

“Living As Heavenly Citizens”

Philippians 3:15-21

I remember hearing the story about a fellow who was out in the country one afternoon, and he happened to drive past a farmhouse with a barn. On the side of the barn, he noticed half a dozen arrows embedded, and each arrow was right in the middle of a brightly painted bullseye. The man was impressed, so he went up to the farmer and asked, “Are you the one who shot these arrows?” And the farmer said, “Yes sir, that would be me.” So the man said, “You are one amazing shot! How in the world did you ever acquire such skill?” The farmer replied, “Well, it was easy. I just shot the arrows into the side of the barn first, and then I painted the bullseye around each one!”

Now, that is how most people attempt to go through life. To say it like the world, they ‘follow their heart’ and make what ever they desire in the moment the bullseye. And if they’re getting what they want, they assume their life is on target. Well, the apostle Paul tells the Philippians he has another target in mind, and not one that he has drawn for himself. Turn with me in your Bible this morning to the third chapter of Philippians. Throughout our study of this letter tucked away in the New Testament, we’ve returned over and over again to the central theme of joy in the Lord. Rejoicing in the Lord is Paul’s emphasis in chapter 3, and to do this will involve pressing on toward the heavenly prize which is ours in Christ. Within this text, Paul has been dealing with the subject of maturity and the believer’s responsibility to press on toward the prize of Christlikeness. He has said that to know Christ is his number one aim in life. While he is not perfect, he presses on to lay hold of that for which the Lord Jesus has laid hold of him. That’s the bullseye. Which is to say that he now lives with a sense of divine purpose. And so to live with this sense of redeemed purpose,

Paul says that he has made the clear choice to forget what lies behind, strain forward to what lies ahead, as he presses on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Everything about his life was aimed in this one direction. The bullseye was seeing the Lord Jesus one day and, in the meantime, living in a such a way that Christ would be honored. He then says in verse 15, “Let those of us who are mature think this way.” (Read)

And so Paul has heaven on his mind and he is ready to go. And he wants believers to know and understand that their ‘citizenship’ is in heaven, which is what he writes now in verse 20. Heavenly citizenship impacts the way that we live on earth. I know you have heard the cliché that warns us against being so heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good. I have found that it is the opposite which is most often the case. The problem with most Christians is not that they think about Heaven too much, but that they think about it too little. One my favorite quotes says:

C.S. Lewis — *“If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought the most of the next. The apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the slave trade, all left their mark on earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one. Aim and Heaven and you will get earth thrown in; aim at earth and you will get neither.”*

The irony is that the more we think about the next world, the more effective we become in this one. It was the hope of resurrection in Christ and Heaven that transformed the first century world through the witness of the early church. The apostles and early Christians willingly laid down their lives in this world because

their hopes were fixed on the one which is to come. That is how Paul lived his life as a citizen of heaven. And that is what Paul explains for us in these verses to which we will now turn our attention. Here in the text, he wants the Philippians to know that heavenly citizenship involves a daily discipleship, a way of living that requires them to look in, look around, look out, and look up. And so notice how, number one, we must:

1—Look IN for God's Spirit to lead (3:15-16)

“Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.”

There is a certain way of thinking that distinguishes mature, heavenly minded believers. And that way of thinking has already been explained by Paul in the previous verses. It is a way of thinking that understands we have not arrived. It is humble and forward focused. The word ‘mature’ there in verse 15 was used to contrast a child with an adult. The Christian who is growing toward the goal of Christlikeness will reflect a humble, teachable attitude. How will maturity like this happen? Well, there’s both an objective and a subjective element. Objectively, we have the Word of God. If we’re to become more like Christ, then we have to know what Christ was like. If we want to know what Christ is like, where can we go but to the Bible? The Word of God is the revelation of Jesus Christ. The books of the Old Testament announce that He is coming. The four gospels record His arrival—His birth at Bethlehem, His earthly ministry, His death and resurrection. The book of Acts records the immediate impact of that as His disciples spread the gospel. The epistles explain the significance of Christ’s life and ministry. And then the book of Revelation presents Him as the goal of all history. So that everywhere you look in this book, Jesus is the focus of it all. And

as we study the Word of God, we do so in order that we might know what Christ is like.

Subjectively, the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to make me more like Christ. We are dependent upon His power to change us into the image of Christ which is the work of the Holy Spirit. Second Corinthians 3:18 says that as we gaze at the glory of our Lord in Christ, the Spirit changes us into His image. So objectively we are devoted to the study of God's Word, while subjectively we are dependent upon the work of God's Spirit. That is how we grow. We look to the Word of God for instruction and rely on the wisdom and the power of the Holy Spirit who lives within us. Paul wants the Philippians to know that they have the greatest Teacher of all living within them. The Author of this book lives with you and me! Let me mention to you a few of the ways the Holy Spirit leads and instructs us as believers:

- The Spirit of God will always be consistent with what the Word of God reveals (John 16:13).
- The Spirit of God will always lead you to act according to the character of God (Romans 1:4).
- The Spirit of God will never lead you to live your life in fear (2 Timothy 1:7).
- The Spirit of God will always lead you to reject sin, not defend or hide it (Galatians 5:17).
- The Spirit of God will always work to free you from guilt and despair through repentance and hope (Titus 3:5).
- The Spirit of God will lead you to take action instead of giving up in defeat (Ephesians 6:18).

By His Spirit, God will lead us on to maturity in the faith and will illuminate our minds to know and understand His will. It is important that we not get slack and become complacent in our faith. Verse 16 says, “Only let us hold true to what we have attained.” In other words, we must stay at it, keep moving forward, living one day at a time.

2—Look AROUND for examples to follow (3:17)

“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.”

To live as heavenly citizens means we look in Scripture and to the leadership of the Holy Spirit and we also look around for examples that are worthy of being followed.

“Example” —*refers to a blueprint to follow in constructing a life worth living (word in Greek is ‘typos’)*

Discipleship demands that we as believers look around for spiritual examples to follow. Notice Paul says in verse 17, “Brothers, join in imitating me.” In other words, follow me, pattern your life after mine as I am following Christ. Paul wants to provide an example of what a spiritually maturing, growing disciple of Christ looks like up close. His life is in contrast to the legalistic false teachers who were confusing them. To ‘press on’ to maturity in the faith requires that you and I be in the Word of God, rely on the leading of the Holy Spirit, and also have an example of what it means to follow Jesus. We all need examples in our lives of those who are farther along in this process than we are. When Paul says, “Join in imitating me,” he is imitating Jesus Christ as God has revealed Him in the Scripture.

1 Corinthians 11:1 —“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”

As a Christian, you and I ought to be able to say the same thing. Every Christian ought to have someone whom they look up to as a spiritual mentor in the faith. We press on to maturity not in isolation, but through imitation.

“Imitating” —*literally means a follower together; comes from a compound Greek word meaning ‘with’ and ‘mimic’*

In their minds, they could no doubt recall the way that Paul had modeled the faith before their watching eyes. They’re aware of how he labored among them, how he was bold in his witness even when faced with threats. They remember the way that he responded to his imprisonment and abuse in the Philippian jail. And now, though he is separated from them by a great distance, he urges them to imitate his own personal example, to use his life as a pattern for their own faith. And because he is separated from them, he states the need for them to surround themselves with examples who are worthy of imitating. Notice he calls upon them to keep their eyes on those who walk according to that same example.

“Keep Your Eyes” —*word in Greek is ‘skopeo’ and means to observe, to fix one’s gaze upon, to take aim at; this is the same word from which we get our English word ‘scope’*

Let’s suppose you are about to go under the knife. You are there waiting to go into the O.R. when the nurses come to wheel you away. Before the anesthesiologist puts you to sleep, you have the opportunity to ask the surgeon about his credentials. He tells you that he went to the finest of medical schools. But more importantly, you want to know if he’s ever performed surgery. But what if he were to say to you, “You’re my first! I’ve never done this before, but don’t worry, last night I stayed at a Holiday Inn Express.” I guarantee you that such a response would cause you to think twice before having surgery!

The plain fact of the matter is that we often assume that the doctor or surgeon has the experience. You and I know all that is required of them in their field long before they ever come to the operating table. They have years of schooling and then a very important thing known as ‘residency’ which refers to the period of time they are receiving their ‘on the job’ training. They are closely watching and observing as a far more seasoned and experienced doctor goes about his profession. Residency is a full-time, supervised, clinical training program in a specific field of medicine whereby the student is given more and more hands-on experience while under the close supervision of a superior.

That’s the idea behind this word ‘imitate.’ It doesn’t mean we lose our personality or become a carbon copy clone of someone else. It simply means we look to those who are walking with God, and we pattern our lives after them. We learn to read and study the Bible from them. We learn to pray like them. We learn how to share our faith like they do or raise our children like they do, and so on. These are the necessary relationships which are involved in discipleship. It is the recognition that we need each other in the body of Christ. Instruction comes through observation.

Steve Lawson — *“Every Christian today needs to have the same kinds of examples before them. Wise is the believer who has several such people in their life as mentors and leaders. Misguided is the believer who thinks they have no need of these types of influences. Having an array of advanced Christians modeling genuine spirituality will produce a much more balanced, healthy Christian life.”*

We pick up things we learn from other people, for better or for worse. It reminds me a story I heard about a little girl who noticed that her mom was cutting off the ends of a pot roast before putting it in the oven to cook for dinner. She had seen

her mom do this many times before, but she had never asked her ‘why.’ So this time she asked, and her mom replied, “I don’t know why I cut the ends off, but it’s what my mom always did. Why don’t you ask Grandma?” And so this little girl called up her grandmother and said, “Grandma why do you cut the ends off of the pot roast before cooking it?” Her grandmother replied, “I don’t know. That’s just the way my mom always cooked it. Why don’t we ask her? So the girl called her great grandmother and asked her the very same question, “Granny, why did you cut the ends off the pot roast before cooking it?” And her great grandmother said, “Best I can recall, when I was first married, we had a very small oven, and the roast didn’t fit unless I cut its ends off!” Why do we do what we do?

Paul says, “Keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.” Do you have someone in your life that you look to as an example in the faith? It may be the one who led you to Jesus. Or, perhaps it is a father or mother. Whomever it may be, it needs to be someone who is spiritually mature in Christ who can teach you and set before you an example of what maturity looks like. We need these examples, and we should all determine to be such an example for someone else. Other people around us are watching how you and I live. They are watching our actions and reactions, listening to our words, and observing how we treat other people.

Matthew 18:6—“Whoever causes one these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

We must never forget that the Great Commission is not simply a mandate to make converts, but to make disciples. It is leading people to follow Christ, to believe in Christ and follow Him in discipleship. Church leadership prioritizes it:

Ephesians 4:11-14—“And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine.”

Colossians 1:28-29—“Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ.”

The goal of heavenly citizens is maturity in Christ. And we need examples in our lives of what it looks like practically. I have people in my life that have helped me along the way, who taught me to read and study my Bible. Who taught me how to share my faith with a nonbeliever. And I learned by observation, by getting close to them, by spending time in their presence, by seeking out their counsel when I found myself confused or struggling with something. Notice that there is a third thing involved as we must also:

3—Look OUT for counterfeits to avoid (3:18-19)

“For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”

Citizenship in heaven demands that we look around for the examples to follow, while at the same time we also look out for counterfeits to be avoided. Not only do we imitate godly examples, but notice that in verse 18 Paul says that we are to watch out for counterfeits who are in actuality ‘enemies of the cross’ rather

than friends and allies. He is describing those who profess to be Christian, but their lifestyles and doctrine reveal them to be unbelievers and enemies of the cross.

