

THE REQUIREMENTS AND BENEFITS OF CITIZENSHIP

The Book of Philippians #25

It's been a few weeks since we were in the book of Philippians so I want to read a few verses to get us in context with today's message.

PHILIPPIANS 3:7-14

“But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

The last time we were in the book of Philippians I spoke on Paul's admonition to forget what lies behind and to press on toward the goal of the upward call of Christ. The upward call of Christ refers to the heavenly realm, not the earthly realm. Though perfection is something to strive for here on earth, the fullness of perfection will not be attained until we reach heaven; until we are granted the fullness and completion of the good work that God began in us at the moment of salvation.

So the upward call of Christ comes at the end of Paul's race, not at the beginning. And it does not refer to Paul's call to be a minister of the gospel, but rather His call to a heavenly existence. According to The Expositor's Bible Commentary, if Paul had in mind the chariot races of Rome, the upward call of Christ would refer to the summons to the winner to approach the judge's elevated stand and receive his prize. This call is the prize that awaits him at the end of the race.

Like our Olympians, the gold, silver and bronze medals may be deserved because they finished the race ahead of the others, but their prize will not be awarded until the medal ceremony takes place. So Paul is visualizing the heavenly judge at the end of the age calling him to “come up” to receive his prize – the prize of eternal life and all the rewards for righteous living. But then Paul says something strange.

PHILIPPIANS 3:15

“Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you.”

Paul has already stated that he has not yet become perfect but he presses on so that he may lay hold of it (Philippians 3:12). This perfection is something that awaits him in heaven. So why is he now referring to some who have attained perfection? The word translated as “perfect” can mean “perfection” or “mature”. Since we already know Paul does not consider perfection something to be attained in completeness in this life, the most likely understanding of this verse is referring to those who are mature, rather than those who are perfect. In other words, he is saying that those who are mature should take the same view as Paul. One must forget the past and strive toward what lies ahead. If some have a view that differs from this Paul is certain that God will reveal it to them.

He then goes on to say that no matter what view you hold all of us should keep living by the same standard to which we have attained.

PHILIPPIANS 3:16

“However, let us keep living by the same standard to which we have attained.”

The word translated as “however” actually means “to get in line with” or “to be guided by”. Paul is saying that we can be assured of receiving the prize if we get in line with and continue to be guided by that which we have attained. And what is it that we have attained? A look at Romans 9 should give us the answer.

ROMANS 9:30-31

“What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it.” (NIV)

So what have we attained? We have attained the righteousness which comes to us through faith in Christ. This is not something which we attained on our own or through our own efforts, but rather that which Christ has attained for us by His death and resurrection. But it is appropriated by us through our faith in the work of Christ on our behalf. Paul explained this earlier in chapter 3, verses 8-9.

PHILIPPIANS 3:8-9

“More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.”

So we may not have attained perfection yet but we have attained something – and that something is the righteousness which comes through faith in Christ. This is the standard to which Paul is referring. If we are to live in such a way as to win the prize that awaits us we must live by and follow this standard. In other words, Paul is saying that we can be assured of receiving the prize if we get in line with God’s standard of righteousness and continue to be guided by it.

Jesus is, of course, the standard bearer for righteousness. He is the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). We need look no further for how to live a righteous life than to look at our Savior. But Paul tells us we can also recognize the pattern of righteousness by looking to those who live the same pattern that Jesus established. And Paul includes himself in this pattern as well as those who are following Paul’s own example. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 11:1 to be imitators of him, just as he also is an imitator of Christ. For that reason he says,

PHILIPPIANS 3:17

“Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.”

Paul had enough confidence in his life of faith that he could point to himself and say follow my example because I follow the example of Christ. I’m not sure most of us here would dare say that about our walk of faith. But though none of us are perfect there are many areas in our lives which other people could point to as examples of living out our faith. We may not be tested to the extreme that Paul was, but we too are tested. And what comes out of that testing is the fruit that people see.

Our goal, the goal of each one of us, is to make sure the fruit we produce is the fruit of righteousness and not the fruit of the flesh. Paul knew the difference between the two because he had lived one life in the flesh and one life in the Spirit. In both he sought to live a life of righteousness but in only one life did he accomplished it – his life of faith.

