

Dwelling together according to the kingdom of God is our greatest aspiration

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More people have asked me questions about our fifth heart statement than any other; what does it really mean? It reads this way: Dwelling together according to the Kingdom of God is our greatest aspiration. This heart statement is about how we do life together. That's what *dwelling together* is getting at. How will this church family live with each other? How will we treat each other? How will we pool and share our resources and gifts from God? How will we encourage one another and help one another? That's the focus of our fifth heart statement.

It's a critical question. On the one hand, we're all so different. We are made up of different ages. Half of us are men; the other half women. Our family sizes are different. We don't all have the same balance in our checking account and our houses aren't all the same size. Some of us are amazingly artistic; others of us aren't so much. We have different strengths and weaknesses. We are all so... different.

But we have so much in common. We hope in the same God; we were born of the same Spirit if we are saved. We have one Lord who has given us one Word, the scriptures. We have the same treasure (God is our greatest treasure) and we all have the same destiny, an inheritance waiting for us in the heavens.

So, how will we, who are so different, but who have so much in common, live and relate together? Our statement says that we all (with our great variety and differences) should live together as one people *according to the Kingdom of God*. That's what unites us together. Not our love of the Packers or our common experience of Wisconsin winters. No, our unity found in our commitment to live by the Kingdom of God. That is really important to understand. What does it mean to live together according to the Kingdom of God? That's where we are going to begin.

What is the kingdom of God? Is it a place? I know some of you kids want to go to the Magic Kingdom in Orlando, FL (PIC). No, God's kingdom really isn't a place. Is the Kingdom just an idea that inspires hope? Just some hopeful thoughts that encourage followers through our passage on earth? No, the kingdom of God is real; it's not imaginary. Is the Kingdom of God another name for the church? That would mean when we gather together we are gathering in God's kingdom. The kingdom and the church are connected, no question. But they are different, too.

There are complexities about the kingdom that we can't get into today, but for the most part, the Bible talks about the kingdom of God primarily as God's reign or rule. The kingdom of God is the stretch of his power and grace; that, of course, has no end. So, it's not a thing to hold or a place to go; it's more an expression and experience of his power and grace. Maybe the simplest description of the kingdom is found in the Lord's Prayer; turn to Matthew 6 and read

with me vs. 9-10 (READ). Jesus says in vs. 10 that the first request we should have in our prayers is for God's kingdom to come. That's interesting. Prioritize God's kingdom. Desire that, pray for that before you pray for anything. Don't pray for your kingdom to come, pray that his comes. But what is that? I think the next verse gives us an explanation. Jesus went on to say "Your will be done." That's what God's kingdom is; it's his way, his rule, established on earth just like it is in heaven. Another way of thinking about it is like this: there is a future day where everything will be just as it's supposed to be; like it will be in heaven. We'll relate a certain way, we'll be a certain way; our worship will be pure and our service to one another will be joyful. And that day broke into our world with Jesus. And now, Jesus is working that day into our present day through his church living by the power of the Holy Spirit in conformity to the words of God.

So, when our heart statement reads dwelling together according to the Kingdom of God is our greatest aspiration, we mean to say that we have a great desire (a principle desire, even) to live together as a church family according to the ways and will of God. We want the shape of our church family, our relationships, our interactions, our work together to take the mold of the excellent way, glorious reign, of God just like it is in heaven. So then, when we talk about God's kingdom, we're not talking about a place or an idea; we're not even talking about the church so much. We're talking about an order, a rule, a way; God's order, God's rule, God's way that we want to experience and live by.

I think one of the best ways to utilize our time in God's word is to talk more in depth about this kingdom. What's it like? How do we live by it? How is it different than kingdoms on earth? I want to share with you 4 aspects, 4 things about the kingdom that I pray will help us better understand the kingdom and how we can live by it. Because when we do, we'll be the church of Jesus Christ in Taylor County that he's calling us to be.

