

The Kingdom of Heaven Is for You!

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord” Isaiah 55:8

It's all about me! We feel and act this way with so many aspects of our lives. In fact, our more honest moments in life would reveal that this is the driving force and motivation behind our lives. It's all about me! It's noticeable at school. When the grades don't match what we think we deserved, disappointment moves to sulking and pouting. Or if we get beat soundly in that competition, we choose to act with anger and frustration instead of humility. Even those classroom interactions are where our choices and decisions are driven by desires to be well-liked, popular and accepted instead of compassionate and gracious.

This permeates the workplace as well. Customers and patients become more of a means to a bonus or promotion rather than our purpose for serving. Employers become more like punching bags for our jabbing comments as our pursuit for accountability moves into lust for power and revenge. And as much as this attitude is part of our schools and workplaces, it's even more a part of our own homes. Our families are riddled with this “it's all about me” motivation. Our marriages are self-serving instead of sacrificial toward our spouses. Children and parents clash as we each seek to get our own way. Siblings stubbornly hold on to competitive ways instead of sharing forgiveness and mercy.

Maybe the most profound “it's all about me” moments come in the subtlest of ways! When we take over someone else's moment of success by inserting our own past achievements as something better and more important in that moment. Or when we capitalize on someone else's grief by changing the focus to our own problems that we consider even worse. Even others' failures are times when we'll try to take the blame for things that weren't our fault so that we can somehow feel better about ourselves. For nearly any situation and circumstance in this life, I imagine there's a way for us to make it all about ourselves.

Many of these examples probably don't phase us anymore. Yeah, they might make us uneasy for a moment as they're mentioned, but we likely try and find comfort in the fact that this how most people operate. “It's just the way life is,” we might say. We've been trained and continue to condition ourselves to function according to this pattern. And with this understanding so ingrained into us, this is how we expect the kingdom of heaven to even work. Like everything else in our lives, we operate like the kingdom of heaven is all about us. Yes, our thoughts and actions often betray this fact that we believe that God's kingdom needs and depends on us!

If we're not convinced of this, just consider the questions we often ask ourselves when it comes to God's kingdom. Am I a good enough person to make it to heaven? Have I done my one good deed for God for the day? How can I make up for my past wrong because forgiveness doesn't feel effective? What can I do to make sure that I get this one favor from God? If I don't this, will anyone else really be able to make God's plan succeed? You see in our sinful hearts and minds, we regularly turn God's kingdom into something that is all about us!

This is why we all resonate so well with the complaint of the first laborers from the parable in our Gospel reading. We get them! They are our kind of people. It's all about them! They did most of the work so it makes sense to us that they should be rewarded accordingly. And when we hear that they aren't, we want to respond to this Gospel of the Lord with, “That's not fair!” rather than, “Praise to You, O Christ.” Based on these words, we might even consider going a step further, looking to attempt some sort of spiritual strike in order to prove that the kingdom of heaven is really all about us. “Really God? More work? Less pay? No way!” However, the more we try to make the kingdom of heaven all about us, the less the kingdom of heaven is actually for us.

That's what Jesus' jarring words reveal to us today. The kingdom of heaven isn't all about us, it's for us! Unlike everything we've come to know or experience, the kingdom of heaven doesn't operate on the “it's all about me” policy. Neither are these words some sort of heavenly business model guaranteed

to improve our earthly businesses. As Isaiah shared with us in our Old Testament reading, God's ways aren't our ways! His thoughts aren't our thoughts! And while we might struggle to understand God's thoughts and ways, He makes them known to us right now for our own benefit.

The kingdom of heaven, God's reign and rule over this world and the life to come, is all about Jesus! It's not about us, it's all about Him! And before we tune out saying, "This is no different than our 'it's all about me' policy!" The Holy Spirit points our hearts and minds to the work that God has done, the work that Jesus has done. Jesus' life, His death, His resurrection is all for us! He was first, but chose to be last, so that we might be first with Him in the kingdom of heaven! When the kingdom of heaven is all about Jesus and the work that He has completed for us, then we have the greatest assurance of all that the kingdom of heaven is truly for us!

Taking the focus of God's kingdom off of us and our work keeps the focus on Jesus' generosity, His saving work for all people. Just as the master generously brought laborers into his vineyard, promising them stability, so also does our Lord and Savior Jesus bring us into His kingdom and give us stability in this life and the life to come. This is the work Jesus does in baptism! He calls. He promises. He provides opportunity for work in His kingdom. This is the work that Jesus personally does through your baptism! You have been called His child. He has promised you the stability of His eternal earnings through His life, death and resurrection. He provides you with opportunities of service in His kingdom with every role that you have been given.

Taking the focus of God's kingdom off of us and our work keeps us from punching a timecard for our life as a Christian and any other Christian's life. When it's not about us in God's kingdom, we no longer need to be concerned with the quantity of hours served in order to prove our faithfulness and gain our reward. Instead, our whole life is a service of response to what our faithful God has done and continues to remind us of until He calls us to our heavenly rest. And when the kingdom of heaven is no longer all about us and our time, we also can see and appreciate God's timing as He continues through His Church to constantly search for workers for His kingdom until He returns.

Taking the focus of God's kingdom off of us and our work keeps us from resenting the others God also provides to work with us in His kingdom. Instead of using our work in God's kingdom to isolate and alienate, we have the opportunity to encourage and uplift each other as we unite together in Jesus who calls and delivers His promises to us through His Word and sacraments. Every day we are given, is one that the Lord can use to point others to Him and the saving and forgiving work He has done and continues to do.

So, whether it's at school, work or home this wonderful promise that the kingdom of heaven isn't all about us, but for us, does have an impact. Knowing how our Savior generously loves, values and serves us now and for all of eternity, gives us confidence and boldness to serve, love and value our neighbors in the same way. We seek to turn away from our "it's all about me" lifestyle and cling to the work God has done and continues to do in our lives. That work of God in our lives is to apologize for our selfish emotions and reactions seeking forgiveness from those we've hurt as we do from Him. His work is to open our hearts and eyes to the ways we've mistreated others and allow us to receive His guidance and direction to change our self-serving ways. His work is to teach us wisdom and patience to listen and refrain from making things all about us. His work has been and continues to be to make sure that the kingdom of heaven is for us because of Jesus alone. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan