

# Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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## We Must Lay Hold of the Kingdom Forcefully

by Dan Trygg

“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven violently-makes-its-way, and forceful-people grab-hold-of it.” Matthew 11:12

“The Law and the Prophets were until John; since that time the kingdom of God is being proclaimed, and everyone is forcefully-pressing into it.” Luke 16:16

“...you will take power at the coming-upon of the Holy Spirit upon you; and you shall be My witnesses...” Acts 1:8

After sending out His twelve apostles to go ahead of Him to proclaim and demonstrate the kingdom of God, Jesus made His way behind them to teach and preach in their cities. Meanwhile, John the Baptist, who had been imprisoned by king Herod Antipas for confronting him about his marriage to his brother's wife, heard the reports of what Jesus was doing. (Note that Matthew calls this “the works of the Anointed-One”, indicating that John recognized the significance of what Jesus was doing as a fulfillment of OT prophecy.) Through his followers, **John relayed a question to Jesus, “Are You the Coming-One, or might we expect a different person?”** We are told no more details than this brief question. We are left to imagine what John was thinking. Why was he who had been the appointed messenger, the forerunner who had identified and proclaimed Jesus as the Coming One, having these doubts? **He who had been so bold and powerful a witness for the kingdom, and for Jesus Himself, now appears to be wavering.** (It may be that John had been believing the popular view that the Messiah would be the head of a political kingdom, which would overthrow the Roman yoke, liberating Israel from her earthly overlords, and introduce an earthly reign of righteousness and justice. Jesus, while attracting great crowds and speaking of the kingdom of God, seemed to be making no effort to rally the people for a militant uprising.) **In response, however, Jesus affirms to John what it was that he himself was noticing, i.e., He was doing the works of the Messiah.** Jesus then refers to signs of the kingdom described by prophet Isaiah some 700 years before (Isa. 35:5,6; 61:1-3), ...signs which Jesus was now doing..., and then says, “and blessed is whoever might not be offended by Me” (vs. 6). **The implied meaning of Jesus' response was, “Yes, John, I am the Coming One. I know I am not coming as you were expecting, but I am the One. I am doing things in a way that may seem strange to you, but look at the clear signs which indicate Who I am, and do not be offended that I am not as you expected.”**

When the followers of John left to pass along what the Lord had said to their master, **Jesus began to talk about John. Who was this man who had suddenly appeared in the wilderness?** Was he a reed shaken by the wind? Did he bend to the pressure of popular opinion or threats? By no means! Was he dressed in soft clothing and living in the comfort of a king's court? Not at all! John was a figure in stark contrast to that. He lived in the wilderness, dressed in rough, simple clothing. **He was a man of principle and passion uncorrupted by popularity, materialism, fear, or bribery. He was truly a prophet, a mouthpiece of God.** More than just one of a number of prophets, **Jesus declared that he was the messenger of which Malachi had written 400 years before, ...the messenger sent from God to prepare the way for the Lord's coming** (Mal. 3:1; cf. Isa. 40:3). The Lord then even went so far as to say that **John was the greatest man who had ever lived up to that time.** “Of all those born of women there has risen none greater than John the Baptist” (Matt. 11:11). Stop and think about that for a moment. **That is a huge claim to make for a person who had such a brief ministry, and now was languishing in Herod's prison.** Think of all the great Bible heroes, the great men of history, Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, etc. Jesus is saying that the accomplishments, character, and importance of these men were not more significant than what John had possessed and accomplished. **That would have shocked Jesus' listeners. As much as they loved John, they probably had not seen him in this great light.** I mean, compared to being the intimate, obedient friend of God (Abraham), or birthing a nation and leading them through the wilderness (Moses), or being a hand-picked, godly king (David), or a prophet with the miraculous evidences of an Elijah, what had John done? **What had made John so special?** Jesus continues, “and if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah, the one being about to come. The one having ears to hear, let him hear.” Elijah? What does *that* mean? Again, Malachi, the last of the OT prophets, wrote of the great and terrible day of the Lord, a day of great judgment, coming like a burning furnace which will set ablaze all those who are arrogant and evildoers, leaving them nothing, ...but a day *also* of great joy and vindication for the upright who fear God. Before that day, **Malachi wrote that God was going to send Elijah the prophet.** He would restore the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers, to stave off the curse (4:1-6). **John was an Elijah type of figure** (Jn. 1:21; Lk. 1:8-17) to turn the hearts of Israel back toward God, to restore the proper care and affection of parents toward their children, and children toward their parents.

