

Matthew 11:7-15

Introduction

I want to start out this study by making just a few brief comments on verse twelve. There are four different ways to translate this verse with four different resulting meanings. This leads me to say a couple of things. First, there is no doctrine that stands or falls on any one of the different translations. Second, the Word of God is true even when we translate or interpret it wrongly. And third, since this is the Word of God, it does matter that we do our very best to translate and interpret the Word of God accurately!

However, I hope you will see that even in the supposedly “minor” places, we should care very deeply about interpreting and understanding God’s Word accurately.

So for anyone who would like to understand the different translation options and the reasons for the choice I made, you can find an explanation in the sermon notes for this message that will be posted on the Church website.

For this morning, I am simply going to *assume* the interpretation I’ve adopted.

I. Verse 7 – 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 did you go out into the wilderness to see?” Jesus is speaking to the multitudes *in Galilee*, but John baptized in the *Judean wilderness*, probably at least forty miles away. So Jesus is asking the people why they traveled so far (perhaps a three days journey) just to end up at a place in the desert. *Who* was this “John” that he should stir up so much excitement and attention? Was he “a reed shaken by the wind”? The picture here is of someone who is fickle-minded and easily swayed by the opinions of others (cf. Eph. 4:14). But no one was ever more bold and confrontational than John the Baptist. So by asking this question with such an obvious negative answer, Jesus is reminding the people of the message and preaching of John the Baptist:

- ✓ Matthew 3:2, 10-12 – Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand... even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees... He who is coming after me is mightier than I... His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

This is certainly not the message of a reed shaken by the wind!

II. Verse 8 – What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses.

In this context, a man dressed in soft clothing is a man with no backbone. But it obviously takes some backbone to live alone in the desert – which is just where John lived, far away from the pampered comforts of any king’s house! We know that John wore not soft clothing, but rather “a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist” (Mat. 3:4). And of course, this easily reminded the people of the prophet Elijah:

- ✓ 2 Kings 1:8 – “[Elijah] wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist.”

The angel of the Lord told Zechariah that John would go before the Lord “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17). Obviously, the crowds did not make the long journey to the Judean desert to see a man dressed in soft clothing! But by asking the question, Jesus keeps on poking and prodding the people to consider who John really was.

III. Verse 9a – What then did you go out to see? A prophet?

Of course, the answer to this question (and the answer that Jesus has already prepared the people to give) is “yes!” There had been no prophet in Israel for four hundred years. Everyone in Israel had read about the prophets of old. The stories of Elijah would have been legendary. And now John the Baptist arrives on the scene with a message and mannerisms very similar to the ancient prophets – and especially similar to Elijah. Only one thing could explain why crowds of people would leave the comforts of their homes in Galilee for a three day journey to the Judean desert – they went out to see a prophet (Mat. 14:5; 21:26).

IV. Verse 9b – Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

“A prophet was the spokesman of God; among the Jews there could be *no* higher pedestal on which to place a man” (Morris). So how could anyone be *more* than a prophet? Jesus explains:

V. Verse 10 – This is he of whom it is written, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.”

Though we may not know the context of this quotation, the Jews certainly did.

- ✓ Malachi 3:1-4 – Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Does this sound familiar? This was exactly the message that John the Baptist preached! He preached a coming judgment of winnowing and fire, and we can see from Malachi that this judgment was meant to accomplish a refining, and a purging, and a purifying of God’s people. The ultimate purpose of the judgment is not negative, but positive.

Notice that in Malachi it is Yahweh who says: “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before *me*.” But when Jesus quotes this verse, He applies it to Himself: “Behold, I send my messenger before *your* face, who will prepare *your* way before *you*.” Jesus is making an astonishing and literally breathtaking claim to be God Himself. In Jesus, Yahweh has now come to His temple – and **John** is the messenger who prepared His way! Now it is *easy* to see why Jesus says that John was more than a prophet! But I think Jesus’ main point is to warn the

people that if John has already come, then the refining and winnowing and purifying work of God's judgment has begun. After all, Malachi's prophecy said not that the Lord would *offer* to judge and purify the people, but that He would judge and purify His people whether they wanted it or not! And yet to many of the people, things still weren't adding up. They didn't see any refiner's fire. Where was the fuller's soap? Either Jesus is wrong, or the people have been blinded even to the reality of their own judgment.

