

Hard Sayings of Jesus - Kingdom Taken by Force

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 11. When Jesus had finished instructing his 12 disciples, he went out from there to teach and preach in their cities.

And when John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of Christ, he sent words to his disciples and said to them, Are you the one who has come, or shall we look for another?

Jesus answered them, Go and tell John what you see and hear. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up.

And the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me. As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John.

What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?

[1 : 09] Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in king's houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, more than a prophet.

This is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way for you. Truly I say to you, that among those born of women, none has risen, excuse me, there has risen no one who is greater than John the Baptist.

And yet he who is released in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence.

And the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.

He who has ears, let him hear. But to what then shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to their playmates.

[2 : 18] We played the flute for you, and you did not dance. We sang a dirge for you, and you did not mourn. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say he has a demon.

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, look at him, a glutton and a drunkard. He is a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.

Let's pray together. We come to you, Lord, this morning asking once again that you would be with us, that you would open our eyes and our hearts, that we would make connections, that we would see the truth that you have for us in these words.

We pray, Lord, that you would penetrate us with your truth, that you would lift the words off the page, that you would plant them in our hearts, that you would move us by the truth that we consider this morning from this passage.

We pray this because we want Christ to be exalted in our lives. We want Christ to be exalted in this congregation that we're a part of. We want Christ to be exalted in this community.

[3 : 34] We want the knowledge of the Lord to cover the earth like the waters cover the sea. And so we pray for the illumination of your spirit and for your work in each of our hearts, that we might be people who are in earnest pursuit of you.

We ask this for Christ's glory. Amen. As I've had occasion to speak in the last year or so, I've been looking at some of the hard sayings of Jesus Christ.

And that phrase, hard sayings, is from John chapter 6, when Jesus said, unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no part with me. And the disciples' response was, this is a hard saying. Who can understand it?

And, of course, there are many hard sayings of Christ because many of the things that he said shattered all the categories of thought that the Jewish establishment had.

And even to this day, they continue to cause us to set up and take notice and ask ourselves, what did he mean by that? What? That seems like a strange thing to say.

[4 : 41] How do we interpret it? And I want to look at one of those difficult sayings from this passage. It's verse 12. It says, From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and violent men take it by force.

And what I want to do this morning is consider this passage with you. What is this passage teaching? What does it mean? It's a hard saying. How does this truth apply to us today? How does it apply to those who have never come to Christ?

How does it apply to those of us who have come to Christ and who have believed in him? What are the implications of this? How is this designed to stimulate within us the pursuit of God and following hard after God?

So I want to look at this passage with you and ask the question, what is the meaning of this? What does it mean when it says, The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and violent men take it by force?

Now, John the Baptist, as you know, was the forerunner of Jesus Christ. He was the one that came announcing that the Messiah was coming, that Jesus was coming to bring his kingdom to earth, that the kingdom of God was coming, that kingdom that would right all wrongs.

[6 : 01] And would reconcile people to God, and would reconcile people to one another, and would bring about everlasting justice and righteousness that humanity had longed for.

And the Messiah, the righteous king, is coming. And so John's message was a message, Repent and believe. Prepare yourself for the reign of Christ. And so John came to the people preaching this message of repentance.

And his message was, God is a holy God. He's the righteous judge of all the earth. He's coming. He's powerful. Therefore, repent. And that was the message of John.

This one is coming. And the power of the king is on the move. He's bringing in his kingdom. And he is coming. We should repent and believe. And the power of the kingdom and who Jesus was, was transformed John.

It made him into this radical figure, this figure that was not conventional in any way. He was someone that was totally outside the power structures of the culture in which he lived.

[7 : 13] He wasn't a noble one. He wasn't a politician, as you might expect. And remember how Jesus spoke about him in the passage I just read.

He said, Who did you go out in the desert to see? Were you looking for someone conventional? Were you looking for someone dressed in soft clothes? Those noble men are in the king's palaces. John was this radical figure who wore skins and who ate a strange diet of locusts and wild honey. And he was totally outside of the conventions of the day.

And he was this radical, spiritually intense man who seemed very strange to the people around him. He was the example of a man for whom the kingdom of God was everything.

And the kingdom of God dominated everything about him. It dominated his thoughts and dominated his life. And the kingdom of heaven was not just something that was thought-provoking and encouraging and interesting, but it challenged everything.

[8 : 19] And John came preaching the kingdom and calling people to repentance. And he radically embraced the kingdom and its message. Now, in this passage, John is used as an example of one of those people who take the kingdom of heaven by violence, who take it by force.