He's warned the church against those who were peddling a false gospel of works, those who went around claiming that salvation was Jesus 'plus' something else. Back up in verse 3, he says, "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh." The three-fold repetition of the phrase 'look out' emphasizes the need for vigilance. Remember that Jesus said:

Matthew 7:15-16—“Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits.”

They come to you in sheep’s clothing, meaning that they have the appearance of sincerity. However, inwardly they are ravenous wolves. And Jesus said it will be a problem even to the end of the age. In Matthew 24, when He speaks of the end of the age, He says, “Many will come in My name and will deceive many.” And as you work your way through the New Testament, you find out this is an ongoing issue in the church. In Acts 8, we read about a guy named Simon Magus who was a counterfeit believer among the general population of believers in Samaria. Then in Acts 13 there is Elymas the Sorcerer. In Acts 20, Paul is about to leave the Ephesian elders and he says, “I know that after my departure, savage wolves will come in, not sparing the flock. In fact, men from among your own selves will come in, speaking perverse words to draw away the disciples to themselves.” So he knew it would be an ongoing issue. It was an issue then, and it is still an issue now.

Don't think giftedness is the same thing as godliness. We are often attracted to a person's giftedness in some area, and we may automatically assume this is the same thing as godliness and virtue when it is not. Charisma is not the same thing as character. Influence is not the same thing as integrity. A crowd following is not the same thing as a Christ follower. And as the citizens of heaven, you and I must be aware of these potential dangers. And so Paul is writing with tears as he warns the church of these enemies of the cross. They use the name of Jesus to build their own brand. Yet their message is entirely opposite and is in fact diametrically opposed to the message of the gospel. They are not unlike those in our own time who want to use the name of Jesus while flying the pride flag, or who use the name of Jesus as a means of personal gain. Or those who co-op the name of Jesus to fit their political ideology.

They may pose as His allies, but in all actuality they are His enemies. They despise His grace, downplay His sacrifice, and deny His gospel. And notice what Paul says is their real motivation. He makes four statements about them in verse 19:

Their condemnation is sure

Notice verse 19 says, "Their end is destruction." The word for 'end' is the Greek word 'telos' which means goal. Apart from divine intervention leading to repentance and genuine faith, the unbeliever's life will end in eternal destruction and separation from God in Hell. It is not a rosy picture of what it means to die without Christ. No, it is the most sobering and shocking thought there is, to think that without Christ a man or a woman will die and be cast into Hell. And such a thought moves Paul to tears as he writes these words. The tear drops fall from his cheeks to stain the pages which he writes. This is the terrible fate of all who die lost in sin.

Their craving is sensual

The second descriptive phrase in verse 19 says, “Their god is their belly.” And that word ‘belly’ is another way of simply referring to appetite. Paul is using it to describe sensual or unrestrained desire. It is the one who lives with no higher authority than the dictates of their own sinful heart. It is to say that they worship their appetite, whatever that may be.

Their celebration is shameful

Paul goes on in verse 19, “And they glory in their shame.” In other words, they celebrate things which should make them ashamed. They live an upside down life as far as Heaven is concerned, celebrating the wrong things. They are like those Isaiah said who, “Call evil good and good evil, they put forth darkness for light and light for darkness, they put forth bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.”

G.K. Chesterton — *“Fallacy does not cease to be fallacy simply because it is fashionable.”*

Their captivation is shortsighted

Notice the last phrase in verse 19, “With minds set on earthly things.” Rather than minding the things of Heaven, these enemies of the cross are preoccupied with all things Earthly. The reason is due to the fact that they are of this world, unlike a child of God whose citizenship is in Heaven. An earthly mindset is concerned with nothing more than the immediate and temporal. So that the here and now is all that matters. That’s how people who don’t know the Lord live their life, isn’t it?