VI. Verse 11a – Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.

“Truly, I say to you”. This is a very solemn declaration of an irrefutable fact. In his day, John was the greatest man who had ever lived – greater than Abraham, greater than Moses, greater than Samuel, greater than David, greater than Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel. And what was this greatness? It was the simple fact that no one in all of history had ever received a higher calling than John the Baptist. No one in all of history had ever been given a more honorable or privileged position. To prepare the way for the coming of Yahweh Himself – no higher privilege could possibly be conceived of. Or could there?

VII. Verse 11b – Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

The least in the kingdom of heaven are all those whose names will never be recorded in any history book, and who will never have any special titles or positions of prominence. The least in the kingdom of heaven are the average, no-name, Joe-blows, and yet in the kingdom, even your average, no-name, Joe-blow will be greater than John the Baptist. Do you realize what Jesus is saying? He who is least in the kingdom of heaven will have a higher calling, and a more honorable and privileged position even than John the Baptist, who in his day was the greatest man who had ever lived. These are staggering words! But what do they mean, and what's the point?

First of all, we have to see that John the Baptist was *not* in the kingdom. He prepared the way for the kingdom, but he himself did not enter in – otherwise we couldn't say that the one who is least in the kingdom is greater than John the Baptist. Now we know that when the kingdom is consummated, John the Baptist *will* be in the kingdom – along with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and Daniel, and all of the other Old Testament saints (Mat. 8:11; Dan. 12:13). So Jesus is not talking about the consummated kingdom after He returns to this earth (the “not yet”). That leaves the “in between”. In between John's announcement that the kingdom was at hand and the consummation of the kingdom, there is the inauguration of the kingdom and the gradual growth and spread of the kingdom (the already). *This* is the kingdom that John was announcing in fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. The kingdom was present in seed form even in the days of John because it was present in the person of the King (Mat. 12:28; Luke 17:20-21). But the official establishment of the kingdom still awaited the death and resurrection of Christ, His ascension and enthronement at the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:29-36), and His pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon His people. Isaiah foretold that the age of the kingdom would be the age of the Spirit.

- ✓ Isaiah 44:3 (cf. 32:15) – For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.

Joel prophesied that in the last days, when the kingdom finally came, God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh – meaning both the small and the great (Joel 2:28-32). And Peter saw in the Day of Pentecost the fulfillment of this prophecy (Acts 2:14-21). In the days of John, even though the authority of the King was already present, it was not yet possible for anyone to actually enter in to the kingdom. But with the accomplishment of Christ’s redemptive work, the gates of the kingdom were finally opened, and all those who had already been trusting in the Messiah were immediately ushered in (cf. Acts 28:23; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:, 23, 31). Was John saved? Yes! Was John saved by grace alone and through faith alone? Yes (Rom. 4)! But John died before he himself could enter into the promised kingdom of the Messiah and experience the blessings of the Messiah’s reign. He announced the kingdom, he preached that it was “at hand”, but he himself never entered in. This is why Jesus can say that even John—the greatest of all human beings from the beginning of the world to his own day—even John did not have as high a calling or as privileged a position as even the least person in the kingdom of heaven.