First of all, God's kingdom is ruled by a King and his name is Jesus. This may be an obvious point, but I think there are implications to this truth that are very tempting to ignore. Let me try and get at this with an analogy. Did you know that a speed limit sign that reads 65 really doesn't mean 65? Did you know this? For some it means 68; for others it means 71. I'm on going to tell you what it means to me because this sermon isn't about me! We just have this way or assuming and establishing our ways, our will and our desires as the true kingdom. And we do this in our relationship with God and within God's church. And what happens, then, is that God's kingdom (which again, is his way and will) starts looking really arbitrary; it starts looking a whole lot like our kingdom. We start thinking that our ways are just like God's ways and they're not, are they?

Isa. 55:8-9 says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heaven are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Do you know the context of that passage? Compassion. Forgiveness. God is saying, "I forgive will you don't; I'm compassionate when you're not. My ways are higher than your ways.

That's such an excellent example of dwelling together according to the kingdom of God. If we're honest, we tend not to be very gracious and forgiving to one another. We tend to hold each other to standards that we don't like people holding us to. God is saying, "No, live by my king. Don't trust your ways; don't live by your order. Live by mine."

When we remember that God's kingdom actually has a king and this king has laws, rules and ways, we're less likely to define and describe God's kingdom in arbitrary and hypocritical ways. We don't set the speed limit; we don't decide who gets forgiven and when. We don't decide the ordering of this church family. The king does. And when we remember that the kingdom is ruled by the king we're less likely to arbitrarily define the rules of our community; we leave that to the king.

Secondly, it's important to see that God's kingdom is upside down. When Jesus came preaching, "The kingdom of God is at hand," meaning, "I'm here and I brought God's way with me," he defied conventional wisdom. So much of what we think we should do accordingly to our normal, human way of thinking is actually wrong; we should do the opposite. Let me give you some brief examples.

- It's hard not to feel during this Christmas season that we'll be the happiest when we get the best presents. When kids go back to school, do they brag about what they gave or what they received? That's obvious. But Jesus said (Acts 20:35), "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Upside down.
- We all go to great lengths and try really hard to spend quality time with family during Christmas (and other times of the year); we think, "there's nobody more important." But Jesus turned his family away and said he has deeper family connections (Matt 12:50); "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." Upside down.
- We spend so much energy and resources trying to avoid suffering; trying to make this life the most comfortable life it can be. But Jesus said (Matt 6:19-20), "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven." Don't work hard for reward in this life; work for reward in the next. Upside down.

As we live this life together as brothers and sisters within the same church family, with our different values and preferences, with our different personalities and, of course, as we sin against each other, we all are going to have natural and immediate impulses to respond, which most of the time are not going to be the kingdom way. We need to understand and even prepare for an upside down kind of life; the kingdom of life. Because here's the deal: when we don't expect and plan for it, when we encounter the upside down nature of the kingdom we actually reject it for conventional thinking.

The next aspect about Kingdom life that I want to highlight is this: the Kingdom life requires aggression. Now what in the world do I mean by that? My oldest is on the boys swim team at Medford High. After most meets, the two sides will play a game of water polo. Have you ever watched a game of water polo between HS boys? It's not for the meek. It seems you can

do anything you want to a boy with the ball short of stripping off his swimsuit. I mean, they tackle and dunk, they put each other in headlocks and wrestle in the water until the ball is forfeited. It's pretty brutal; it's not for the weak. You have to be aggressive. The scriptures says that's how we have to take hold of the kingdom. Turn with me to Matthew 11 for the key passage (READ Mt 11:12).

What does this verse mean? Well, it depends on how you interpret it (allow me to highlight the complexities of language). In the Greek, the passive and reflexive verb form are identical for this word; So, there are two ways to interpret this verse. If you think it's in the passive voice, it goes like this: "The kingdom has suffered violence by others," which clearly means others are bringing violence against the kingdom; the kingdom is suffering from the violence of others. The reflexive voice goes like this: "The kingdom has been coming violently." So, what's doing the violence now? The kingdom is.

