

## Prayer

Holy Spirit of God, surround my day with Your peace, steer me through the day with Your power, touch my mind with Your wisdom, and comfort my heart with Your love. May I live to the Glory of God as long as I have breath to proclaim it and time to live it, and may I always witness to the truth of God found in Jesus Christ my Saviour. Alleluia; AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Crime

*People's lives are devastated by crime; for example, burglary can create a sense of deep insecurity, and the results of drunken driving are terrible. Pray for the victims of crime.*

### On-going prayers

- Pray for Zimbabwe and ask God to bring it just government
- Pray about world tensions concerning Georgia and Russia
- Thank God for books to read

## Meditation

Almighty God, You transform people,  
You change everything for the better:

You call a sinner and create a saint;  
You call a failure and make a success;

You call a girl and reveal a woman;  
You call a boy and make known a man;

You call a loner and inspire a preacher;  
You call a servant and uncover a leader;

You call a pauper and make a prince;  
You call a maidservant and unveil a queen;

You call a loser and tutor a genius;  
You call a rebel and make a loyal friend;

You call us all to aim for higher things  
In Your Kingdom, both now and forever.

## Bible Study - Matthew 11:12-19

<sup>12</sup> 'Including the time of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and violent people struggle against it. <sup>13</sup> For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; <sup>14</sup> and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. <sup>15</sup> Let anyone with ears listen!

<sup>16</sup> 'But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, <sup>17</sup> "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." <sup>18</sup> For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; <sup>19</sup> the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.'

## Review

This passage of scripture concludes Jesus' discussion with the crowds about John the Baptist, but it is not a straightforward piece of scripture, and there is considerable debate about what some of it means. The analogy about children playing in the market place (11:16f.) is relatively straightforward, but the earlier part of the passage is strange. Both Jesus and John had spoken about the coming Kingdom of Heaven, but what does Jesus mean by saying that the Kingdom had 'suffered violence' (11:12)?

Verse 12 is a well known passage, but many people are confused about it because you will find that different versions of the Bible give us very different translations. Compare my version above with '*the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent are taking it by force.*' (New American Standard version). The Greek words used here in the original text are totally confusing, so how then does anyone decide what to do, and find the better translation? Scholars look at any possible variations in the ancient Gospel scripts, they look to the way these words are used in other passages of scripture, and they examine the logic of the passage and what makes the best theological sense. Here, however, there is little agreement on any of these matters.

Despite the problems I have had to come to my own opinion about what it means, and although the detailed reasons can only be a part of a more complete study, my conclusions are that the Greek words used in this text convey the sense of violence done against the Kingdom of God. The idea that violence is used to enter the Kingdom (as in the NAS version quoted above) does not seem to me to fit what Jesus has taught about the Kingdom in the rest of His ministry. What Matthew was trying to say was that both Jesus and John had announced the Kingdom of Heaven, and it had suffered sustained attack by evil forces, most notably the Pharisees. John was imprisoned, and Jesus had been rejected by the religious authorities; moreover, Jesus foresaw that just as John had been violently treated, so would he (10:38). This would all happen before the Kingdom was firmly established in the hearts of men and women after the resurrection. Also, in view of the Pharisees' accusation that Jesus was working for Baalzebul (9:34), Jesus was preparing to confront the Pharisees about this (12:22-37), but He did not respond to the threat of evil with physical violence, but with strength of argument, insight, and a spiritual authority which came from His father.

The final four verses contain Jesus' rigorous complaint at the way some people, notably the Pharisees, had responded to all that He had taught and done. He knew that disputes and trouble lay around the corner, and he took the opportunity of this public speech to ridicule His opponents as children who did not know what they wanted (11:17). The illustration Jesus chose also served to unite John and Jesus against the Pharisees in the minds of those who heard Him speak. Jesus and John were the ones who behaved normally, but the Pharisees appeared indecisive and a little ridiculous. There is no doubt that verses 16 and 17 were an insult!

It is interesting that Jesus quotes the Pharisees' complaint that the ascetic and austere lifestyle of John was demonic; 'for John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon' (11:18). This is the first we have heard of such an accusation, and it was perhaps a standard accusation used by the Pharisees against all with whom they disagreed. How unwise it was of them to see demons in what they did not understand! Jesus had been accused in the same way (9:34), unashamedly identifying with John. The accusation against Jesus was this; 'the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"'. The whole saying exposed the hypocrisy of those who did not understand what they were seeing and

who they were addressing. They did not understand the work of John or the work of the Messiah, and could not even understand the difference, in principle!

Whilst all this was going on, it seems that Jesus was having a firm dig at the Pharisees, and it is possible that those listening to Jesus would either have roared with laughter or been quite confused by what He was saying! However, Jesus spoke to everyone with humanity, personality, warmth, sentiment and wisdom, and this was one of the important differences between Him and the religious Pharisees. Although he was clearly an amazing man with awesome authority and power, people responded to him with love and affection (see, for example, the incident at the house of Peter's mother-in-law 8:14,15), and he argued without appealing to mysteries or scholarly arguments, but with ordinary human logic and understanding. The last words of our passage today are 'yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds'. Jesus had tried to explain the great and mighty things of God using the faulty vehicle of human language and the plain logic of the human mind. It is up to us to seek to understand Him, observe his deeds, and discover for ourselves that He was, and is, the Son of God.

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Have a look again at verse 12. Have you ever heard a sermon on this text? What was said? Do you agree with the interpretation I have given?
2. Do you feel that the figure of Jesus presented in Matthew so far is an accessible, or a remote person? Does it make any difference which?
3. Why do you think that people tend to reject people they do not know or things they do not understand?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*The Kingdom of God is the place where God rules, and I do not believe that the Kingdom has a place for violence, or even that violence can be justified as a means of getting into it. This text has been badly and unhelpfully translated and it has led to some inaccurate teaching about the Kingdom. I do sometimes wonder why God has allowed some scriptures to be so misunderstood; but this is a warning to us to make sure we understand scriptures properly and do not rely too blindly on our translations.*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- *In what ways is the Kingdom of God attacked today? How can it best be defended? Perhaps you think that it is not our job to 'defend' the Kingdom and this is what God alone can do! Discuss this with a friend.*
- *Have you always been charitable to things you do not understand within the church, or do you find yourself getting 'hot under the collar' quite easily at various things which happen? Pray about your attitude to what happens in the life of the church, and seek Jesus' perspective on anything troubling you today.*

## Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, there are times when I do not seem to take hold of either You or what You say. Take hold of me, therefore, and hold me in Your firm grasp, so that I do not slip away to follow my own path. Tutor me in Your ways, my Lord, and show me Your paths. AMEN