

REFORMATION

Study Notes for the Christian Layperson

by: Rev. Andrew Richard



MATTHEW 11:12-19 ESV

Author and Date:

Matthew Levi the apostle around AD 50. Today's Gospel reading immediately follows the text we hear on the Third Sunday in Advent when John the Baptist is in prison. The reading comes before Jesus begins to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and die.

¹² [Jesus said,] **“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.**

- The phrase “kingdom of heaven” is better translated “reign of heaven.” It doesn't refer to a castle with a moat and thick walls, but to the act of ruling or being king. This reign of God in Christ is not an earthly reign, but a spiritual one. Since Pentecost the Holy Spirit brings it to us through the proclamation of the Gospel (see the explanation of the Second Petition in the Small Catechism).
- The reason that the reign of heaven dates from the time of John the Baptist is that, while the Old Testament saints certainly had promises and grace from God, the Savior on Whom those promises and grace were founded had not yet come. John was the immediate forerunner of the Christ, who saw the Savior with his own eyes and pointed at Him with his finger and declared Him to be the long-awaited Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.
- “Suffered violence” – This reign of heaven (the true and pure proclamation of the Gospel) is hotly persecuted by the devil and the world. So Herod the Great tried to kill the child Jesus (Matthew 2:13-18), Herod Antipas imprisoned and later beheaded John the Baptist (Matthew 11:2, 14:1-12), the Jews killed Christ, stoned Stephen (Acts 7:54-60), and murdered many of the apostles. Herod Agrippa the First killed

James the brother of John with the sword (Acts 12:2) and imprisoned Peter (Acts 12:3).

- “The violent *take it*” – The word translated “take” is only used in one other place in Matthew's Gospel: “the evil one comes and *snatches away* what has been sown in his heart” (Matthew 13:19). The devil goes after the Word of God because he knows that if he can pervert the Word (“Did God really say?”), or kill everyone who speaks it (hence all the martyrs), or make man forget it (as the Scriptures had been lost for some time during the kings of Judah until found during the reign of Josiah [2 Kings 22]) – in short, if the devil can stop the Word, then the devil can stop the reign of God and he can reign instead. This seemed dangerously close to happening just prior to the Reformation: the devil had long been perverting the Word and making mankind forget about it and misunderstand it. The prevailing opinion was that salvation happened by our works, which completely buried Christ. Yet the Gospel of Jesus Christ is an “eternal Gospel” (Revelation 14:6), and, like Jesus, the Gospel shall never die, nor remain buried for long.

¹³ **For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John,**
¹⁴ **and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.**

- While the word “prophesy” is not limited to foretelling the future, but more broadly means speaking God's Word, here it does have the sense of “foretold.” The Prophets are such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc. The Law refers to the first five books of the Old Testament, also called the Torah, the Pentateuch, or the books of Moses. The Prophets and Law foretold both the coming of John the Baptist (Isaiah 40:3, quoted in Matthew 3:3) and the coming of Christ.

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- The mention of Elijah is a reference to Malachi 4:5, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.” John the Baptist was not a reincarnation of Elijah. The angel Gabriel clarifies this when he foretells the birth of John to John’s father Zechariah: “He will go before him *in the spirit and power of Elijah*” (Luke 1:17). John would be *like* Elijah according to his faithfulness and zeal, much as Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit (2 Kings 2:9). If John is the promised Elijah, that means that Jesus is the promised Christ.

¹⁵ **He who has ears to hear, let him hear.**

- Jesus uses this expression at the ends of some parables (e.g. Matthew 13:9, 43), and in addressing the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. Having “ears to hear” is a gift of the Holy Spirit. For example, a very literal translation of Psalm 40:6 says, “In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted; you have excavated ears for me.” An open ear is from God.

¹⁶ **But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,** ¹⁷ **‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’** ¹⁸ **For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’** ¹⁹ **The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”**

- Verses 16-19 bring to mind the sayings, “There’s no pleasing some people,” and, “Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.” No matter what John or Jesus did, they were always the opposite of what the people wanted. Jesus highlights this fact by noting something as trivial as eating habits: John fasted and the Jews hated him; Jesus feasted and the Jews hated Him. The reason for this animosity can be seen from the analogy: the people wanted John and Jesus to march to the beat of their drum. “We play a happy flute tune, you dance. We play a miserable dirge, you mourn. Point being, you are whatever we want you to be.” In short, the people didn’t like John and Jesus because John and Jesus spoke God’s Word faithfully and wouldn’t change their tune for anything.

- The question that faces every Christian individually (and every congregation and generation corporately) is: Does the Word of God claim authority over me, or do I claim authority over Him? At the time of the Reformation Martin Luther was given an ear to hear

by the Holy Spirit, recognized the authority of God’s Word over man, and sought to reform whatever teachings in the Church had perverted that Word.

- We desire God’s Word to be preached to us in its purity, because, even if that means getting cut to the heart and accused of sin, even better it means hearing the Gospel in all its sweetness as a glorious salve for the conscience. The tricks of the devil and the rebellion of the world seek to do away with the Gospel of Christ, but Christ will not be done away with. Terrified sinners who feel God’s wrath need His death and resurrection proclaimed to them, and Christ will not allow so great a gift (that cost him His life) to be withheld from those he came to save. The Gospel always prevails against the devil and the world, as it did in the first century of the Church, as it did at the time of the Reformation, as it does today in spite of everything that stands against God’s Word, as it will forever.
- Being justified by deeds may seem an odd phrase for observing the Reformation, which so strongly emphasized justification by grace through faith apart from works for the sake of Christ alone. But here the word justify doesn’t refer to salvation in the sight of God, rather to vindication in the sight of man. Even though Jesus seemed to have been overcome in his death, He was vindicated (shown to be in the right) in his resurrection. Even though the Gospel suffers much today, the Gospel is continually vindicated by the Holy Spirit bringing more to faith in Christ. Even though the Word of God is under constant attack and those who tenaciously hold to it are viewed as closed-minded bigots, nevertheless, whether tomorrow or a hundred years from now or on the Last Day, it will be clearly seen that the Word of God was right and the devil and world were wrong. This was the great comfort of the Reformers: VDMA, *Latin for Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum*, “The Word of the Lord Endures Forever” (see Isaiah 40:8, quoted in 1 Peter 1:25).



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