I think the second option is the right one for two reasons. First of all, we have plenty of instances that God's people will be poorly treated as they live by the kingdom way, but that's different than the kingdom itself suffering violence. How do "the violent take" the kingdom by force? It would mean that the kingdom somehow is overpowered by the violence of a hostile world. Well, that doesn't seem right. God's rule can never be overcome.

Secondly, are there any other images of God's way or kingdom taking an offensive posture? An aggressive posture? Well, notice Matthew 16:18-19 (READ). Imagine the picture: hell has gates. They're big gates, strong gates. But what's advancing against the gates of hell? The church with all the power of the Kingdom of God behind it. And what do we see? The gates of hell are no match for the church of Jesus Christ advancing on Satan's territory with all the power of the Kingdom of God.

So, here's what I think Jesus is saying in Matthew 11. Ever since John the Baptist arrived on the scene, the Kingdom of God has been plowing over the works of Satan. People are being healed; many are repenting of their sins. God's kingdom is on the move. But, if you want to get on board, if you want to experience the benefits of the kingdom, you better be prepared to take hold of the kingdom violently. Like a cowboy wrestling a steer, like a varsity swimmer playing water polo, you better grab on tight to the kingdom and not let go. The kingdom of God is experienced and enjoyed by people who take it by force.

Friends, we will only enjoy the benefits of God's rule in our life if we get aggressive against our own sinful tendencies towards each other and work hard in faith to live by God's order. It's not just going to happen; it's not all just going to work out. If we sit in our spiritual lazy boys, we are all going to get mad at the one who has the the remote, we're all going to wait around for someone to get us a glass of water (rather than get one for others) and we're all going to go to sleep when there's important kingdom work to do. So, what does that mean? It means there's an earnestness to faith and living together according to the kingdom of God. We have to work at being intentional; we have to make a conscious choice to die to our own

preferences and desires and prioritize the preferences and needs of others among us. That's kingdom living and only the ones willing to get violent with their own selfishness will live it.

Finally, the kingdom of God will endure. With all this sacrifice, with all this effort, we need something to assure us that it's all worth it. Do you know what I mean? Most of what I've tried to highlight this morning really does include, and even necessitates, a reordering of our lives that is difficult. Listening to King Jesus instead of my own wisdom requires me to humbly admit that I'm not wise to order God's church or Kingdom. Living upside down means I'm going to be out of step with the world and conventional ways of doing things. Taking the kingdom by force is going to cost me effort and energy. Is it going to be worth it? Or am I wasting my time? Turn with me to Hebrews 12 (READ vs. 28-29).

The writer says the Kingdom cannot be shaken. In a world that's looking more and more chaotic and as vulnerable as living a Kingdom life make me, God's rule, his way, his order will not be shaken, it will not be destroyed, it will not let me down. It will endure. I hope hearing that this morning makes you think, "It's worth it! I'm going to walk according to the Kingdom. I am going to submit to God's order in my life and in this church family."

Now, the writer says because the kingdom can't be shaken, we should have two responses. Did you see them? The first is gratitude; "Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken." Look what you've been given, FBC! A king who will rule over you with benevolence and justice. He will always do you good. So, be thankful in all circumstances.

But there's another response; "thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe." In response to the great love, the superior wisdom, the gracious kindness of our king, offer to him your acceptable worship. Praise him! And what is that? What's your acceptable worship? I sure hope you're thinking of Romans 12, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to which, which is your spiritual worship." Our lives laid down, my brothers and sisters, is our worship.

Key verse ~ Hebrews 12:28-29

Questions for the week

- What makes living with other people hard or difficult? When do you not get along?
- If Christ is the King of our church family, how will that impact our interactions together?
- What might you do (or not do) if you take the Kingdom by force?