VIII. Verse 12 – [NIV; cf. NLT] From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, [ESV] and the violent take it by force [NLT – violent people are attacking it].*

If this translation is correct, then Jesus’ meaning is that the kingdom is coming in the midst of conflict. The *reason* the kingdom must advance forcefully is *because* it is being resisted and opposed! And yet the very fact that the kingdom is advancing while violent men oppose it is evidence of God’s judgment! Think about it. Among those who are *resisting* the advance of the kingdom are many of the very people who assumed they would be *first* into the kingdom! So already the words of Jesus are beginning to be fulfilled:

- ✓ Matthew 8:11-12 – I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Many of those who thought they would be first into the kingdom are about to find themselves on the outside. With the coming of the Messiah’s kingdom, the boundaries of God’s people are being redefined. The unbelieving Jews who used to partake of many of the privileges of the people of God have now been *excluded* from the kingdom. The refining, and winnowing, and purifying of God’s people has begun. *Only* the true Israel of the Old Testament may enter into the kingdom, along with all those Gentiles who share in the faith of their father Abraham (Rom. 4). Now maybe we can better understand the passage from John chapter three:

- ✓ John 3:18-19 – Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is *condemned already*, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And *this is the judgment*: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

* See pages 7 & 8 for the notes on the translation of this verse.

Many of those who thought they would be first into the kingdom will actually be excluded from that kingdom because of their unbelief. And so as those who are outside of the kingdom, they stand already judged and already condemned. As John said:

- ✓ Matthew 3:2, 9-12 – Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand... Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees... He who is coming after me is mightier than I... His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

The coming of the kingdom spells judgment for many, but it ultimately results in the purifying of God’s people – so that they might truly be “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a *holy* nation, [and] a people for [God’s] own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Ex. 19:5-6).

IX. Verse 13 – For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ...

When Jesus speaks of “all the Prophets and the Law, He is speaking of the *entire* Old Testament from Genesis to Malachi. And so Jesus is saying that the entire Old Testament was pointing forward to these days – the days of the Messiah, the forceful advance of His kingdom in the midst of opposition, and the final triumph of the kingdom when Christ comes again. With the ministry of John the Baptist, the age of prophecy and promise comes to an end, and the kingdom age of *fulfillment* is beginning.

X. Verse 14 – ...and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.

Once again, if we don’t know the context of this quotation, the Jews certainly did.

- ✓ Malachi 4:5-6 [NIV] – See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

The ultimate judgment and condemnation is being excluded from the Kingdom, but one of the signs of this judgment will be the destruction of Jerusalem – if Israel refuses to repent. John the Baptist was Elijah who is to come, which means that Jesus was bringing in the great and terrible day of the Lord. On the one hand, the blessings of that day are great (the least in the kingdom are greater than John the Baptist), but on the other hand, the judgments of that day are terrible (many will be cut off and excluded from the kingdom).

XI. Verse 15 – He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

When Jesus said in verse fourteen, “If you are willing to accept it, [John the Baptist] is Elijah who is to come”, He was not saying that John *might* be Elijah, but it all depended on if the people were willing to accept this! So why does Jesus say: “If you are willing to accept it”? Jesus said this for the same reason that He also says: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Who did

the crowds travel all the way to the Judean desert to see? A reed shaken by the wind? Of course not! What then did they go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Obviously not! What then did they go out to see? A prophet? Yes. But these same crowds who went to such great lengths to travel into the wilderness are still in danger of missing the entire point about John the Baptist. They still hold him to be a prophet (Mat. 14:5; 21:26), but many of them are not willing to accept the fact that he is Elijah who is to come. They hold that Jesus is a great teacher sent from God, but they are not willing to accept the fact that as the Messiah, He is bringing in the great and terrible day of the Lord. They have been blessed with much revelation, but their hearts and minds have been blinded to the presence of the kingdom, and so they're in danger of being excluded from the very kingdom that they were waiting for.

He who has ears to hear, *let him hear* – let him apply himself diligently to my teaching! John Calvin says that “it is customary with Christ to introduce this sentence whenever he treats of subjects which are highly important, and which deserve no ordinary attention... Christ here exhorts [those] whose ears have been pierced, to consider attentively this remarkable secret of God, and not to remain deaf with unbelievers”. Let us not just listen Sunday after Sunday to the stories of John the Baptist or the stories about Jesus. Instead, our eyes should always be opened *more and more* to the powerful *presence* and *reality* of the kingdom. We should tremble at the terrible judgment that is even now at work in all those who are being excluded from the Kingdom because of their wicked deeds and sinful unbelief. And we should be filled with awe at the fact that as citizens of the kingdom, our calling is higher, and our position more honorable and privileged than even John the Baptist, who in his day was the greatest person who had ever lived.