And what Jesus is saying is that if you're going to lay hold of my kingdom, it's taken by force. It's taken by violence. It's taken by aggressive pursuit.

The kingdom of God challenges everything. It overturns the status quo. It overturns life. And Jesus is challenging people who want the kingdom of God, who want to enter into the kingdom, and who want to taste its power and experience the kingdom, but want to go on with life as usual.

And he says that casual interaction with the kingdom of God and its power is not possible. It's not an option. The kingdom of God overtakes life violently.

And only violent people experience its power and take hold of it. Now, we can ask ourselves the question, what does this mean? It's obviously one of these hard sayings.

[9 : 39] It's a difficult saying to understand. Because we think to ourselves, isn't Jesus all about love and kindness and graciousness toward one another and meekness and forgiving?

It's in Jesus the one that said, if someone compels you to go a mile with him, go two miles with him, how could he talk about the kingdom of heaven being laid hold of by violence?

What does violence have to do with the kingdom of heaven? And if violence is the way to advance the kingdom of heaven, or if it's advanced by violence or laid hold of by violent people, what does that mean?

What could the meaning of that possibly be? Well, we know that obviously it's not physical violence that's being spoken of here. Human beings are made in the image of God.

God protects humanity and hallows human beings so that any violence against his image bearers is a profound affront against God.

[10:39] It's a monstrous evil. It defaces his image. And it dishonors God. And that's why throughout Scripture, violence against others is forbidden.

In fact, you might remember that in Genesis chapter 6, one of the reasons why God floods the world is because of the violence of mankind. And in the Sermon on the Mount, remember how Jesus says that even hatred in your heart is being guilty of murder.

And so any assault on a human being, any demeaning or harming or killing or violence toward another human being is an act against God.

The passage cannot be talking about that kind of physical violence. We also know it's not speaking of people who just have violent personalities who give themselves to acts of violence or who are violent in the ways that they present themselves.

We might think of these as people who need the kingdom of God, but Jesus isn't speaking of people who have committed violence or give themselves to acts of violence here, like an inmate we might find on death row or like someone like John Newton who wrote Amazing Grace who had formerly been a slave trader and a violent man.

[12:02] So what is Jesus describing here? What is he talking about? When he says he's talking about people who are characterized by intensity and passion and a longing and a depth of pursuit of God that is forceful and even violent in the sense of it's vociferous and passionate.

These are people for whom Christian faith and the kingdom of heaven are not just an aspect of life, but are really their life, their life itself. Not one amongst many pursuits, but that which marks them and marks their lives in all of their pursuits, this pursuit of God and pursuit of his kingdom and a passion for his kingdom, a desire for God.

He's speaking of a spiritual intensity and a spiritual ferocity, a spiritual single-mindedness that is marked and all-consuming.

It's really what we sing about in this hymn that we will sing at the end of our service this morning.

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart, wean it from earth, through all its pulses move, stoop to my weakness, mighty as thou art, and make me love thee as I ought to love.

Hast thou not bid me love thee, God and King, one holy passion, filling all my frame. That's what's being spoken of here, that one holy passion, baptism of the heaven-descended dove, my heart and altar, and I love the flame.

[13:47] What Christ is speaking of here is that kind of passionate pursuit of God that is vociferous, even can be described as violent, giving yourselves to God, a passionate pursuit.

Remember how that in the Narnia stories, this figure, Puddleglum, is describing the warden, and he describes him as a chap of one idea. And that's the thought here, a chap of one idea.

Here's someone who is obsessed with one idea. There's one thing that is his overwhelming passion, and it's what he pursues all the time. There's this passion for God that's being described in this passage.

We're being called to that kind of passionate pursuit of God that is all-consuming, a spiritual aggressiveness that borders on obsession in pursuit of God.

I think that's what Paul's talking about in Philippians chapter 3. Do you remember how he speaks in that chapter how all the attainments of his life, the fact he was born a Jew and circumcised on the eighth day, and he considers all that to be nothing, to be refused, compared with pursuing Christ.

[14:58] And he says, I'm captivated by Christ. I'm captivated by this passionate longing for Christ, by the all-surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whom I've lost everything.

And consider it all refuse, in order that I might know him. And remember that passage, how he says, I want to know Christ. I want to know the power of his resurrection.

I want to be conformed to his sufferings. I want to be like him in his death. And he says, not as though I've already obtained this, or I'm already made perfect, but I strive, I press on, forgetting everything that is behind, past failures, past successes.