The reason he points this out is because there is a contrast between those who live according to righteousness and those who do not. And he wants us to be aware that not everyone who claims to be righteous lives by the same standard of righteousness.

PHILIPPIANS 3:18-19

“For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.”

Paul knew firsthand the bitter disappointment of close friends and fellow-workers who claimed to be followers of Christ for a season but were diverted from the faith by the choices they made. For instance, in Philemon 1:24 Paul speaks of Mark, Luke and Demas as his fellow workers. But in 2 Timothy 4:10 he says that Demas, having loved this present world, had deserted him and gone to Thessalonica. Demas set his mind on earthly things which caused him to desert the ministry and his fellow ministers.

He also said in 1 Timothy 1:19-20 that some had rejected the faith and suffered shipwreck in regard to it. Among those were Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom he handed over to Satan, so they would be taught not to blaspheme. It seems it matters what you set your mind on – earthly things or heavenly things. One can draw you away from the faith and the other can draw you to the upward call of Christ. One will cause you to wreck your ship on the reefs of this world’s pleasure. The other will allow you to sail into eternity unharmed.

That’s why Paul tells us where to set our faith and the motivation for doing so.

COLOSSIANS 3:1-2

“...keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on the earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

As Paul said earlier in Philippians, *“To live is Christ and to die is gain”* (Philippians 1:21). Because Paul understood this so well, he also said this:

PHILIPPIANS 3:7, 10-11

“Whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ...that I might know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead”.

Paul knows that an encounter with the Living God can make a change in one’s values and goals. He is also very aware that even in the midst of our earthly pursuits God can initiate change for the very purpose of creating true righteousness within us. He did this with Paul and He has done this with us as well.

We spoke last week of change, in particular the changes that will be occurring for our congregation over the next month. The book of Philippians has much to teach us on the subject of change and how to deal with it. After all, it was written by Paul who had one of the most dramatic events happen to him, changing the course of his present and his future life forever. If anyone would know how to handle change it would be him. He is the one who wrote in chapter four of Philippians, “*Be anxious for nothing*” and “*I can do all things through Him who strengthens me*”. Paul knows that change can be a blessing if you acknowledge the One who brings the change.

We mentioned last week that change is one of the inevitabilities of life. But it has been said that there are two other things certain in this life. And they are death and taxes. Though we may have a way to reduce our tax burden and may occasionally get a refund on our federal income tax, we all pay a sales tax or a gas tax or a county or city tax in one form or another. You even pay taxes on your phone and utility bills.

And as far as the other is concerned, death is one of the inevitabilities of life. And the author of Hebrews reminds us of this when he says, “*It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment*” (Hebrews 9:27). As much as we would like to hold on to life as we know it we cannot. For Scripture also reminds us that God’s breath of life was given to us and some day He will withdraw His breath from all of us.

GENESIS 2:7

The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed life into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.”

JOB 34:14-15

“If (God) should determine to do so, if He should gather to Himself His spirit and His breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust.

ECCLESIASTES 12:6-7

“Remember Him before the silver chord is broken and the golden bowl is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed; then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.”

But the good news is that this world is not our ultimate home. We may be citizens of this world but our true citizenship lies somewhere else. And Paul reminds us of this in Philippians 3:20-21.

PHILIPPIANS 3:20-21

“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; 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.”

When we apply to become a citizen of an earthly country we start with desire. Then we make a choice to pursue that desire. We move into and become part of that country and then, if we have met all the requirements for becoming a citizen, we are accepted into that country as a newly immigrated citizen.

There is much discussion today over our current immigration policy and the path to citizenship for illegal aliens. Should we grant amnesty or should we deport? Should we relax the current immigration rules or more fiercely enforce them? Should we build a wall around our southern borders or should we

not? Regardless of which political viewpoint you hold two things remain clear – a nation without laws quickly becomes a lawless nation, and a nation without compassion quickly becomes a nation divided.

When I grew up every person who wished to become a citizen of the United States had to learn to speak and read English. You could not get a driver's license or go to school without speaking and reading English. You may speak and read more than one language but one of them had to be English. How quickly that has changed.