- ✓ Ephesians 4:1-3 – Walk in a manner *worthy* of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
- ✓ Romans 14:17 – For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Listen again to the prophecy of Malachi:

- ✓ Malachi 3:1-4 – The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple... he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

It is only by the grace of God that today we can come before the Lord in righteousness and that today our worship can be pleasing to the Lord. Because of the refining and winnowing and purifying work of the Messiah's judgment and the coming of His kingdom, we can truly say that we are a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that we may proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. If we are willing to accept it, the great and terrible day of the Lord has arrived. The kingdom is forcefully advancing while violent men try to take it by force. Even the least in the kingdom of heaven are greater than all who came before. ***He who has ears to hear, let him hear.***

Notes on the translation of verse 12

There are four different ways to translate this verse with four different resulting meanings. This leads me to say a couple of things. First, there is no doctrine that stands or falls on any one of the different translations. Second, the Word of God is true even when we translate or interpret it wrongly. And third, since this is the Word of God, it does matter that we do our very best to translate and interpret the Word of God accurately! I trust that we will be convicted that even in the supposedly “minor” places, we should care very deeply about interpreting and understanding God’s Word accurately.

The two main options for the first part of verse twelve are as follows: “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven *suffers violence*” (*passive* of “biadzetai”), OR, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom *comes forcefully*” (*middle* of “biadzetai”). The only other time this word appears in the New Testament is Luke 16:16, and here the word is clearly in the middle (“The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone *forces his way into it*” [versus “everyone is suffering its violence”]. Bauer’s lexicon states that outside of the Bible, this word appears “nearly always as a middle deponent”. BAGD also gives this sense for the verb as an *intransitive middle deponent*: “makes its way with triumphant force.” So the NIV translates (cf. NLT): “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven *has been forcefully advancing*.” This would certainly be a true statement in light of a verse like Matthew 12:28 (“But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you”) or Matthew 16:18 (“I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”). In the immediately preceding context (Matt. 11:1-6), Jesus has reminded John of the powerful and triumphant advance of the kingdom in the mighty deeds of the Messiah. Carson comments: “The kingdom has come with holy power and magnificent energy that has been pushing back the frontiers of darkness. This is especially manifest in Jesus’ miracles and ties in with Jesus’ response to the Baptist (Mt 11:5).” So for the first clause of verse twelve, I am inclined to follow the NIV and the NLT (along with Carson and Hendriksen).

The two main options for the second part of verse twelve are as follows: “‘forceful people seize it [the kingdom]’ (thus referring to rigorous discipleship [cf. Luke 16:16]), or negatively, ‘violent persons plunder it [the kingdom]’” (Hagner). The NIV adopts the first (positive) reading: “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, *and forceful men lay hold of it*.” However, the Greek word for “forceful people” (biastai) is elsewhere *always* used in a negative sense, and the Greek word for “seize” (harpadzousin) is almost always used in a negative sense (only one known exception?). Thus, when both words are placed together in the same sentence it is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid the negative implications (cf. almost all major translations and most commentators).

To sum up, here are the four major options for translating Matthew 11:12:

Negative-Negative (most translations and commentators) – The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force.

Positive-Positive (NIV; Henriksen; cf. Luke 16:16) – The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing and forceful men lay hold of it.

Negative-Positive (a few commentators) – The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and forceful men lay hold of it.

Positive-Negative (NLT; Carson) – The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing and the violent take it by force [NLT – violent people are attacking it].

