

**+ Philippians 3:17-4:1 + Rejoice that Your Citizenship Is in Heaven! +
+ 12th Sunday after Pentecost + 7 August 2016 +**

Who are you? That's a question that Christians of every age have had to answer since the earliest days of the Christian church. It's a question of loyalty and priority. It's a question of acceptance or rejection. How you answer that question could be the difference between being respected and being ridiculed, between a continued friendship or family relationship and sudden separation or isolation. How you answer that question could mean the difference between keeping your job and losing your livelihood, between freedom and oppression. How you answer that question could mean the difference between a ruined reputation because you caved in or pain and suffering because you did not. How you answer that question could mean the difference between life and death. How you answer that question means the difference between an eternity in hell and an eternity in heaven. So who are you—a citizen of heaven or an enemy of the cross?

As North American Christians, we've had it pretty easy. You don't have to go to sleep at night fearing that a loved one could be kidnapped and brutally murdered for their Christian faith at the hands of Islamic jihadists. You don't have to worry that your church might be demolished by anti-Christian mobs before our Easter Sunday service or that you and your congregation could be imprisoned simply for gathering to worship. You don't have to worry about your pastor being taken away in the middle of the night never to be seen again or your children taken from you to be brainwashed of their Christian faith. You don't have to worry about losing your property or being beaten by an anti-Christian mob because you follow Jesus. We have not been forced to find out how extreme our world's rejection can be towards citizens of heaven who reject the world's darkness and stand firm in the Lord. It's a wonderful blessing of God's grace that we do not have to live with such fear, but has that blessing made us complacent?

Who are you? If you stop and take a look at your life, does your life reflect your answer? Do you live like a citizen of heaven or an enemy of the cross? None of us wants to admit that we have not lived as citizens of heaven, but when you look at your life, what do you see? Have you always stood firm or have you ever conformed to the world around you fearing the world's rejection?

How do you look at the world around you? Do you see it as something that passes away or have you bought into the lie that you need to grasp at this life with all of your might? Have you lived like a citizen of heaven or compromised with the **"enemies of the cross of Christ"**?

Who are you? The Apostle Paul knew how eternally important it was for his hearers to properly answer that question. Over the years, Paul had seen how the good news of Jesus changed people's hearts and lives, their loyalties and priorities. Called from the darkness of unbelief by Jesus himself, Paul devoted his life to proclaiming Christ crucified. He spent all his time pointing people to heaven towards that "something better"—eternal life with Jesus, the heavenly goal that he pursued with every fiber of his being, but his hearers kept slipping and sliding back to the comforts of this life. Paul knew that by going back to what was comfortable, back to what and whom they refused to let go, the people he loved were turning their backs on Jesus. In fact, by doing so, they were comfortably turning themselves back into **"enemies of the cross of Christ."**

So with tears, Paul warned them, **"...Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction; their god is their stomach; their glory is in their shame. They are focused on earthly things..."** Do you hear Paul's warning for you and me in there? How could a loyal follower of Jesus become an enemy of the cross? It's not as difficult as you think. As sinful human beings, you and I are naturally inclined to hold on to what makes us feel comfortable and pleasant in this life. We're naturally inclined to live for this world and its pleasures and sins. We're naturally inclined to live for the things of this world that pass away like money and stuff and people. We're naturally inclined to live for ourselves and not for our Savior.

After all, who of us would naturally prefer to embrace the cross and all its troubles and challenges over all that makes our lives easier right now? By nature, we would gladly set aside the heavy burden of the cross as citizens of heaven to chase after the fleeting comforts of this earthly life—especially if we don't have to face the world's harsh rejection.

...But Paul is right, isn't he? Daily you and I are tempted to think that this world is all we have and we dare not do anything to ruin that. You get so caught up in this life that you focus on what you want here and now. You wander away from hearing and reading God's Word. Your priorities become self-centered and short-sighted. Your time and money and effort are wasted on striving for empty glory or success in this life. Who cares about heaven or the cross of Christ when you can grasp at everything in this life now?

