

Sermon Text (Matthew 11:12–15 ESV)

¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Salvation Is Free

Who doesn't love to get things for free? Let's say that someone goes to an ice cream shop that gives out free samples. Who wouldn't want to take advantage of that to try some other flavors, even if he already knows exactly what kind of ice cream he's going to get? Or let's say that there's a sign at a store that says, "Buy one; get one free!" Even if that deal is for an item that you weren't originally planning on buying, who wouldn't at least consider it? There's a reason why so many politicians promise that they can get you something for free if you vote for them. After all, who wouldn't want to take part in that amazing deal?

There are many different things that we could get for free, but out of all of those deals, surely the best deal of all is getting free salvation. Getting to go to heaven without having to do anything at all? Sign me up! And that's exactly what we receive through faith in Jesus. As the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9). Who wouldn't want to take part in that amazing deal? Unfortunately, all too many.

In our reading for today, Jesus says, "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force" (verse 12). This verse could have two meanings. We'll discuss the other one later, but the first meaning is this: The kingdom of heaven suffering violence refers to the persecution that we face for believing in Jesus as our Savior and spreading the good news that he died on the cross to save us from our sins, and

the violent taking the kingdom of heaven by force refers to those who are trying to force their way into the kingdom of heaven by their own works instead of repenting of their sins and believing in Jesus as their Savior from their sins. During Jesus' time, the main source of this violence came from the religious rulers. They believed that they had earned a place in heaven for themselves through their works, and they opposed the message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins that John the Baptist and Jesus preached. They opposed this message so much that they eventually had Jesus arrested and put to death on the cross in order to silence him. Little did they know, this was exactly what was needed to win the forgiveness of sins that John the Baptist and Jesus preached.

However, that didn't stop the false message of salvation by works from being preached. In fact, it is a false message that is still alive and well today. There are even times when we can be tempted to believe that it is true. There are times when we can look around at the empty spots in the pews and notice who is not there, which can then lead us to think about how much better we are at being Christians than them. When we put money in the offering plate or give some extra money to our various church groups and projects, we could start thinking about just how generous we are when we don't have to be. Making sure we are consistently having devotions or reading our Bibles could eventually make us start thinking, "Wow! Look at how good I am at staying in God's Word outside of church!" We might be tempted to learn everything that's in the Bible and then gloat about how much Bible knowledge we have instead of focusing on what the message of the Bible is. We may not even realize that we are doing these things, but that just goes to show how easy it is for us to make everything about us and what we have done.

However, when we start making everything about what we have done, how quickly our pride can turn into despair. After all, for every "good" thing we have done, we have done countless more bad things. We may think that we can make up for it with our good works, but we can't,

because God demands perfection. As Jesus says in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). This is something that Martin Luther realized back in the late 1400s and early 1500s. Just like the religious rulers during Jesus’ time, the medieval church taught that you had to earn your salvation by your works, that you had to take the kingdom of heaven by force, and because that is impossible, Martin Luther fell into despair. What hope could he or anyone else have when their sins are so great and immeasurable?

Then, one day, while he was studying the apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans, Martin Luther rediscovered the good news of the Gospel. “For in [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Romans 1:17). Thanks to the work that the Holy Spirit did on his heart, Martin Luther came to realize the truth: this verse was not talking about righteousness that we have to live up to but righteousness that God freely gives to us through faith in Jesus. Martin Luther no longer felt the despair of his sin, because he now understood that Jesus had taken the full burden of his sin away, and he was now at peace.

However, just like the religious rulers of Jesus’ time, the rulers of the medieval church did not want this message to be preached. They caused the kingdom of heaven to suffer violence by doing everything they could to silence Martin Luther. They tried to force him to recant, to publicly take back what he said. They excommunicated him, declared that he was no longer a member of the medieval church. Martin Luther even had to live in hiding, using a fake name, out of fear that he would be killed. However, no matter what was tried, no matter what was done, nothing could stop the good news of the Gospel from being preached.

This brings us to the other meaning that verse 12 of our reading for today could have. The kingdom of heaven suffering violence could refer to the kingdom of heaven advancing forcefully,

meaning that nothing can stop the good news of the Gospel from being preached. And the violent taking the kingdom of heaven by force could refer to the ones whom the religious rulers called “sinners,” who had repented of their sins and come to faith in Jesus, taking the kingdom of heaven from the religious rulers when they thought that it was theirs and were trying to keep it from the “sinners.”

This is also something that still happens to this day. The devil tries everything that he can to keep the kingdom of heaven from us, but no matter what he tries, the Gospel is still preached to us, and we get to hear those comforting words that only the Gospel can give: that we don’t have to do anything because Jesus already did everything for us. We all may have fallen short of perfection, and we may never be able to do enough to earn a place in heaven. But Jesus was perfect for us and earned a place in heaven for us. He freely laid down his own life for us so that the free gift of forgiveness may be given to us. Even though some may try to keep this free gift from us by telling us that we need to do something to earn it, nothing they do can keep it from us, because, thanks to everything that Jesus did for us, his free gift is already ours. What a deal!