

“Our Citizenship is in Heaven”

Philippians 3:17-4:1

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Introduction:

How much do we value our citizenship in this nation? As far as I know, all of us here this morning are citizens of the United States. Most of us were most likely born in this nation, and for those of us who were born here, very seldom will we ever slow down to appreciate the great blessing of being citizens of the United States. Perhaps we think about it on the 4th of July, or maybe we think about it during a time of war or during some kind of national crisis. Perhaps we thank God for our citizenship when we get home from a long journey overseas as the customs officer inspects our passport and says, **“Welcome home!”** But very rarely do most of us wake up thanking God for allowing us to be citizens of this nation.

However, for those who enter this nation as foreigners, we know that citizenship in the United States can be extremely important. We have seen the controversy unfold down in Arizona over the past several weeks, and regardless of our opinion concerning the illegal immigration crisis, the situation should remind us to be thankful to God for our own citizenship. We know that for those who are not born in this nation, the path to citizenship can be long and difficult. And so as a church, two weeks ago, we celebrated the blessing of brother Michael’s citizenship in the United States.

During that ceremony at the Federal Courthouse in Milwaukee, the judge explained that people from all around the world are desperately trying to make their way to this nation. In fact, he said that out of the 194 nations around the world, all of those nations are represented here in the United States, and he said that we are the only nation on the face of the earth that can make such a claim. Even on that one day in Milwaukee, in that one courtroom, out of the 74 being sworn in as citizens, 35 nations were represented! We were reminded of our national motto, **“E Pluribus Unum,”** **“Out of Many, One.”** It is a tremendous blessing, then, to be citizens of this nation.

And yet even though this is true, if we had been living in the First Century, it is Roman citizenship that most of us would have really wanted. Roman citizenship meant everything. Roman citizens, for example, had the right to vote, the right to own property, the right to run for public office. Roman citizens could not be crucified, they could not be tortured, they could not be beaten without a proper trial, they had

the right to face their accusers in court. People in the First Century placed a high value on their citizenship in the Roman Empire, one of the most powerful empires in the history of the world. But even under the Roman system, the apostle Paul spoke of a greater kingdom, a more valuable citizenship.

This morning, I would invite you to turn with me to the book of **Philippians**, to a passage that begins in **Philippians 3:17**. In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on **page 1839—Philippians 3**, starting in **verse 17**. We know from history that the city of Philippi was a very important city in northern Greece, it was located along the Via Egnatia (the Ignatian Way), the well-built Roman road that cut from west to east across Macedonia—the road that connected Rome to just about everything to the east—from Greece, to Asia Minor, and beyond. If you look at a map, you will find that Philippi was halfway between the western coast of Macedonia and the far eastern edge of Europe—a very strategic position! In order to solidify their grip on Philippi, in order to help maintain law and order, Rome would provide a pension for their most elite soldiers to retire there. Today, we would refer to them perhaps as the Secret Service, or perhaps we would refer to them as the Navy SEALs or the Rangers—these were the best of the best. And after they fulfilled their years in the military, after they had protected the Emperor for so many years, Rome would say, **“We will pay you a pension; however, there is this one small thing: We need you to move to Philippi!”** And so Philippi was considered a Roman colony, and it was a colony that was populated primarily by retired Roman soldiers. They were not technically on duty, but as you can imagine, those old soldiers brought some level of stability, some level of backup to the troops that were stationed there.

In the book of **Acts**, we find that Paul brought the gospel to Philippi for the very first time in **Acts 16**, the first time the gospel was preached in Europe. He baptized Lydia, a seller of purple fabric, along with her entire household. After having been thrown in prison, the Lord sent an earthquake, and before the night was over, the jailer and his household were also baptized. Several years later, Paul ended up under house arrest in Rome, and once he was there in Rome, the newly established church in Philippi sent him some financial support. Paul then wrote back what is basically a thank you note for that support—the letter we now refer to as the book of **Philippians**—an incredibly positive letter where the words **“joy”** or **“rejoicing”** are repeated sixteen times in only four chapters. If you will, then, as we consider our citizenship in heaven, please look with me at what Paul has to say to the new Christians in Roman colony of Philippi—**Philippians 3:17-4:1**...