Now, don’t think this means that you and I should avoid all unbelievers at all costs. How else will people ever come to know Jesus except through our

witness to them? There is a sense in which all of us were at one time or another an enemy of God. We lived for ourselves with our god being our belly, we gloried in what was really our shame, and our minds were set on earthly things. And were it not for the grace of God, our end would have been destruction and eternal separation from God in Hell. But thank God for His mercy! And that's why Paul writes these words with such emotion. He says, "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ." He's brokenhearted over their lost and blind condition. Elsewhere, he wrote about his fellow Jews and his deep desire to see them come to faith:

Romans 9:1-3—"I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."

Do you love lost people like that? Are you that passionate to see your lost family members come to know Christ? Are we moved to tears when consider what it means for a lost man or woman to die and be eternally separated from God in Hell? Paul is moved to tears as he writes these words.

Stephen Davey —*"Paul is worthy of imitation in so many areas, and this is one of them. Paul wept over unbelievers like Jesus Christ wept over unbelieving Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). We do not find any hint of Paul saying, 'Well, those wicked people are going to hell, and good riddance.' No Christian should ever entertain that kind of spirit toward the lost. In fact, the more we know about coming judgment, the more we are moved to compassion and urgency and prayer and outreach."*

When we lose our burden for the lost, we cease to share in God's heart desire that they be saved. Our ministry in the church can become so inward focused that we are far more passionate about things that ultimately don't matter. Listen to what the prince of preachers, Charles Spurgeon, wrote:

"If sinners will be damned, at least let them leap into hell over our bodies. And if they are to perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped around their knees, imploring them to stay. If hell is to be filled, let not one go there unwarned and unprayed for."

While we dare not pattern our lives after those who are lost may we never become calloused and unconcerned for their salvation! There's a final thing:

4—Look UP for Jesus to return (3:20-21)

"But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself."

Living as heaven's citizens demands that we look in for the direction of the Holy Spirit, we look around for examples to follow, we look out for counterfeits to avoid, and we look up for Jesus to return. This is to be our daily outlook as those who trust in Jesus. We must never forget that our ultimate citizenship is in heaven, and from it we are waiting for the Savior who has promised to come again. The word Paul uses for 'citizenship' there is a very important word.

"Citizenship" —*translates the Greek word 'politeuma' and is the same word we get 'politics' from*

The King James uses the word 'conversation.' That was a word which used to mean everyday behavior or manner of living. And that is the idea behind this

word. We are to live as citizens of heaven, which means we had better not get too comfortable living in this world which is not our home. To say that our citizenship is in heaven is not simply about our future destination, but our present motivation. There is nothing more purifying than believing Jesus Christ could come at any moment. We are waiting for our Savior from heaven! When you believe that and live with that in mind, it's a motivation. It will keep you from doing a lot of stuff, or it will get you involved in doing a lot of stuff. It will motivate you to live with eternity in mind. This certainty about the future enables consistency in the present. The word 'await' means to fully expect. It carries the idea of a sense of eager expectation. Such an outlook means that we live in a certain way where our minds are informed by truth and our lives are conformed to holiness.

Titus 2:11-13—“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

It is about our destination, our motivation, and then notice it is also about our future transformation. When Jesus Christ returns, verse 21 says, “He will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him to subject all things to Himself.” In other words, the citizens of heaven will one day get an upgrade! At a time in the future God will transform our ‘lowly’ bodies to be like Christ’s own ‘glorious’ body. That word ‘lowly’ is a fitting description of the body I currently have, and the older that I get, the more aware I become of just how ‘lowly’ it is. The years take their toll out on our mortal bodies.

However, if your citizenship is in heaven, you have an upgrade to look forward to one of these days!

Heavenly minded believers are those that take their growth in Christ seriously. Heavenly minded believers pattern their life after spiritually mature examples and become examples in the faith. Heavenly minded believers are cautious to not imitate the enemies of the cross, while remaining burdened for them. And heavenly minded believers are patiently and hopefully waiting for Jesus to come again, and look forward to one day being made fully like Him.

(Illus. of Titanic)

What world are you currently living for?