Nowadays you can't even use an automated phone system or even an ATM machine without first being asked if you wish to continue in English or Spanish. For some things you don't even have to read at all. All you have to do is recognize the sign or symbol used to identify the service or object like the following.

For instance, symbols for men and women come in handy when you need to use the restroom and you don't speak the language of the country you are in. But symbols only go so far. Symbols won't get you a driver's license or allow you to get a loan for a car or a home. It won't keep you out of jail if you cannot understand what the legal requirements are for living in America. There is more to being a citizen of the United States than the ability to interpret symbols.

Though not applicable across the board, our country's current solution for immigration is not to integrate other cultures onto our own but rather to facilitate the separation of cultures; to allow those who immigrate to our country to retain their native language. It is we who are accommodating their differences rather than requiring them to become part of our country. This is particularly true of the Hispanic community. For instance we print things in both English and Spanish and hire bi-lingual men and women to serve the non-English speaking members of our community.

While this has a compassionate side to it as well as an economic benefit, it does a disservice to our immigrant communities when we handicap them in such a way as to not provide them with the basic tools necessary to succeed in their newly adopted country. If an American citizen cannot get a job because he cannot read or write English how will a non-English speaking person be able to support his or herself? They may look like a citizen and act like a citizen but they do not have the same opportunities as a citizen. And we have allowed them to fail by not requiring of them the basic tools necessary to succeed in this country.

In addition to this, immigrants seeking citizenship must first pass a naturalization test administered by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). According to the US Government web site this test consists of two parts: the civics test and the English language test. In these tests, applicants for citizenship are, with certain exemptions for age and physical impairment, expected to demonstrate that they can read, write, and speak words in ordinary daily usage in the English language, and that they have a basic knowledge and understanding of American history, government, and tradition. If they are provided forms and benefits and other services in their native language then what incentive do they have to learn English? And if they cannot read, write, and understand English then we have cut off their path to true citizenship.

What is true about becoming a citizen of a country holds true for being a citizen of heaven. Some may understand the symbol of the cross or the fish but that understanding does not make them a citizen of heaven. And if they do not speak the language of heaven then they can never become a citizen of heaven. And what is that language? I'm not talking about "speaking in tongues" though that has been called the

language of heaven or the tongues of angels (1Corinthians 13:1). What I am talking about is the ability to communicate directly with God, to be understood by Him, to be accepted by Him, and to be allowed entrance into His kingdom. To do this you must stop speaking the language of earth, your native tongue, and begin to speak the language of heaven.

Unfortunately what holds true in a country also holds true in a church. Some denominations and ministers of the gospel have allowed the language of earth to continue to exist in the church. They do not require repentance from sin or faith in the One true God. They allow sins of the flesh to be forgiven without the sacrifice of God to cover it; by doing so they present a false sense of citizenship for people who will never succeed in passing the real test for entrance. They mislead their congregants and themselves. Citizenship in heaven requires sacrifice not accommodation. To believe otherwise is to deceive.

We apply for citizenship in heaven just as we do to become a citizen of an earthly country. We start with our desire to come to the cross, acknowledging our sin and our need of a Savior. We become citizens of heaven by meeting the requirements of citizenship: confessing with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believing in our heart that God raised Him from the dead. When these requirements are met we are accepted as citizens of heaven. The sign or proof of this is when the Holy Spirit comes and dwells within us; a simple process but one which many refuse to pursue.

Like many illegal aliens in this country, some want to become citizens of heaven without going through the process. They desire to take advantage of the rights of a citizen of heaven but have no desire to confess or believe. As long as people are made to believe they are already citizens of heaven without repentance or faith they will never feel the need to become one. And as long as we continue to feed that belief by calling evil good and good evil, and by substituting darkness for light and light for darkness (Isaiah 5:20), then we only harm ourselves and the very ones we seek to help.

Like the Scribes and Pharisees of old they and we are in for a very rude awakening. God knows those who are His and those who are not. Some may think they are heavenly citizens but God knows otherwise and will reject them when the full requirements for citizenship become apparent.