I press on to the prize for which God has called me, heavenward in Christ Jesus. This one thing I do, he says. This one thing, this goal, I want to know Christ.

It's that kind of passionate pursuit of Christ that Jesus is exhorting us to and calling us to through this passage of Scripture. For the purpose of this sermon, we could say, what Paul is saying is, I violently pursue the kingdom of heaven by force.

[16:12] I'm pressing on. I'm straining. I'm single-hearted, compulsively committed to knowing God and knowing his kingdom, and I'm in pursuit of him.

It's my passion. It's that one holy passion that fills my entire frame. And of course, you know that if you and I are to know God, if we're really to know God, if we're to walk with God, if we're to live in fellowship and communion with God, it cannot be a casual pursuit.

It cannot be something we dabble in. If we're going to know God and enter into the joys and delights of his kingdom, it's something that has to be pursued with violence, to use the words of this passage.

She's even vehemence. And of course, in our culture, we have no categories for this. We have no categories for this, certainly in the pursuit of Christian faith.

Now, when we talk about sports, well, people can get very, very overwrought with sports and decorate their faces and even their whole bodies and passionately root for whoever they're rooting for.

[17:23] But when it comes to the pursuit of Christian faith, we're afraid of such passion. We associate it with arrogance and intolerance. But if you think about this, when Jesus was on this earth, he was pursued by people who pursued him passionately.

They climbed up in trees so they could get a better look. They tore the roofs off of houses where he was preaching and teaching. Think of the blind beggar in Luke 18.

He's calling out, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. And people around him say, shut up, be quiet, stop yelling. And he yells all the more.

He doesn't care. He's not daunted by them. He's crying out, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. Think of the multitudes of people who stood in the desert all day, hanging on to every word spoken by Jesus, not even thinking about what were they going to eat later in the day.

And how were they going to get safely home? These people were people of passions and zeal.

They came early. They stayed late. They did whatever they had to do in order to see him, even just to touch the hem of his garment.

[18:37] There was a passionate pursuit of God. He was pursued with that kind of passion when he was on this earth. And I can imagine someone maybe thinking to yourself or saying to yourself, wait a minute, Ted, don't we teach at Grace Fellowship Church that you can't save yourself by your pursuit of God.

God must work. God is sovereign. He has elected some to eternal life. Eternal life is a gift. God's spirit must work in you and open your heart to the gospel.

Isn't that what we teach here? Are you teaching something different? And here's a question we could ask ourselves. How do you know that the Spirit of God is working in you?

What does it look like when the Spirit of God is operating on us? It's seen in a passion for God, a hard pursuit of God.

Spurgeon said in one of his sermons, you know the Holy Spirit is striving with you because you're striving with the Holy Spirit. There's that pursuit of God that marks someone who is in whom the Spirit of God is working.

[19:54] One of the evidences of God's work is spiritual passion. It's seeking God. It's pursuit of his truth. It's deep meditation on him and his glory and who he is and what he calls us to and the soul-satisfying delights of knowing him.

Those things are what mark the person who is in violent, passionate pursuit of God. Sometimes we would have to acknowledge to our shame that we're too busy with other things.

We're consumed by hundreds of other passions, by career and family security and financial security and family interest and we're alive to all sorts of things and we're reading things on the web all the time and collecting information and data and a whole range of other pursuits and yes, spiritual life is of some interest and it's something I pursue but I'm also about my money or family or friendships or political causes or hobbies or interests and so forth.

All these passions crowd out the pursuit of God. Now I'm not suggesting that we don't give ourselves to those ordinary callings of daily life.

Obviously a mother gives herself to the callings of being a homemaker and caring for her children and her home and her family. It's not wrong for a husband to work hard at his job and to do his job well in order to provide for his family but you know where your thoughts travel when your mind goes to neutral, when you have a moment to think.

[21 : 45] You know whether your time with the Lord is a time of passionate pursuit of God, of hunger after God and striving after God or if it's just taking off the check marks in your reading, Bible reading schedule to get through the Bible and the year or if it's dutifully fulfilling spiritual obligation.

You see, here's the point. Where there's sleepiness and passivity in the pursuit of God, where there's no hard seeking after God, where there's no one holy passion filling all your frame, there will not be spiritual growth and spiritual zeal and spiritual fruit.

And I think there's a whole category of people sometimes who grow too cynical to seek him.

There are people who have given up on the violent pursuit of joy in God. They've given up on the idea that true joy and glory is found in the presence of God and they're not in pursuit of him.

