

What's It Mean To Be A Citizen Of Heaven? – Philippians 3:17-4:1

Pastor Colin Rieke ~ February 24, 2013

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!



This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

As many of you know, I am not able to become the president of the United States of America. That is because I was born overseas in Ndola, Zambia. This isn't something that I lose much sleep over, I never really had the desire to get into politics. And now, I actually take my birth abroad as a badge of honor. But it wasn't like that growing up. I didn't think it was all that unusual to be born in Africa, in fact many of my friend were also born in Africa. I just thought this was the way things were for everybody. Growing up in Zambia, and then Malawi was my childhood. I went to school at an international school with friends from a dozen of more countries. I didn't think anything of it.

One of the things that did make me a little different was that I was American. I could say that I came from America, even though I was never born there, nor had I (at that point) ever lived there. On the flip side, when I came to America, I loved to say that I was from Africa. But being a citizen of America is special, but as a kid I didn't realize how special it was. I am an American citizen because my parents are American citizens. And being an American citizen has certain rights and privileges. Not only could we go to the American embassy for a 4th of July party every year, but we could enter the country without need for a thorough questioning. We had the protection of the American government, something that many of my friends did not have. That was a tangible benefit of being an American citizen abroad.

This morning, the apostle Paul, in the letter he wrote to the Christian church in Philippi, had another citizenship in mind. A citizenship that has certain tangible rights and privileges. It was a citizenship that he reminded the Philippians of 2000 years ago, and it's a citizenship he reminds us of today. It is the citizenship we have as children of God in heaven. And just as I lived as an American abroad, so we as Christians live abroad from heaven. So WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CITIZEN OF HEAVEN? What's a citizen to do?

1. Look out for the world
2. Look into the Word
3. Look up to the Lord

The apostle Paul knew a thing or two about being a citizen of a commonwealth. Not only was he a Jew, but he was also born a Roman citizen. And being a Roman citizen had certain, distinct advantages for Paul in the Roman Empire. The things that we take for granted today – innocent until proven guilty, the right of a trial before a jury of your peers, were something that only Roman citizens had in the empire. Paul could not be sentenced until he had a trial. He could not be crucified, he had rights. And there were certain times and certain places that he exercised those rights. Before he was flogged in Jerusalem, Paul asked the Roman centurion, **“Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been found guilty?”** But there were other times where Paul did not immediately exercise his rights as a Roman citizen.

It was right there, in Philippi, the town to whom he was writing this letter, that he was thrown in prison without a trial. It was only after he had spent the night in prison that he made the leaders of the city aware that he was a Roman citizen. Why is it that Paul used the rights of his citizenship in one place and not another? Because Paul was not only a Jew, he was not only a Roman citizen, but he was also a citizen of heaven. And unlike his Roman citizenship, he wasn’t born a citizen of heaven. He was a naturalized citizen – by grace, through the blood of Christ. This is what made Paul and us citizens of heaven.

Paul knew WHAT IT MEANT TO BE A CITIZEN OF HEAVEN. He showed he wasn’t afraid to be a Christian, he endured an unjust punishment to bring more credibility to his message. He wasn’t a guy who was just going to run and hide at the first sign of trouble. Not only did Paul show WHAT IT MEANT TO BE A CITIZEN OF HEAVEN that day in Philippi, but he continued to do it for the Philippian congregation as he continued his missionary journeys. Paul had visited Philippi, a town at the northern edge of the Aegean Sea on his second missionary journey. Even after he left Philippi, he had the Philippian church on his heart. He returned again to Philippi to encourage the brothers and sisters in faith before he returned to Jerusalem. And now he was giving them this letter.

He shares with the Philippians WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CITIZEN OF HEAVEN. **“Join with others in following my example...and live according to the pattern we gave you.”** Paul was a leader to the Philippians, not only with words, but also by the example that he gave them, even from so far away. He told them to live according to the pattern they had been taught, a pattern Paul exhibited. And to look out for those who don’t follow that path.

The believers at Philippi were to look out for the world, for the **“many who live as enemies of the cross of Christ.”** But Paul was not only talking about those who are openly hostile to Christ, but to look out for the wolves in sheep’s clothing, who opposed Christ and his mission to the cross. We heard about two examples of that in our other readings from God’s Word this morning. In the first lesson, Jeremiah, a true prophet of God, was opposed by the people of Israel because they didn’t like to hear the law that he had spoken to them. Jesus too, in our gospel, was confronted by those who appeared righteous, the Pharisees, and refused to be influenced by their plotting and scheming.

