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Upper Thames Missionary Church
Trinity Sunday 2021

“Citizens”
Philippians 3:15-21

-Like last week, Paul is saying some startling things here (hearing people be called "dogs" "bad works people" and "flesh-mutilators" should cause us to prick up our ears)

-This week, Paul has some more strong words, and it requires us to think carefully about the people these words are directed at, since its not quite as obvious as last week.

But to help us process this, we need to ponder together on Pauls comments in v. 20, and that's where we will begin today.

Let's look at that verse again: it says –

“For our citizenship is in heaven, and from there we eagerly await a savior – the Lord Jesus Christ.” (My Translation)

- “what’s the therefore there for?” – in chapter 3 we’ve got this contrast between earthly and heavenly things – and especially between having your **mind** set on earthly things or on heavenly things.

Paul is contrasting the way of Jesus with the way of worldly thinking (that’s why some of your translations may use the word “but” instead of “for” to emphasize the contrast. Those who have taken on Jesus’ way of thinking are described as having received a new citizenship – being of a totally different identity than they used to be.

-Paul isn’t just choosing the language of Citizenship as a random metaphor for our new identity – there are several layers to his meaning:

First, we can say that the language of citizenship is about power and privilege – Roman Citizenship certainly worked this way. It gave a person rights and power over non-citizens. It was something to be used to one’s advantage in many circumstances.

- advantage – precisely the thing that Jesus relinquished when he took on flesh in the Christ song of 2:5-11.

-Therefore, we see our citizenship in heaven working out a certain way on earth – not like the people of the worldly nations view citizenship, as power, privilege and advantage, but present humility, being content to suffer the loss of any earthly thing, because our power, our riches, and our hope are all rooted in heaven and the future of Christ’s return from heaven to Earth.

- our "power and privilege" is in heaven, with the King.

Second, citizenship in the Roman world was closely tied to having a “savior”. Paul is reminding us we don't look to earthly powers for salvation and rescue from our ultimate struggles— we look to a power that is over and above any earthly power

-“savior,” the title for Jesus we see here in v. 20, was a title familiar to the Roman citizens of Philippi – if you recall, they were mostly retired soldiers and their families and they knew that the military title of Caesar was “savior” – they had marched into battles declaring that they were bringing the “good news of the Lord – Caesar”, and they were coming to save the barbarians from their uncivilized way of life.

Paul is openly challenging that imperialistic thought about Rome and Caesar, and saying we are citizens of a better country, and we have a greater savior.

Third, Paul uses the language of Citizenship here because he knows that our citizenship fuels our ethic - our way of life.

We have one identity marker, the primary and “triune” one – and that is the name of our Savior, King **Jesus**, and of our **fatherland**, the Kingdom of **God**, and our personal identity marker, the **Holy Spirit**.

Note well:

Paul did not ask the Philippians to give up Roman citizenship, indeed, Paul held onto his dearly, and didn't mock or belittle it – presumably, he would have encouraged the Philippians with Roman citizenship to do the same.

Paul knew it was a practical tool, of temporary value, and worth holding on to while he could have it in this age.

Our heavenly citizenship is not only a marker, then, it is itself a **guiding light**.

-The Spirit, our proof of heavenly citizenship, is a personal, leading, commanding, speaking, living presence with us - calling us and empowering us to live according to the ethics of the Kingdom of God.

vv. 15-16

In light of their common citizenship, their call toward the same ethic, their sharing of the savior Jesus and the Holy Spirit, Paul can trust that they will work out points of disagreement without Paul needing to invoke his authority as an apostle.

Verses 17-19 are a little different. They are in a way, a call to acknowledge the right and the wrong way of living as “dual” citizens, so to speak.

In verse 18 we see: that Paul is saying many **LIVE** as enemies – he is talking about their actions, their ethics and bad – so where has it all gone wrong?

- sometimes people think this is a problem with "false teachers" and false teaching – but the context says nothing about that - in fact the surrounding context would lead us to believe these people had been saying the right things, but they weren't living the right way.

Paul or the Philippians seem to believe these people were claiming to be Christians, but their practice is in direct opposition to the Cross of Christ.

-it is power centred and selfish – just like Roman the life that comes from prioritizing earthly citizenship – it appears that they wanted hold the image of Christ while still satisfying their earthly desires

-these people LIVE in contrast to the Christ Hymn which as we said is the core of his message to the Philippians.

-whereas the cross is "emptying, humble, obedient" they are enemies of that way of life, not living as citizens of heaven here on earth as Jesus showed us.

In v. 19 we see that the outcome for these people – whether they are legalists like the Jews trying to make the Christians jewish (remember last week) or whether they are lawless Christians – making a mockery of grace by saying – lets sin so that grace can abound!

-the outcome of these people's way of life is **destruction** - not the prize and upward call of Christ

-what does this mean for us?

Many things, but there are two things we need to be careful of:

First,

It means we must be aware, in our churches today, that we can claim Christ... We can claim to say or think the right things... but there is more to life than claims, and claims can be empty.

Second, - Paul is not saying the mark of a "Citizen of Heaven" is to be a person eagerly awaiting the return of Jesus. Sure, that's part of it)

Citizenship is described in particular, in chapters 2 and 3, and most clearly, in 2:5-11 when Paul describes the life of the King we are all called to copy.

I think this also means that we need to take v. 17 especially seriously:

-While we must study the scriptures to learn about the Kingdom ethic, and the way of living that matches up with the truth of the gospel, **it is imperative that we have people in our life that we can imitate.**

Like any person new to a land, we need guides, we need people to take us under their wing and show us the ways of this new place, explain to us the strange and beautiful features of the kingdom, and be gracious with our questions, concerns, and doubts.

This perhaps is what the church lacks most in our culture, because we are fiercely independent. This sort of help cannot come from youtube personalities, celebrity Christians, and mega-church pastors, that we watch online. In fact, we cannot be discipled by these digital presences – because we only see the person they put out there online, we don't know their attitude, behaviour, and character in the daily grind. This has become a particular problem for all of us in these days.

We need to realize and be reminded of the fact that finding a godly person to take us under their wing is important for all of us, AND taking someone under our wing is important too. There is a description of this aspect of being a Christian, and it goes like this:

“I am helping someone, and someone is helping me to be a growing follower of Jesus”

Who is someone you look up to who displays attitudes, behaviours, and character, that looks like Jesus? Paul reminds us here to keep our eyes on those who live as faithful citizens of heaven.

-list a few people who come to mind, and if you have none, pray and ask for one!