

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Where are you from? I can't tell you how many times I heard that question during our 12 years in Russia. As soon as someone would hear my accent when speaking Russian, that question was usually close behind. It is very important in what country a person has citizenship. While we may proclaim here in America, "Liberty and justice for all," the truth is, what we really mean is liberty and justice for American citizens. As a citizen of this country, you have special rights and privileges that none citizens do not. And while in Russia, because we were not citizens of Russia, we did not enjoy some rights and privileges that Russian citizens enjoyed. One time what was to be a three hour layover in Moscow turned into an 8 day stay... all because of a trivial error in the visas for two of our children. I'm not complaining! That's just the way it is. Being a citizen carries with it certain privileges.

So, let me ask you this... where are you from? Where is your citizenship? This is an important question! But before you answer, consider what the Apostle Paul tells us today in his letter to the Philippians. We read from the third chapter, beginning at verse seventeen.

**Philippians 3:17-4:1 Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. 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. Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!**

Paul tells us that really there are only two possible places of citizenship... either earth or heaven. Just as easy as a person could tell I was not Russian by my accent, so also it is evident if a person is a citizen of heaven or earth. Paul said, "**many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.**" How is their hostility to the cross of Christ evident? He says: "their god is their stomach." Of course he doesn't mean that they literally worship their stomachs. Rather, he explains that the person with earthy citizenship thinks first about himself and his own happiness and pleasures. The person of this world says, "If it feels good, do it! Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die." **Man** is the center of all things. Earthly pleasures are of greatest importance.

What else characterizes the earthly citizen? Paul says: "**their glory is in their shame.**" Instead of feeling ashamed about their sins and desiring to cover up their moral faults, the citizens of this world instead glory in their sin and shame. For example, a *business* man who cheats another and receives a big profit because of his deception boasts about what he did to others. He is proud of what should make him feel shame. Also we see more and more that *homosexuals* take pride in their sin. They even organize public parades to celebrate their sin! Or someone who boasts to his friend about how drunk he got... blasted out of his mind. He's

bragging about this? Shouldn't he be ashamed about it? But for the earthly citizen, there is no shame about sin... only pride.

Paul also says, “**Their mind is on earthly things.**” How can I earn more money? I've got to get that new cell phone. We need to get a bigger nicer house. I love the new 2010 “fill-in-car-of-your-choice”... I'd die to have one! The new HD TV... got have it! The person whose thoughts are continuously focused on the earthly is clearly a citizen of this earth. None of the things I mentioned are sinful in and of themselves. But when these things are our primary focus, clearly we are forgetting who we are, who God is, and where we are going.

Our text has described for us what a citizen of this world is like... did you get any twinges of guilt because you recognized some of yourself in the earthly citizen? Do we see a part of us that would be a foreigner in heaven? How do we pick out foreigners? They look different, they talk different. They act different. A citizen of heaven looks white, pure and holy. Is that you? Or are you dirtied with sin and unclean? A citizen of heaven uses his tongue for praising God, praying, and encouraging others. Or do you sometimes speak angrily to others, cutting them down? A citizen of heaven acts totally in line with God's will. Are your actions selfish and centered on your will?

What does an obsession with this world eventually lead to? Paul says, “**Their destiny is destruction**” This earth is sinful. It is temporary. It will be destroyed. Money is temporary. It's just paper. It actually can burn! Our current bodies are imperfect. They are dying. They will decay. Do you really want to be a citizen of this earth? Is this really your permanent home? Is it really worth so much of your attention and energy?

No, it is not! Don't be tempted to cling to the things of this world. We are citizens of a much greater place. Paul said, “**our citizenship is in heaven.**” Citizenship in a country is only valuable if the leadership of the country is powerful and can give and defend the rights and privileges it offers. As heavenly citizens, Paul says: “**we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.**” Christ's power, authority and glory mean our inheritance is secure. His blessings are guaranteed.

Jesus is the reason that we are not foreigners in heaven. If living as an enemy of the cross of Christ is the mark of an earthly citizen, clearly the cross of Christ is key to heavenly citizenship. Christ has made us suitable in every way for life in our eternal dwelling place. He has given us his perfect life. He has removed our guilt through his suffering and death on the cross. He will even give us new, glorified bodies that will be holy and pure. “**will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.**” All that we need so we fit in to our eternal home, our heavenly Father provides to us in Christ.

In your daily life, consider yourself primarily a citizen of heaven! Heaven is your real home. Earth is a temporary dwelling place... and not very joyful one. All of us are foreigners here on earth. As foreigners, we look different, talk differently, and act differently than the people of this world. So how do heaven's citizens act here on earth? The apostle Paul said at the beginning of our reading: “**Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.**” Paul simply says, “Live like I lived when I was among you. Also, follow the example of others who continue to live according to the example I gave you.” It is important that we see and follow the Christian example of men and women of faith.

I read an interesting story about a herd of African elephants. In an attempt to thin out this herd, the authorities killed off a number of the older males and moved a group of females and young bulls to another area. It was not too long after the move that the young bulls began killing white rhinos in that area. Apparently, they were trying to prove their strength and power. One elephant even organized a gang that began attacking tourist buses.

To solve the problem, the authorities shot some of the troublemakers but then came up with a better solution. They released a few old males from another area into the troubled area. The older males immediately began to bring the young bulls into line. It would appear that the young elephants did not know how to act in their day-to-day living without the example of the older elephants to teach them. Learning by example is not restricted to just the animal kingdom.

Just as the elephants needed an example to follow so that they knew how to behave in their day-to-day living, so also we need an example to follow in our day-to-day Christian living. St. Paul encourages us to follow his example in our Christian living. Do not be focused on earthly things, but to be focused on Jesus and heavenly things.

What kind of life did Paul live? He also followed an example... the example of Christ himself. Paul was willing to suffer all things for the Gospel of Christ. As a missionary, he traveled a lot. He frequently did not know where he was going or how long he would stay. He often did not know whom he would stay with, especially when entering a new town or village. On multiple occasions he was falsely accused, beaten, put in prison, shipwrecked, ridiculed, and stoned nearly to death. According to church tradition, he eventually was put to death for his faith. How could Paul live this way? Was he insane? No. He was a foreigner. He did not consider himself a citizen of this world. He knew he was just passing through and that he was heading for a better place: heaven. He lived his life accordingly. He encouraged us to follow his example.

For the present we are still on earth. And God has a reason for keeping us here for a while. It is our time of grace, during which God has graciously called us to a life of repentance and faith. It is also a time of opportunity. A time to bring that same gospel invitation to those still in darkness. But while we work and wait here, we turn our thoughts heavenward, keeping focused on Jesus and heavenly things. Some people say Christians are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. May that never be said of us! Paul describes Christians who are so heavenly minded that they are also and therefore of great earthly good! Knowing we are citizens of heaven and God is our Father, we strive to live holy lives that give him glory... lives of love toward God first and foremost, and lives of love toward our neighbor. Where is your citizenship? It is in heaven! Praise the Lord! Now let's live that way. Amen.