They don't really believe that it's there to be won by violent pursuit. But as true Christians, we know that there's joy to be had, that there's victory to experience, that there's peace to be known, that there are joys unspeakable and glorious in the presence of God.

[23 : 24] We know that we're made for God and that there are everlasting joys in his presence and it's worth it to say with the psalmist in Psalm 27, one thing I have desired and that's what I seek, that I might dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to behold the beauty of the Lord because in the day of trouble he will lift me up and set me on a rock.

Sometimes Christian people even fall into a cynicism to all of that. A cynic thinks that that kind of enthusiasm is for the young for the immature.

I used to think you could know God like that they say. So I think sometimes there's a kind of Christian cynicism that we can fall into that gives up on the violent pursuit of God and concludes that it's not really worth it, that it doesn't really go anywhere.

It's really unbelief. It's very easy for young people raised in a Christian church to fall into cynicism and think well, think of their parents or the older people.

Well, you think you have all the answers, you have the truth, you think your way of knowing God is the only way to know God. That kind of hostility is sometimes expressed in cynicism that refuses to believe that in his presence and in his presence alone there is fullness of joy and pleasures forever.

[25 : 07] I wrote an article for Table Talk, it will be in the March or no, in the April issue this year, next month and next month's issue. I wrote a few months ago and I wrote it on this passage and it has haunted me ever since, ever since studying and preparing and trying to write a contentful article that is expositional in 500 words.

And the passage, it's convicted me, it's convicted me about my own coldness of heart and my own spiritual dullness.

And so as I'm preaching to you this morning, I'm not just preaching to you, I'm preaching to me.

That we need to know the pursuit of God.

And we need to know God. And we need to be in passionate pursuit of Him. It needs to be what marks our lives. And what explains us as people.

And what you get on you when you bump up against us because we're like sponges that are so full of passion for God. I've thought many times since writing that article about that third verse of the hymn we sing, we have not known thee as we ought.

[26 : 43] And the words are, we have not loved thee as we ought, nor cared that we are loved by thee. Listen to these words. Thy presence we have coldly sought and feebly longed thy face to see.

That convicts me. That moves me. because I would have to say that has too often been true of me. The prayer of this song, of this hymn is, Lord, give a pure and loving heart to feel and own the love thou art.

And so this sermon this morning is a call for you to evaluate your pursuit of God. Are you one who is taking the kingdom by violence?

Who is pursuing God like a soldier would pursue victory in a battle? All out. Life on the line.

[28 : 00] Or has your love grown cold? are you marked by passion and love for God and the pursuit of God, a longing after God that marks you and changes you?

And the fact is that a Christian who pursues God passionately, as this passage describes, will ultimately regard, will often be regarded as odd, even in the church.

People will say things like, he's too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good. I've often thought I would love to meet one of those people who's too earthly minded to be of any earthly good, because my observation is that the most heavenly minded people I have ever known are of the greatest earthly good because their pursuit of God makes them people who have the word of God on their hearts and on their lips and love of God filling their hearts with passion.

So what are some of the marks of spiritual intensity, spiritual passion? Certainly a proactive pursuit of God. It'll be the passion of your life.

The overarching interest that you pursue in the midst of all the other legitimate interests of life. But even with all those other legitimate interests of life, I've got to be a husband and a father and an employee and a worker and a provider and all those other things that I must do because they're part of the callings God has given me.

[29 : 46] Yet overarching all of that is this love for God, pursuit of God, desire for God, a chasing heart after God that pursues, that overarches everything else, delighting in him.

I think it also be marked by a willingness to walk alone. There's a sense in which the pursuit of God, there's a solitariness to it. God, and I'm not denying the validity of camaraderie with other Christians or the importance of being part of a congregation of believers as we are here at Grace Fellowship and the fellowship we have with one another and the corporate nature of seeing the church of Christ as a body of believers and each of us is members of that body and parts in the body.

But you must be willing to walk alone and pursue him alone as well. Remember when in John chapter 21 Jesus told Peter that he was going to become old and people would take him where he didn't want to go and he would be put to death.

And Jesus said, that's okay, just follow me. Peter motioned toward John and he said, what about him? Remember Christ's words, he said, if I want him to remain here until I return, that's not your business, you just follow me.

There are ways in which walking with God is solitary and you do it alone. Now, I think even in terms of husband and wife relationship, you pursue God together, you love God together, you read the word and pray together each day and there's a mutuality of your love for God and pursuit of God, but there are also some levels in which each one of you must pursue God yourself.

