

Our Citizenship is in Heaven
(Philippians 3:17-4:1)
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. When I first became aware of some of the traditions associated with the season of Lent, I was child. The Friday observances are most memorable and that, because it impacted diet and once you start messing with food, things get serious. Pork was out, fish was in (now for a kid, THAT is a sacrifice)! But why? I blame no one but myself for the way I took this. To be religious or quote “to believe in God” was to try to be good. By making these adjustments then I was doing something for God like giving Him a sacrifice. By giving something up, I was pleasing God; I was being religious. This was good, so I thought. I didn’t realize that this was the height of confusion about what this season is really about.

But we’re talking more than just a “season.” What we live out during Lent is really a microcosm of the entire Christian life. Is this season about my life or about Jesus’ life? If it is about my life – or your life – then this is the epitome of sinking sand, but if this season is about Jesus’ life for sinners, for you, and for me, now we’re talking. Now things get cleared up. Our attempts to be religious fail. Our efforts to be good fall short. We keep messing up. We need more. We need serious religion. Real faith. It doesn’t depend on us. It depends on Jesus. We depend on Him. This is Lent. There is no other true Lent. Jesus is our life and new life. Jesus is our Lent.

But this holy season of Lent continues to be the occasion for confusion about the Christian life. If Jesus is our Lent, our Renewal, and our New Life, then why would anyone engage in acts of humiliation? Doesn’t the whole idea of “giving things up” put our faith back on our own shoulders, instead of our relying on the Lord? In other words, is Lent a product of man-made religion that engages in acts of holiness for one’s own sake and status or is Lent truly a following of the Lord’s passion for us; the only basis for salvation? Let me be clear about the short answer: Lent is entirely about the Lord’s suffering for you, not about your suffering for the Lord. Lent is about Jesus saving you, not about your trying to save yourself.

With this clarification, however, one might assume that any acts of self-sacrifice must therefore be entirely inappropriate for the Christian while leaving those sacrificial gestures to our brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic Church. And we would be wrong.

Lent also remembers that the passion of Christ yielded direct results for those who confess His saving name. His passion changes us. The Lord of Lent makes us Lent people. For us to ignore the new life would be to ignore the life that Jesus gives: giving to the needy (Matt 6:1-4); living lives of prayer and forgiveness to others (Matt. 6:5-15); and living lives of fasting (Matt. 6:16-18).

Jesus' passion for us has rendered gifts to us, and one of those gifts is a new citizenship. Heaven is now our home. We are people who belong to Christ. We are people who now belong to heaven. When I was growing up my mom would teach me and my siblings, "People will always know whether or not your parents taught you any better." That is, children reflect their parents. But the greater principle is that Christians reflect their Lord and Savior. So what Christians are not "are the enemies of the cross of Christ."

When heaven is your home, then you are like the King of Heaven. When heaven is your home, you don't treat this world as your home. You have a higher home. You have a better home, but for citizens of heaven, this does not mean that you neglect this world. No, now you see that you have a mission here: to be salt to the earth and light to the world. You're here to share the resources of your citizenship in heaven and one of those resources is to continue to keep before yourself and the world the sufferings of Jesus.

The sufferings of Jesus which we mediate upon especially during the Lenten season remind us of how our lives have changed. Christ on the cross crushed the devil's head, Christ on the cross nailed our sin and shame on those planks of wood; Christ on the cross put an end to our slavery to sin. To come to faith in the living Christ does not lead us to live contrary to the cross of Christ, but rather consistently with the cross of Christ.

Saint Paul, however, warns that there is a real danger out there. It is possible to confess Jesus – to have your theology and doctrine down – but to deny the Lord with your life; to deny your citizenship in heaven. In such a case a person is not willing to suffer with the Lord (Ro 8:17); nor are they willing for the world to be crucified to them and their being crucified to the world (Gal 6:14); nor do they crucify their own flesh with its lusts and desires (Gal. 5:24). This warning here in Philippians is about our living, not our doctrine. It's possible to know the Bible front to back, but live a life completely contrary to the Lord.