It is so sad a thought to the apostle Paul that he was reduced to tears over people who behaved like this, behaved as **“enemies of the cross of Christ.”** It is easy to see the enemies of the cross not only when people reject Christ’s sacrifice, but even in the words of one of his close disciples Peter, when he

rebuked Jesus' intention of going to the cross. But being an enemy of the cross does not just include those who are openly hostile to the cross, but those who are apathetic. This is what we as Christians, as citizens of heaven need to look out for.

Apathy shows itself in our lives. It is far easier to be apathetic about something than to care enough to do something. Nowhere is this more dangerous than in apathy to the cross of Christ. If Christianity were illegal, outside of Sunday mornings, would there be enough evidence to convict you? What is your reaction to sin? Do we have a reaction to sin? To those things that God makes clear in his word are displeasing in his sight. Not only displeasing, but deserving of punishment and death. Do we give the excuse that God-is-just-going-to-love-us-anyway-after-we-repent-so-we-should-just-go-ahead-and-do-it? An attitude like this is enemy to the cross of Christ. The cross makes impossible any compromise with sin. A compromise with sin rejects the cross.

But it is for the enemies of the cross and the apathetic to the cross that Christ came. In our gospel we see him steadfastly continue his walk to the cross, despite everything and everyone that would keep him from there. They mocked and ridiculed the God of all power as having no power. All Jesus' disciples ran away in fear. But Christ stayed on that cross, enduring our punishment, enduring our pain so that we might be his joy and his crown, so that we might be citizens of heaven.

(2)

We are God's joy and crown. And it is only when I look into Gods Word that I see this and find the strength to fight against temptation. The temptation to take God's sacrifice for granted. This is what Paul encouraged the believers in Philippi to do. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CITIZEN OF HEAVEN? Instead of looking out at the examples of everyone around us, I look in God's Word to see how a citizen of heaven acts. I actually might have to take a few minutes to crack open my Bible and see what it says. Paul says, **"live according to the pattern we gave you."** It is in God's Word that I see how much God has done for me, how much he loved me. The pattern that I follow is not a "how-to" guide to get to heaven, but it is a reflection of the love he has showed me, it is staying on the narrow way to heaven, not losing sight of the one who won it for me.

Our citizenship is from heaven, **"And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ."** As a citizen of the United States living abroad, I was never in so much danger that the US government needed to get me out of the country. But there are movies out there, like *Argo*, that detail the dangers of what has happened to American citizens living in foreign countries. As Christians we live in the world, but this world is not our home. We are foreigners in a land not our own. But just as I would look forward to returning to the United States every two years on furlough, we as Christians look forward to returning to our home country, returning to heaven.

(3)

For when we look in to God's Word, it leads us to look up to the Lord. What an important thing to remember. It is so easy to take a look at the world around us – perhaps we whine and complain about how terrible the world is, perhaps we may wonder what we gain by waking up on a Sunday morning to come to church, perhaps we may look at our lot in life and wonder if God is even there. But WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CITIZEN OF HEAVEN is to have someone to look up to.

When all others are looking to their own wealth for support, to other people, to some unknown karma of the universe, how much better is it for Christians, for citizens of heaven to look up to their Savior. To the one who came down on this earth as the promised Savior of the world. Who took upon himself the sins of the world and was crucified on a cross. That same Jesus who conquered death and ascended into heaven. He is the one we look up to.

We look up to heaven eagerly awaiting our Savior to come back. Yes, we know we have the protection of our Lord and Savior right here and now, but we still long for him to come back, to take us from this world of tears. With the power that enabled him to perform miracles, to rise from the grave, he will use that same power to transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body. This is what a citizen of heaven is waiting for.

BEING A CITIZEN OF HEAVEN is not just an honorary title that we carry around as Christians to make us feel good and special, just as being a citizen of the United States was not just an honorary title when I was living in Zambia and Malawi. BEING A CITIZEN OF HEAVEN is something real, it is something we can hang on to. We have the protection of our loving Father in heaven while we are living in this foreign country, and we look forward to returning when God sees fit to call us home – whether that be tomorrow or 50 years from now. We close with the apostle Paul's words, **“Therefore, my brothers [and sisters], you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!”** Amen.