When you become a citizen of heaven you are transferred out of one kingdom into another (Colossians 1:13). You are given new clothes to wear and are invited to attend the marriage of the Lamb and His subsequent marriage supper (Isaiah 61:10; Revelation 19:7-8). Those who try and sneak in without the appropriate attire will be considered uninvited guests. They are not the true citizens of heaven. They remain “illegal” aliens and will be cast out of His presence forever.

MATTHEW 22:11-14

“When the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him,, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?’ And the man was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called but few are chosen.”

A country may relax or change its requirements for citizenship but God does not. There is only one name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved. That is the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12). And there is only one way through which entrance into heaven can be granted. That is by grace through faith in Jesus. It is not by works lest any man should have confidence in his

accomplishments. It is by faith alone from beginning to end. (Romans 10:9; Ephesians 2:8-9). For without faith it is impossible to please Him (Hebrews 11:6).

Paul says that anyone who preaches a gospel different than the one he has preached is doomed for destruction along with those who have believed his deception (Galatians 1:8). These are people without wedding clothes that have not been invited to the dinner. When the king comes they will be thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Telling someone they can continue to speak the language of the flesh while calling them citizens of heaven is like saying they have no need of wearing wedding clothes when attending the wedding feast of the Lamb and His bride. It is simply not true. And it would be a terror rather than a pleasure to see the Lord's return in such a state of deception.

But it is different for us. As citizens of heaven Paul says *"we eagerly await for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into the conformity with the body of His glory."* How will He do this? Paul tells us it is *"by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself."* To put it more simply, all true citizens of heaven will be changed. They will shed their mortal bodies for an immortal one. And they will leave this place that has been contaminated by sin for a place free from its influence.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:52-53

"Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable and this mortal must put on immortality."

1 THESSALONIANS 4:16-17

"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord."

REVELATION 21:1-4

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away... And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.'"

This is what awaits the true citizens of heaven – a new body, a new heaven, a new earth, no more pain, no more crying or tears, no more mourning, no more death. And God Himself will be with us and He will dwell among us. All evil has passed away and righteousness fills all.

Paul rightly tells us to keep living by the standard of righteousness which we have attained through faith in Christ. We do not want to become enemies of the cross which some have become by straying away from it. We want to follow the example of Christ and those who follow Him so that we might attain the resurrection from the dead and inherit all the things which all true citizens of heaven will inherit.

REVELATION 21:7-8

“He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be His God and he will be My son. But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”

2 CORINTHIANS 13:5a

“Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!”

COLOSSIANS 2:8-10a

“See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete.”

A true citizen of heaven seeks to remain a true citizen of heaven. He guards his heart against the evil that would sway Him from the truth and runs the race in such a way as to obtain the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24). He does so by living by the standard of righteousness which he has attained through faith in Christ and by following the example of those who follow Jesus with their whole heart. He forgets what lies behind – the sinful deeds, the pull of the flesh, the shame of regret and remorse – and presses on to the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

He does this so that he might attain the resurrection of the dead and the full benefits of being a citizen of heaven. For he knows the power of Christ is able to raise him from the dead and give him an immortal body to house his immortal soul. And He knows that the pain and struggle this sinful life holds will be washed away in the light of His presence. He knows these things to be true. Unlike the citizens of earth he knows he will experience them because he believes. His faith makes him a citizen of heaven and as a citizen he will inherit the blessing of eternal life.

In Revelation Jesus says, *“Behold, I am coming quickly”* (Revelation 22:20). Because we are citizens of heaven we have no fear of Christ returning. Fear involves punishment but His perfect love has cast out our fear from us (1 John 4:18). Why? Because Jesus took the punishment for our sin upon Himself (Isaiah 53:5-6; Romans 3:25). Through faith in Christ we have already passed out of death into eternal life. As a result we will not come into judgement (John 5:24).

So we look forward to the day when Christ returns with joy. For that is the day we receive our reward, when we are called to the throne of heaven to receive the prize which Christ bought for us - the prize of eternal life. So as full citizens of heaven we say, along with our brother and fellow believer John,

“Come quickly Lord Jesus.”