This is what we should be mindful of during Lent: how often do our lives fail to reflect our confession? How often do we not behave as citizens of heaven? How often do we behave as enemies of the cross of Christ? In our sin, we are inconsistent. I take comfort in the foundation of our confession: we are justified freely by His grace and yet, how easy it is for me to neglect giving to the poor? We have become a people over-reliant upon the government. There was a time in history when the Church was THE source for helping the poor. In fact, this was how the Church in the Medieval era became so prominent, those with means gave back to the Church so that the Church could give to the poor. The Church was overflowing with resources. As a congregation, we must preach the Gospel and we must remember the poor, but how often do we? How often do you? And the Lord in Matthew's gospel connects prayer to forgiveness. I can pray all day, but the rubber hits the road when faith in the heart must translate to mercy given to others. If the Lord is merciful to me, that mercy that He gives is designed to overflow. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew

5:44) This is what citizens of heaven do. And finally, I am called to fast. This is God's holy Word, His holy Will, but fasting? But this is no joke, when we fast we don't do it for spiritual points, but to be mindful that there is nothing else we need. There is only one thing we need: Christ. And yet, how is your fasting?

There is a life that does not value citizenship in heaven, doesn't live as a citizen of heaven. We live in accord to what we belong to. The non-citizen of heaven, has no choice but to live as a citizen of the world, accepting the world's values and the world's way of living. This is what it means to be an enemy of the cross of Christ. This is the careless life. Citizens of heaven care about others; citizens of the world care only about themselves.

What exactly does this non-heaven life look like: it is a life whose god is the belly. So the Cyclops in Euripides: "My flocks which I sacrifice to no one but myself, and not to the gods, and to this my belly the greatest of the gods: for to eat and drink each day, and to give one's self no trouble, this is the god for wise men" ("Cyclops," 334–338). This is a life of sensuality in food, drink, and sex. It is a life that is focused on self-gratification period. This is not the life of a citizen of heaven.

All of this leads to a fascinating state of affairs: if a non-heavenly life is fully invested in self, then it should not surprise us when the most impressive presentations of the human life and body belongs to those who make such an investment. We have to be careful here, because I am not saying that a true Christian can't be physically strong. Of course they can be, but I suppose I'm drawing some from Psalm 73. Asaph considers the worldly: "For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek." (vv 3-4) However, there is something to those who belong to heaven: their strength, their earthy "glory" is given away in service to others. They give "their best years" to the service of other people; and embrace the burdens of others. They know the strain of service. They know the cost of sacrifice. That is citizens of heaven are often not the most impressive specimens of people in the world. But is this a bad thing? Jesus Himself "had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him." (Is 53:2) and then consider how people described the great apostle Paul: they said, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account." (2 Co 10:10)

But there is more to this comparison: the citizen of heaven described in Philippians 3:21 is one who will have their lowly body transformed to be like the Lord's glorious body, but those without this citizenship will have a corrupted body. That is a body not to be admired after the resurrection; that body will be a half-body; a fading body; an incomplete body. It will be a body permanently scarred by sin. But for the body of the citizen of heaven – like you and me – our bodies will be raised imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in

weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.” (1st Cor 15:42-44) Christian, the Word of God here describes your future body!

Why is this so? Because your citizenship is in heaven. Traci and I were leaving Ephesus in Turkey to get back to our cruise ship on the Aegean. Traci had little trouble getting through the check point – something about her blonde-hair and blue-eyes made it evident that she had other citizenship – and she glided through. This was not the case when it was my turn. They stopped me and I was significantly delayed. My darker skin, black hair, and brown eyes fit a profile that made citizenship less than clear. I finally got by, esp. as Traci started to plead my case.

But our citizenship of heaven is not subject to hair and eye color. Your birth certificate coincides with your Holy Baptism, when you were born again and born into the kingdom of heaven. You also received a passport constantly employed: your confession that leads you to the altar where the veil between heaven and earth is lifted so that the gifts of heaven are given you through the King’s body and blood. But your citizenship is also known by your life. Christ is your life; His cross defines your life. Where sin has been covered by that cross means that citizens of Jesus live for Christ not for sin. And when sin is committed, there is only one response: we confess it and get it absolved so that we may live for Jesus all over again. This is your citizenship, but every single time you feel yourself getting tired, when you wonder how much longer you can go on, then remember: your lowly body will be made to be like the Lord’s glorious body.

The best is yet to come. That is, we are truly motivated by what we are yet to be. This requires faith. This requires remembering that this world is not all that life is. This means that we know that in truth our lives are not really defined by years. Yesterday my family celebrated my mom’s 90th birthday, but in Christ, her life is eternal. Years cannot contain her life. The same is true for you. You are a citizen of heaven. That means you live like one and when it gets hard, you remember what is yet to come: your lowly body is going to be transformed to be like His glorious body. This Lent let us live as citizens of heaven so that whatever we “give up” is simply the expression of thanksgiving...giving so as to be like our Savior who gave His all for us. These are sacrifices of faith; these are sacrifices which subdue the god of the belly; which crucify the flesh; and which exalt our true God: the Lord Jesus who has made us citizens of heaven!