

Intro:

There is a verse in the New Testament that most people read in passing without paying much attention. It is a verse hard to understand, so after a moment's puzzle, we usually leave it alone. Here it is:

Matthew 11:12 And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.

Now... what does that mean?

I'm not going to answer that until the end of the message. First, I'd like you to turn to Galatians 5 for our text. We are going to continue in an occasional series I started a couple of months ago with the message: *Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit*.

We saw that the way this is done (from the human standpoint) is by crucifying the flesh (see Gal 5.24 again).

Crucifying the flesh means putting to death in your life the works of the flesh:

- Sensuality and the sins of the senses
- Wrath and the sins of the self
- Drunkenness and the sins of addiction

When you do this, you cultivate the fruit of the Spirit by giving room for the Spirit to do his work in your life.

I want to return to this theme in this message, using Gal 5.24 as our text. As we do, I think you are going to come to understand Mt 11.12 as well. I hope that the result is that we can produce some violent Christians. That is, I hope you will be violent Christians.

Read Gal 5.24

Proposition: Christians who live by the Spirit press forward towards the mark of Christ with spiritual violence.

I. The intensity of the word 'crucify'

A. By its usage:

1. The verb 'to crucify' is used 48 times in the Bible
2. Almost every time it is used of the death of the Lord Jesus
3. It only occurs two times in the Greek OT: in Esther, in connection with the death that came to Haman, but had been planned for Mordecai

4. It occurs only twice in the NT with reference to something other than the death of the Lord
 - a. Gal 5.24 *have crucified the flesh*
 - b. Gal 6.14 *the world is crucified unto me*
5. A compound word, 'crucified with' occurs 5 times as well
 - a. Three times it speaks of the thieves who were crucified with Christ
 - b. Twice it is used of the disciple
 - 1) Rm 6.6 *our old man is crucified with him*
 - 2) Gal 2.19 *I am crucified with Christ*
6. Another word, nekrow, 'to put to death' is used in Col 3.5
7. A synonym, thanatow, also 'to put to death' is used in Rm 8.13

The objects of these words are:

- the flesh (with the affections and lusts)
- the world
- the deeds of the body
- your members (that is, fornication, uncleanness, etc.) (Col 3.5; literally, 'the parts the ones by [or, of] the earth' — 'whatever in your nature belongs to earth' NET

So note this: the word is used primarily in Scripture to refer to the death of Jesus. *Every other use is an exception.*

- Each of those other uses points to discipleship
- Each of those other uses invests discipleship with a particularly violent picture: the death of Jesus Christ by crucifixion

So the word is intense by its usage and also ...

B. By its meaning

1. Crucifixion first used by the Persians
2. Later used by Alexander the Great and the Carthaginians
 - a. In Greece, restricted only to slaves

- b. Attitude: Only barbarians crucified free men
3. Rome refined and developed the method, calling the instrument a *crux*.
- a. Used only on slaves or non-Romans
- b. Citizens were not to be crucified (but autocratic governors ignored this)

“In the Roman provinces the penalty of crucifixion was one of the strongest means of maintaining order and security. Governors imposed this servile punishment esp. on freedom fighters who tried to break away from Roman rule.”¹

- Josephus reports innumerable crucifixions, mass executions in Judea in the aftermath of the Jewish revolt
4. Brief descriptions
- a. From *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*:
- 1) Carry the cross beam to the waiting stake
 - 2) Scourging – heavy leather thongs, bits of lead in end, beaten till almost dead [no resistance]
 - 3) On ground, tied or nailed to crossbeam
 - 4) Beam raised and attached to upright portion, either at top of a T or in the traditional Latin ‘plus-sign’ shape
 - 5) No footrest, but a block of wood projected out where the body could ‘sit’ after a fashion
 - 6) Feet nailed together, through the ankles, creating another ‘rest-point’
 - 7) Victim could not stretch erect to draw a full breath
 - 8) Fluid would build up in the lungs, death would come by exposure and exhaustion, either by:
 - a) Heart failure
 - b) Suffocation by the weight of one’s own body

¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vols. 5-9 edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 compiled by Ronald Pitkin., ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed., 7:573 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976).

“Crucifixion was regarded as one of the worst forms of execution. Cicero calls it the supreme capital penalty, the most painful, dreadful and ugly. ...

“The physical and mental sufferings which this slow death on the cross involved are unimaginable. Crucifixion as a capital penalty was ended only by Constantine the Great.”²

b. From the *New Bible Dictionary*:

“The method of crucifixion seems to have varied in different parts of the Roman empire. Secular writers of the time shrink from giving detailed accounts of this most cruel and degrading of all forms of punishment.”³

- Archaeologists in 1968 discovered an ossuary containing the bones of a young man who had been crucified sometime between AD 7 and AD 66. His name was Jehohanan.
- “The young man’s arms (not his hands) were nailed to the *patibulum*, the cross-beam... The weight of the body was probably borne by a plank (*sedecula*) nailed to the *simplex*, the upright beam, as a support for the buttocks. The legs had been bent at the knees and twisted back so that the calves were parallel to the *patibulum* or cross-bar, with the ankles under the buttocks. One iron nail (still *in situ*) had been driven through both his heels together, with his right foot above the left. A fragment shows that the cross was of olive wood. His legs had both been broken, presumably by a forcible blow, like those of Jesus’ two companions in Jn. 19:32.”⁴

I don’t mean to horrify you, but I do mean to impress upon you the intense meaning of this word.