[31 : 48] And there's got to be that willingness that says, I am going to pursue him. I'm not going to be hampered by others, I'm not going to wait on others, I'm going to pursue him because he's worthy.

It will also be marked by a deep repentance and an aggressive humility. Now, in our culture, people think if you're spiritually intense, you must be very arrogant.

To think that you know God means that you're arrogant, you have God, you have all the answers, but the kingdom of heaven comes to those who with deep humility and repentance acknowledge the fact that the kingdom of heaven is not something I obtain on my own, it's not something I obtain through my works, even through the good works of the pursuit of God, it comes through repentance and faith and casting myself on God, and desiring God, and longing for God, and being willing to say the problem with the universe is me, the problem with our family is me, the problem with the church is me, it's my pride, it's my self-righteousness, it's my compulsive self-centeredness to say that and truly mean it, to say I deserve to be lost, I deserve to be cut off, if I have any hope of God, it's a hope of mercy and grace from a God who's full of grace and compassion, there's a spiritual humility, a ferocious humility that should mark us,

A.W. Tozer said the more you get to know God, the more desperately you want to know God, so if we're seeking God, there'll be a holy violence in our life, there'll be holy violence in our prayer life, it's hard to pray, to really pray, it's a hard thing to do, to pray for a couple of hours requires you repenting and rebuking your spirit that wants to wander off somewhere else and working ferociously to maintain your thoughts and focus so that you can truly pray, like Moses who is desperate to know God and said I will not go up unless you go with me God.

There's that kind of pursuit of God that we're being called to in this passage. Seeking God means reasoning with my soul, it's talking to my own soul. That's what Jesus speaks of so often in his ministry.

[34 : 34] Remember in the Sermon on the Mount he says, you know, consider the lilies, look at the lilies, they don't toil or spin and look at how they're arrayed and how they're cared for, how the birds of the air are cared for, you are worth more than sparrows, you're worth more than lilies, you're reasoning with yourself and it takes holy violence to have these kinds of arguments with yourself and remind yourself of what is true.

Like Psalm 42 where David exhorts his soul, why are you cast down, O my soul? He speaks to his soul, he exhorts his soul, find your hope in God. Or like Psalm 62, the psalmist says in verse 5, find rest, O my soul, in God alone.

He's exhorting his soul to find rest in God. David is taking the truth and he's talking it back to himself, he's aggressively pushing truth into his soul.

It's that kind of holy pursuit of God that we're talking about. God enables us to truly pray. Maybe you're thinking, Ted, I get hung up on so many other things.

I struggle with bitterness and lack of forgiveness or people have hurt me or I don't know what to do about my worry and the way I obsessively worry about everything.

[35 : 55] Even if I don't have anything to worry about, I manufacture something to worry about. Or I have trouble mastering my desires. and passions and they get in the way of me pursuing God. The pursuit of God is active.

It's not passive. Violent men lay hold of the kingdom by force. Embrace God. Pursue God. Seek God.

Pray truth desperately into your being. Aggressively pursue him. Where do we find the grace and power to do that?

I so appreciated the way Charles in leading us this morning brought us to Christ again and again. That's why I want to take you at the end of this sermon. I was thinking of this passage in Hebrews chapter 12.

It says, therefore, since we're surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and run with endurance the race that is set before us.

[36 : 59] that's what we're being called to here, that kind of pursuit of God, casting off the weights and the sin that clings to us and all the things that distract and keep us from pursuing him and knowing him, and running the race with patience.

Running a race is not a passive activity, it's aggressive, it's intentional, but looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despised his shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

You know what he's doing there? The right hand of the throne of God. Chapter 7 tells us, verse 25, he's praying for us. So we look to Jesus.

He threw off the glory of heaven. We look to Jesus. We look to Jesus for forgiveness. We look to Jesus for justification. We look to Jesus for empowerment.

We look to Jesus for strength. We look to Jesus for hunger for God. We look to Jesus for power and enablement. Jesus threw off the glory of heaven and for joy endured the cross.

[38 : 14] He's our model. He's our power. He's the one who will enable us to seek him. the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and violent men take it by force.

May we be people who are violent and forceful in our pursuit of him. Let's pray together. We come to your Lord asking for grace to seek you, to pursue you and the ways that we're called to pursue you in this passage of scripture.

We pray that you would forgive our lethargy, that you would forgive our indolence, that you would forgive us for our distractibility, for all the things that keep us from pursuing you as we ought.

and we pray that we would, your spirit would descend upon us as we are about to sing and that you would be our one holy passion.

We pray this for Christ's great glory. Amen.