**These words would have been electrifying to the crowd.** Most of them would have been excited about John's ministry. They would have identified with Jesus words about the prophetic nature of his appearance and message. To have Jesus declare that (1.) John was the messenger sent before Lord Himself would come, and, (2.) that He was (an) Elijah sent to turn peoples' hearts so that the judgment of God would be *delayed*, set John's ministry into a perspective that was even more urgent than possibly many of them had considered. Yet **there was something even more important than John which Jesus was emphasizing** in His eulogy of him. **John came to preach that the kingdom of God was "at hand", which to John meant that it was "impending", or "soon to come".** Jesus, however, using the same words, meant that the kingdom *had indeed come*. It was in their midst.

If John was the greatest man who had ever lived, from a perspective of the privileges and potential impact of his life for God, Jesus declared that the very *least* person who was "in the kingdom" is *greater* than John. John was living at the culmination of a huge shift in world history. Before John, the law and the prophets were preached. They, like John, prophesied or spoke of something yet to come, ...something that had been finally introduced through the ministry of Jesus. **"From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of the heavens has violently, powerfully crashed upon the scene"**, as demonstrated through the ministry of Jesus and His followers. It has aggressively spread, breaking loose the chains of the devil wherever it has gone. **Those who aggressively, violently, forcefully press after it take hold of the kingdom power.** That is the nature of what Jesus had introduced. It is not to be some nice, namby-pamby religious drivel. **The kingdom, or reign of God, becomes actuated as we violently tear off the old thinking, the old trappings, the former habits and lifestyle, and aggressively give ourselves to serve God with reckless abandon.** Do you have ears to hear this? Are you willing to get violently aggressive with your own heart and life to find and walk in the reign of God?

Jesus' next words are a rebuke to the religiously opinionated, fault finders, people who are quick to point out the characteristics of the messengers from God which they do not like, but have no honest intention to participate in any real way with the things of God themselves. **They are arm-chair theorists, living in their bubble of self-importance, criticizing others who are attempting to live for God, while they are unwilling to get involved in any meaningful way in the pursuit of His will for themselves.** Nothing will satisfy them. They do not want to obey God. **They want to keep a safe distance, and do so by their fault finding.** **John had come like a highly disciplined ascetic**, with harsh living, fasting and separating himself for God by his outward lifestyle. They found fault with his radical obedience and harsh living. **Jesus came as a friend to tax-collectors and sinners**, even seeking out the lost in their own homes and haunts. He came with a message of love, and He lived a lifestyle of freedom from rigid religious practices, yet they were offended at Him as well. Jesus' comment at the end of this paragraph is important, "And the wisdom was justified from its results (lit. – works)." What Jesus meant was that **neither religious lifestyle was an absolute. In both instances, there was a righteous purpose to the lifestyle, and the fruit of each life shows the practical wisdom of the different approaches.** At least, both John and He were actively doing the will of God, and producing good results, which is more than could be said for their critics.

Violence, force and aggression seem to go against what many of us have come to believe concerning what it means to be a Christian. **The Greek word is a strong word picture, and it occurs only one other time in the NT, in Luke 16:16.** Interestingly, the context starts in 15:1, with the Pharisees and scribes getting all bent out of shape because Jesus was welcoming tax gatherers and sinners, and even eating with them. **Jesus then told four parables, each emphasizing the importance of seeking those who are lost.** There is the story of the lost sheep, whose shepherd leaves the 99 to seek out. Sheep are notoriously wrapped up in their own worlds, which generally involves eating what is in front of their face. **Generally, sheep stray not because they are adventurous, but because they are drawn off by something that looks particularly tasty,** and they wander away from the rest of the flock. **Often, when they realize that they are alone, they will simply lie down and bleat,** calling out for the flock. That is *not* the best defense mechanism, because their bleating also tells their predators where they are. **The shepherd can't wait until the sheep finds its way back. If he wants to save that poor sheep he must go to find it,** because it is stuck where it is and will not make the effort to come back by itself. Upon finding the sheep, the shepherd brings it back, calls out the friends and neighbors and invites them to celebrate over his good fortune at finding his lost sheep. **There is joy in heaven when lost ones are restored.** The same message is in the parables of the lost coin and the lost son (the prodigal). **The parable of the unrighteous steward is about using one's material resources to build relationships to bring people to Jesus.** You can't serve two masters. You cannot serve God and money, or pleasure or whatever else. As the Pharisees sought to defend themselves, **Jesus says that what humans think is to be sought after is detestable in God's eyes. Then He says that the Law and Prophets were preached until John; since then the good news of God's kingdom has been proclaimed, and everyone enters violently into it.** It will *cost* us. We must make *radical change*. **We must fight through whatever holds us back in order to press through to oneness with God.**