say that we agree with the fact that Jesus went to Calvary and died on the cross for us. Faith is not just a matter of saying, ‘I believe that Jesus rose from the dead.’ Because you see, the devil believes that too. Satan believes with all his heart that Jesus died for our sins and that He rose from the dead. He believed, but is he saved? No! Why? Because he didn’t follow Jesus.

To follow Jesus means to live the kind of life He lived, to do the things He did, to say the things He said. When you follow Jesus, you become Christlike. You become like Jesus. If Satan followed Jesus, he wouldn’t be the devil anymore. So when we read in the Bible, ‘Believe and you will be saved,’ it means that you believe in Jesus to the extent that you are ready to follow Him wherever He goes.

If I say to you, ‘I’m going on a journey across this dangerous land. Do you believe I can go across?’ And you say, ‘Yes, I believe that.’ Now I say, ‘Come with me.’ Would you still believe me? The first kind of belief is to say, ‘Yes, I believe you can do it.’ That kind of belief doesn’t save anyone. The second kind of belief is this. ‘If you truly believe me, then you trust me to take you across with me. You come with me.’ In this kind of belief, you entrust your life to that person. If you really believe Jesus, you will be ready to put your whole life in His hand.

## ***I press on***

Jesus said that nobody could prove to be worthy of Him on the day of judgment except those who followed Him. When we read the rest of the Scriptures, we find the same thing everywhere. In 1Peter 2:21, Peter says that we have been called to follow in Jesus’ steps. *For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that **you should follow His steps**.* The disciples are to follow their Master’s tracks. For Christians, Jesus is the pattern that they have to copy in their lives.

We find the same teaching with the apostle John. In Revelation 14:4, we read these words. *These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are **the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes**.* *These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb.* One characteristic of those who are redeemed is that they are followers of the Lamb of God. True Christians follow their Savior wherever He leads them.

Paul does not use the verb ‘follow.’ He understood discipleship as something that is very intense and he will use intense words like ‘pursue after.’ You are pursuing something when, for example, you are hunting an animal. The animal is running away from you and you are running after it in order to get it. That is the meaning of the verb ‘pursue.’ Paul uses it in relation to righteousness. He says to Timothy, *Flee from youthful lusts, and **pursue** righteousness* (2Timothy 2:22). In Philippians 3:12, the same Greek word is translated in English by the verb ‘press on.’ Paul says, ***I press on**, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.* When Paul became Christian, he was filled with an overwhelming desire to know Jesus ever more fully. His present life can be described as a pursuit in that new direction.

In a distinctive church, you will find disciples filled with an intense desire to press on toward the goal, pressing through every difficulty to reach the prize. These disciples truly acknowledge Christ

as their Lord in their lives and they acknowledge His lordship by following Him everywhere. This kind of church stands out in the world because it has the power of God working in it. And where there is power, there is life. Having this power is a sign that you have God's life and sooner or later people will notice that you live the abundant life. To this kind of church, nobody can remain indifferent.