So when God calls you to live as a citizen of heaven, how could you possibly give up what rightly belongs to you? Why give up what's nice to have now for the sake of following Jesus when it brings trouble or difficulty or pain into your life or the life of your loved ones? Why would you be willing to stand up for what's right in God's sight and face the rejection of the people around you because you don't conform, you don't cave, you don't compromise? Why would you remain faithful to Jesus even to the point of death when life could be so much easier if you just cave in?

Pretty soon that mixture of fear and complacency draws your eyes away from Jesus to what's going on in your life right now and you find yourself comfortably turning back into an enemy of the cross. As harmless as it seems, such an earthbound focus that fears the rejection of the world can have deadly results for your eternity. All that worldly glory turns to shame. All that worldly comfort turns to pain when eternity is spent in hell. That's why Paul lifts our eyes heavenward to show us who we really are and who we become in Christ. ***“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.”***

One of the first questions that people ask when they want to get to know you is “Where do you come from?” or “Where did you grow up?” For me, that's a rather difficult question to answer since I never lived anywhere longer than six years until I moved here. I usually answer, “The Western United States,” but central New York is really our home. Now whether you grew up around here or not, whether you grew up in this state or this country or not, there's a certain pride in knowing where you come from. For example, we see that in the Olympics that just started on Friday as athletes proudly represent their countries and strive to win glory for themselves and their nations.

In a world that only offers what passes away, in a world that will reject you because it rejected the Savior whom you serve, it is absolutely important to know that in Christ, your ***“citizenship is in heaven.”*** In that sense, you and I are just passing pilgrims on our way home to heaven. That's our real home where our names are recorded with the blood of Jesus in his book of life. That's where our prayers ascend and our hopes aspire. That's where you and I have an inheritance that will never perish, spoil, or fade, where loved ones in Christ are already enjoying eternal glory, and where someday we will take up permanent residence with our living Savior Jesus.

As citizens of heaven, ***“we also eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”*** You see, Jesus came in lowliness to live in this world for you first. He came to endure the world's harsh rejection and make the sacrifice necessary to give you the heavenly home that you possess even now. As we heard earlier in the Gospel, Jesus had to boldly embrace the cross and all its pain and shame and death to give you eternal life with him in heaven. He had to give up everything to purchase your citizenship, even at the cost of his own innocent blood and the loss of his own life. He did all that to give you what's most important, what you need most—forgiveness and life eternal. Then through the hearing of his Word, through the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism, Jesus granted you citizenship in heaven through faith in him.

Now as a citizen of heaven, your perspective changes even in the face of the world's rejection. As a citizen of heaven, you can imitate those who have faithfully gone before you, whether that's the apostles like Peter and Paul and John or the martyrs who were willing to give up everything to have everything in Jesus or those believers in your life who willingly left behind the temporary things of this world for life eternal with Jesus. As a citizen of heaven, you can ***“stand firm in the Lord”*** not compromising, not conforming, not caving into the world's demands or hostility to your Savior.

Above all, as a citizen of heaven, you can look forward to the Last Day when Jesus will come again and ***“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.”*** That means he will raise you from the dead. All your sin, all your weakness, all the consequences of your sin will be purged away forever. Body and soul will live forever with Jesus in your heavenly homeland never to be separated from him ever again.

That's your motivation to boldly confess, “I am a citizen of heaven and I will live as a citizen of heaven to the end.” That's what enables you to embrace the cross, even when its heavy burden brings painful difficulty into your life as you turn your back on what passes away in this life. That's what enables you to follow Jesus to your heavenly home remaining faithful to the end. So my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, remember that you are dearly loved. Rejoice in that heavenly citizenship you possess through Christ, and with eyes focused on Jesus and hearts yearning for heaven, ***“stand firm in the Lord”*** because victory is already yours. Amen.