¹⁷ Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. ¹⁸ For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, ¹⁹ whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. ²⁰ For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹ who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. ¹

Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.

As we look back over these six verses, I would like for us to consider four basic ideas that we can use in our daily Christian lives right here in Madison.

I. And the first thing we notice is the encouragement that WE ARE TO JOIN TOGETHER IN FOLLOWING PAUL'S EXAMPLE.

Those of us who are citizens of heaven are obligated to keep an eye on those who follow the pattern that was first set by Paul, and we are to join together with them in following that example. When Paul refers to a ***“pattern”*** (in **verse 17**), he uses a word that has the idea of a carbon copy. I guess we're getting back to the generation gap issue here, but way back in the olden days, if you wanted a copy of something, you had to put a piece of carbon paper between two pieces of typing paper, and when the typewriter key hit the top piece of paper, the force of that blow would transfer the carbon to the next sheet of paper. Literally, the idea of a ***“pattern”*** here is the idea of striking a blow. In the ancient world, the word referred to the process involved in making a coin. Over and over again, that pattern was used to make coins, and each coin was identical to the one before it. When we went to Washington, DC, several years ago, one highlight of that trip was our visit to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Over and over again, workers would print giant stacks of money, and each bill was exactly like the one before it. They could do that because they were using the same pattern for each sheet of money. Paul is saying: This is how it needs to be in our Christian faith. As citizens of heaven, we join together in following those who are more mature than we are in the Christian faith, just as they follow Paul, and just as Paul followed Christ. We are to be like Christ just as one penny is identical to another. As the preacher said in **Hebrews 13:7**, ***“Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.”*** As Christians, then, let us not only follow good examples, but let us also work hard at being examples that are worthy of being followed. Let us ask ourselves: Are we living in such a way that others would benefit by following our example? As citizens of God's kingdom, first of all, we are to join together in following Paul's example.

II. Secondly, as we look back at this short passage, we also see (in verses 17-18) A SPECIAL WARNING CONCERNING THOSE WHO DO NOT FOLLOW THE PATTERN.

And we notice right away that there are ***“many”*** who fall into this category. You might remember what Jesus said about there being ***“many”*** who enter through the wide gate that leads to destruction, but the way that leads to life is narrow, and there are few who find it (**Matthew 7:13-14**). Paul is saying, then, that those who are faithful to God will be in the minority. Of course, as citizens of the United States, we tend to think that the majority rules, that the majority is right, but that is not really the case. Here in this nation, we are governed by the ***“rule of law,”*** we are

governed by a constitution. In terms of our national law, then, the constitution determines whether something is right or wrong. And perhaps in a slightly similar way, God has given us the Bible—our creed book, our constitution in the church. And so the majority doesn't really have anything to do with it, because the majority will NOT follow the Scriptures. Paul, then, warns that there are many who have turned away, there are many who are, in fact, ***"...enemies of the cross of Christ."***

He points out in **verse 19** that their ***"...god is their appetite."*** In other words, they are not governed by the example of Paul and of Christ, but they are governed by their own desires. If they want it, then it becomes right to them—whether we are talking about the pursuit of money, or pleasure, or food, or power, or stuff, or whatever it is. And so their ***"glory is in their shame."*** There are many who brag about how open minded they are. Many will brag about their drunkenness. Many will brag about all of the money they have spent. Many will brag about the size of their house. Well, it feels good to brag, and so there are many who try to loosen what the Bible teaches in order to get what they want, in order to feel good, in order to brag. They will ignore what the Bible teaches about the danger of debt or of alcohol, but over time that huge house payment or that addiction becomes a distraction—it becomes something that consumes us, something that we worry about in the middle of the night. They may talk about how important God is to them, but when it comes right down to it, they will do what they want to do—they will find a church that agrees with the way they think, instead of adjusting their thinking to fit the word of God. We have seen this happen again this past week with the election of another openly gay bishop into the Episcopal Church—they have ignored the word of God in order to satisfy some kind of desire.