Some commentators argue that “biadzetai” in the first clause and “biastai” in the second clause both come from the same root and conclude that this supports taking *both* of them *together* in either a negative or a positive sense (options 1 & 2). However, I think it equally plausible to question the potential redundancy of the negative-negative translation. I’m not sure I see the positive rhetorical effect of saying, “The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and [then again] the violent take it by force.” However, to say that the kingdom of heaven is forcefully advancing while violent men are attacking it shows very clearly that the kingdom is coming in the midst of conflict. The *reason* the kingdom must advance forcefully is *because* it is being resisted and opposed by its enemies! In support of the positive-negative translation above, I cited only the NLT and Carson. Hagner (WBC, 1994) and Blomberg (NAC, 1992) both take the negative-negative view in their commentaries. However, it is perhaps interesting to note that Hagner and Blomberg were two of the three men who served on the NLT (1996) translation team for the Gospel of Matthew. Does this indicate that Hagner and/or Blomberg have since converted to the positive-negative view reflected in the NLT?

Teaching our Children

NOTE: This text of Scripture is a little more complex than some, and this complexity is reflected in some of the following questions. However, I still believe that these truths are essential for our children to grasp and understand. While our children may be able to provide the answers to some of the questions below, there are some questions where they will probably draw a complete blank. It is never the point of these questions to be so simple that the answers should all be remembered and able to be quoted from the message. The real point of the “Teaching Children” section is to facilitate a teaching opportunity for the parents (which will also include discussion and dialogue).

Q. How could Jesus say that John was even *more* than a prophet? What was so special about John?

A. John was the messenger who prepared the way for the coming of the Lord!

Q. Why did Jesus want the people to know that John was the messenger who prepared the way for the coming of the Lord?

A. ~ Jesus wanted the people to know that *He* was the *Lord* and that the time for the refining, and winnowing, and purifying of God’s people had come.

~ Read Malachi 3:1-4 (p. 2) and then compare with John’s preaching in Matthew 3:2, 10-12 (p. 1)

Q. In Jesus’ day, John was the greatest person who had ever lived. Who is even greater than John the Baptist (besides Jesus)?

A. ~ Even the one who is *least* in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist (he/she has a higher calling and a more privileged position).

~ Discuss the fact that though John announced that the kingdom was at hand, he did not live long enough (until the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit) to enter into the kingdom himself.

~ How privileged we are compared to John – who in his day was the most privileged man who had ever lived!

Q. Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven was forcefully advancing in spite of all those who resisted and opposed it. How does this show us that the people of God are being refined, and winnowed, and purified?

A. Before the kingdom came, there were many wicked people who were outwardly part of the people of God (Israel) and who enjoyed many of the blessings of God’s people. But once the kingdom came, all of these people were excluded and cut off from the people of God. Many of those who were once on the inside are now on the outside.

Q. If John is the “Elijah” that Malachi said was coming, then what comes after John?

A. The great and terrible day of the Lord. See Malachi 4:5-6 (p. 5)

Q. What is so great and terrible about the day of the Lord?

A. The blessings of this day are great (the least are greater than John the Baptist).

The judgment of this day is terrible (many are excluded from the kingdom because of their unbelief).

Q. Jesus said: “*If you are willing to accept it*, [John] is Elijah who is to come. *He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*” Why did Jesus say this?

A. Jesus knew that many people were not willing to accept the truth. Their eyes were blinded to the presence of the kingdom. They couldn’t see that John was Elijah. They couldn’t see that Jesus was the Lord. They couldn’t see that the blessings and judgments of the great and terrible day of the Lord were just around the corner.

Q. Can *we* see the real presence of God’s kingdom? Jesus is calling us to pay close attention to His teaching. His teaching is true and leads to life.

- ✓ Discuss how we can live in light of Jesus’ teaching about the arrival of the kingdom of heaven, with all of its blessings and judgments (cf. this is largely about our *worldview*).
- ✓ See Scriptures on page 6 and 1 Peter 2:9 on top of page 5