² *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vols. 5-9 edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 compiled by Ronald Pitkin., ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed., 7:573-574 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976).

³ D. R. W. Wood, *New Bible Dictionary*, 246 (InterVarsity Press, 1996, c1982, c1962).

⁴ D. R. W. Wood, *New Bible Dictionary*, 246 (InterVarsity Press, 1996, c1982, c1962).

I want you to realize how it would sound in the first century, to people who had occasion to see crucifixions first hand.

When we read Gal 5.24 and say ‘crucify the flesh’, it has significant meaning – it conveys an intense instruction concerning discipleship.

- Discipleship — the Christian way of life — is no casual, easy, self-indulgent life with a little religion mixed in.
- The Christian way of life is a life that calls for intense, vigorous activity against one’s own self.

So the intensity of the word ‘crucify’ brings us to...

II. The vigor required for the flesh to be crucified

A. 1 Pt 2.11

^{KJV} **1 Peter 2.11** ¶ Dearly beloved, I beseech *you* as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul;

B. Rm 8.13 – ‘mortify’ = ‘put to death’

^{KJV} **Romans 8.13** For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.

C. Rm 13.14

^{KJV} **Romans 13.14** But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to *fulfil* the lusts *thereof*.

D. Col 3.5 – ‘mortify’ = ‘put to death’

^{KJV} **Colossians 3.5** ¶ Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry:

E. Gal 5.16-18

1. Walk by the Spirit (16)

- a. The duration of the command
 - 1) Present active imperative
 - 2) Continual, constant

Not a moment goes by in which a Christian is not called to obey this command.

- b. The direction of the command
 - 1) Lit. “walk **by** the Spirit” [KJV – ‘walk **in** the Spirit’]
 - 2) The Spirit is the guide, or standard
 - 3) The Spirit is the template
 - 4) The Spirit is the goal, the direction towards which you must walk.

c. The fulfillment of the command

- 1) The law of the Spirit is fulfilled on the inside, not on the outside.
- 2) The law of the Spirit is fulfilled by yielding the human will to the divine will.
 - a) Repentance
 - b) Obedience
 - c) Faith

You must simply *start* to live the way God wants you to. You must say, “Yes!” to the Spirit of God.

2. Expect a battle (17)

“Even as in the natural man there is something of this struggle (the convictions of his conscience and the corruption of his own heart strive with one another; his convictions would suppress his corruptions, and his corruptions silence his convictions), so in a renewed man, where there is something of a good principle, there is a struggle between the old nature and the new nature, the remainders of sin and the beginnings of grace; and this Christians must expect will be their exercise as long as they continue in this world.”⁵

3. Victory is in the walk by the Spirit (18)

⁵ Henry, VI, p. 676

III. The flesh crucifying activity that makes up the Christian walk

A. The activities too often settled upon

1. The soul that is satisfied with “well, I don’t go *that* far”
 - a. That is, I don’t murder anyone, I just pound them real good
 - b. Or, I don’t commit adultery, but I am quite willing to flirt and play around, but I don’t go over the line
 - c. Or, I don’t get drunk...

What kind of vigor is that? What kind of crucifying the flesh is that?

2. The soul that is satisfied with being as good as everyone else in my church

When did *wē* become the standard?

3. Worst, the soul that denies any effort is needed at all
 - a. Can be the result of a wrong-headed theological system
 - b. Or the result of a libertine loving philosophy (dominates many churches today)

B. The activity of a spiritually ‘military mind’ (Mt 11.12)

Or “the kingdom of heaven is forcibly entered and violent people take hold of it.” (NET Bible note)

1. We are calling for a spiritually militant mind
2. In our circles, militancy has often been associated with our attitude towards modernism and apostasy — but the Bible calls us to go much deeper than that
 - a. The militant mood applies to one’s personal life: personally purging sin out of heart and life
 - b. The militant mood applies to one’s local church life: provoking one another to love and good works

Conclusion:

Well, we don’t have a lot of time to develop this theme further. I have written an article for our church website which I am reproducing in today’s bulletin. I hope you will take the time to read it.

Proposition: Christians who live by the Spirit press forward towards the mark of Christ with spiritual violence.

Let me close with these words from Matthew Henry on Mt 11.12:

“This violence denotes a strength, and vigour, and earnestness of desire and endeavour, in those who followed John’s ministry, else they would not have come so far to attend upon it. It shows us also, what fervency and zeal are required of all those who design to make heaven of their religion. Note, They who would *enter into the kingdom of heaven* must *strive to enter*; that kingdom suffers a holy violence; self must be denied, the bent and bias, the frame and temper, of the mind must be altered; there are hard sufferings to be undergone, a force to be put upon the corrupt nature; we must run, and wrestle, and fight, and be *in an agony*, and all little enough to win such a prize, and to get over such opposition from without and from within. *The violent take it by force*. They who will have an interest in the great salvation are carried out towards it with a strong desire, will have it *upon any terms*, and not think them hard, nor quit their hold without a blessing, Gen. 32:26. They who will make their calling and election sure must give diligence. The kingdom of heaven was never intended to indulge the ease of triflers, but to be the rest of them that labour. It is a blessed sight; Oh that we could see a greater number, not with an *angry* contention thrusting others out of the kingdom of heaven, but with a *holy* contention thrusting themselves into it!”⁶

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, Mt 11:7 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996, c1991).