And so Paul says that these people are ***"enemies of the cross of Christ."*** Here in our society, we hate to consider ourselves enemies of anything. Most people would like to think that they are neutral towards the Christian faith. When it comes to religion, most people tend to say, ***"Well, that's how you see it, and I look at it in a different way, but that's okay. After all, we are all going to heaven; we're just taking different roads to get there."*** However, Paul would say that those who misplace their priorities are enemies of the cross of Christ—not enemies of Paul, not enemies of the church, not our enemies, but they are enemies of the cross of Christ.

And so here in this incredibly upbeat and positive letter, the apostle Paul is weeping—he knows the danger of getting it wrong. He knows the danger of false teaching and the potential it has to destroy the unity of a congregation. He knows the danger of getting distracted. We may start out with the best of intentions, but sometimes our attention gets turned aside to things that do not really matter. Sometimes we can listen to our appetites instead of the word of God, and we can end up as enemies of the cross of Christ. Paul is warning us here that we are not to let this happen. We are to be careful not to be influenced by those who do not follow the pattern.

III. As we come to verses 20-21, we now discover A DESCRIPTION OF THOSE WHO ARE FAITHFUL FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST.

And this is where we discover that we are citizens of heaven. And please notice: Paul does not say that we WILL be citizens of heaven, but he says that our citizenship is in heaven right now. In other words, just like the residents of Philippi were citizens of Rome, so also we are citizens of heaven, and as citizens of heaven, that makes us a colony of heaven right here on earth! Like those retired Roman soldiers, we may be living here, but we do not belong here. Our hearts are not here, we may be living here, but our hearts are in heaven.

Historians tell us that at the time Paul was there, Philippi was a Roman city. It might have been located in northern Greece, but the people did not speak Greek, they spoke Latin there. It might have been located 600 miles from Rome, but the people dressed like Romans, Roman magistrates governed the city, the people followed Roman laws. When they tucked their children into bed at night, they did not tell them stories of Greece, but they told them stories of the glory of Rome. They might have been living in Macedonia, but the people of Philippi knew that they were Romans! And so when Paul said that their citizenship was in heaven, the Philippians would have said, **“Oh, yeah, we know what that’s like! We know what it means to live in one place but to have our citizenship somewhere else!”**

Several weeks ago as we listened to the judge at Michael’s ceremony over in Milwaukee, one thing that really impressed me was how he emphasized the importance of single-minded dedication to the United States of America. In fact, before he administered the oath, the judge stopped the ceremony and asked, **“Does anyone have any allegiance or obligation to any other nation? If so, then speak up now, and I will have you removed from the courtroom!”** **“I didn’t think so,”** he said! And then to further emphasize the importance of the oath they were about to take, the judge then explained that after they take the oath, the next blood they shed would be American blood. In other words, a change was about to take place, a change in allegiance:

I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God.

Once that oath is taken, a person becomes a citizen of the United States, and that person is entitled to the benefits of being a citizen. We remember that Paul valued

his own Roman citizenship. In **Acts 22**, for example, Paul was arrested and is about to be scourged (brutally beaten) by a Roman soldier—they were about to torture a confession. Paul lets it get right to the moment that the scourging is about to begin. In fact, the Bible says that he waited until they had stretched him out with thongs—he was tied down, but then right at the last possible moment, Paul spoke up and said to the centurion who was standing by, ***“Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?”*** At that point, we can imagine the centurion’s face turning white! He quickly goes and gets the commander and says, ***“What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman.”*** The commander came out and said to Paul, ***“Tell me, are you a Roman?”*** And he said, ***“Yes.”*** The commander answered, ***“I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money.”*** And Paul said, ***“But I was actually born a citizen.”*** The Bible explains that they let Paul go immediately, and that the commander was ***“afraid”*** because he had put Paul in chains without a proper trial. If you remember our study of the book of **Acts** ten years ago, **Acts 22** is represented by the 22nd letter of the alphabet: the letter V, ***“Valuable Citizenship.”***

Like Paul, we can value our citizenship, we can love this nation, we can serve, we can volunteer, we can vote, we can run for office; however, we must remind ourselves first of all that we are citizens of heaven. We can love this nation, but we do not belong here! If we mindlessly adopt the values of this nation without first holding them up to the word of God, then we have failed to be true to the land of our *new birth*.

Just as Rome had colonies all over the world, so also does God. We refer to these colonies as congregations of the Lord’s people—little patches or outposts of heaven right here on earth. We are the colony here in Madison. There are colonies down in Janesville, and in Crystal Lake, and over in Dubuque, and over in Minnesota, and over in Beaver Dam—there are a number of colonies in Ghana. We may be living here and there, but our citizenship is in heaven! Please listen to a letter written by a Christian to his non-Christian friend near the end of the 4th Century, as he tried to convince his friend to examine the Christian faith. This is what he wrote...

Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life.... With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign. And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country.... They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven.

In very practical terms, what Paul is saying here in **Philippians 3** is that we are now living as representatives of heaven. Or, as he explains in **2 Corinthians 5:20**, ***“Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an***

appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” Whether we work in a factory, or as a schoolteacher, or as a small business owner, or whatever we do, we are actually serving as representatives of heaven—we are ambassadors. We may live or work just about anywhere, but we represent our true home in heaven, and it is an awesome responsibility. The people around us will make a decision about Christ based on what they see in us. And so with this in mind, I think we understand why Paul would conclude this short passage with one more encouraging word in **Chapter 4:1**...

IV. In Chapter 4:1, we come to A FINAL EXHORTATION, A FINAL AND VERY PERSONAL ENCOURAGEMENT.

“Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and my crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.” The “crown” Paul refers to here is not the crown of a king, but he uses a different word. He uses a word that referred to the wreath of olive branches that was given to the victor in the Greek games. And so as Paul is chained to a Roman soldier under house arrest in Rome, Paul is saying to these people, **“You are my reward! You are so important to me!”** And so for that reason, as he thinks about Lydia and her family, as he thinks about the jailer and his family, he begs them to stand firm in the Lord.

Conclusion:

The main thing we need to remember this morning is that we are citizens of heaven. As I was preparing for this morning’s lesson, I ran across a story from many years ago about a man who was visiting a friend of his who was a British military officer who had been stationed somewhere in the middle of an African jungle. As he entered the officer’s hut, he was surprised to see his friend dressed in his formal military attire and seated at a table that was set with silverware and fine china. The visitor asked why he was all dressed up and seated at a table so lavishly set in the middle of the jungle. The officer explained, **“Once a week I follow this routine to remind myself of who I am—a British citizen. I want to maintain the customs of my real home and live according to the codes of British conduct, no matter how those around me live. I want to avoid substituting a foreign culture for that of my homeland.”** For those of us who are Christians: We are citizens of heaven. That is why we are here today.

Are we getting caught up and distracted by the stuff of this life? Or are we looking forward (more than anything) to being with Christ in heaven? When we wake up tomorrow morning, I would suggest that we wake up with a question: How can we use our responsibility as citizens of heaven to honor God and bless our neighbors? I would suggest that we do not leave home until we have answered that question.

The Bible teaches that we become citizens of God’s kingdom by repenting of our sins, by publicly confessing our belief in Jesus as the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be briefly buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have

any questions, if you are facing some difficult situation you would like us to pray about, or if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we stand and sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org