

Title: Life Together: Citizens of Heaven
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Texts: Philippians 3:17-4:1; 2:14-18
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Citizens of Heaven

[Proposition: The Christian community lives by heaven's values, therefore we must support each other in the midst of a hostile world.]

Introduction

Andrew Peterson's quartet of books, *The Wingfeather Saga*, focuses on three children living in the fictional land of Skree which has been overtaken by the evil reptilian monsters, the Fangs of Dang. Along the way the children, Janner, Tink, and Leeli discover they are not citizens of Skree, but their family comes from a kingdom on a faraway isle called Annierra. This truth excites and encourages them—they are descendants of the king of Annierra, and yet they struggle to learn how to live out their new identities. How can they live as a citizen of Annierra while the evil Fangs of Dang lurk around every corner seeking to capture and destroy them and everyone they love.

In this fantasy tale, Peterson has tapped into a truth about the Christian life, and Christian community. We are citizens together of another kingdom, seeking to live by a different set of values in a land hostile to us and our King. This is an empowering truth, but it is also a struggle to live as sons and daughters of the King.

You'll find this idea all over the Bible, and you probably noticed it when we read the Scripture texts, Paul refers to it in 3:20 where he says: "our citizenship is in heaven." Our theme for this morning as we continue our message series *Life Together* is this:

**Christian community lives by heaven's values,
therefore we must support each other in the midst of a hostile world.**

I. The Christian Community lives as citizens of heaven in a hostile world.

A. We are citizens of heaven

Paul states it clearly in v. 20:

20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,

We belong to another Kingdom, and to another King. This world is not our home. Another way to say this is how the Apostle Peter puts it in 1 Peter. Christians are sojourners and exiles;" temporary residents of this realm, but citizens elsewhere, in heaven.

In fact, the message of the Gospel can be described as a change in citizenship, in Ephesians 2:19-20, Paul explains what God has done for us in Christ:

19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,

Every human being born into this world is by nature sinful and by choice a sinner and therefore a stranger to God's kingdom, but all who believe have now become citizens of heaven through faith in Christ. In Jesus, we have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light.

This is important because

B. The world is hostile to the cross of Christ.

Notice what Paul says in v. 18:

18 For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.

Paul seems to be thinking of some who looked as if they were going to follow Christ, but did not truly believe, and so have rejoined the world as enemies of the cross of Christ.

The people of kingdom of the world are enemies of the cross of Christ because the cross of Christ declares that no one is good, no one really seeks God. For us to be saved, God in Christ had to do something for us that we absolutely could not do for ourselves. The cross declares that Jesus came into the world, to his own people, and his own people did not receive him but executed the King of Heaven. The cross of Christ could not be more offensive to our pride, our self-reliance, or our attempts to hide our sin.

The kingdom of the world also stands opposed to the cross of Christ because the cross of Christ is the pattern of discipleship. When Jesus calls people to himself he calls them to self-denial, to take up the cross, to rejoice in the same rejection he faced, and follow him. This is offensive lunacy to our culture, which tells us my own personal satisfaction is what life is all about, and I should do whatever it takes to achieve it (and we often agree in the church).

But,

C. As citizens of heaven, our allegiance is to Christ not Culture or Country

This letter we're reading from was written to Christians in Philippi. Philippi was a colony of Rome, populated by retired soldiers and their descendants. They had a long and deep history of allegiance to Rome and Caesar. In fact, their allegiance to him had provided for their wellbeing in the past, and that same allegiance allowed them to live in Philippi in relative luxury.

But Paul challenges them throughout this letter to give Christ their highest allegiance. We have already seen how in 3:20 he exhorts them to think of themselves as citizens of heaven. He said much the same thing earlier in the letter in 1:27:

27 Only behave as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ...

And the climax of the Gospel as he presents it in Phil 2:5-11 is that Jesus is the name above every name—even Caesar's name—and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ—not Caesar—is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This is every bit as controversial today as it was in Philippi so many years ago. No country or culture, nothing, should supersede our allegiance to King Jesus—not even America—because every country and culture in the world is infected by sin.

Illustration:

In the early 1970's a man attempted to hold up a bank in Stockholm, Sweden. When the police showed up, he took four hostages. A six day standoff ensued, and despite the robber repeatedly threatening to kill them, a strange thing happened—the hostages began to believe they were safer with the bad guy than the police. Some of the hostages actually resisted rescue attempts and later refused to testify against their captor, and even raised money for his defense!

We now have a name for this psychological phenomenon, Stockholm Syndrome

The Christian Community lives as citizens of heaven in a hostile world and there is a danger for us of a type of Spiritual Stockholm Syndrome where we forget to whom we belong and more and more ally ourselves to the Kingdom of the World. We may even resist God's attempts to rescue us from that mindset, such as in a sermon like this. But we are citizens of heaven, and our allegiance is Heaven's King.

Therefore let us hold fast to our King, and live by heaven's values.

II. You and I are called to live by the values of heaven. ¹

Paul's method of unpacking what citizenship in heaven looks like is to contrast it with the way of life of the world. First, in v. 19 he describes the way of life of those he called enemies of Christ:

19 Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

He lists four different aspects of the world's values.

A. The Kingdom of the World lives by self-serving and self-destructive values:

1. Their god is their belly

Paul doesn't specify if he has an exact form of sin in mind, but his point is clear.² The world is marked by people who live only to fulfill one appetite after another, making themselves or their appetites into gods.

¹ An illustration: "While serving as a missionary in Laos. I discovered an illustration of the kingdom of God. Before the colonialists imposed national boundaries, the kings of Laos and Vietnam reached an agreement on taxation in the border areas. Those who ate short-grain rice, built their houses on stilts, and decorated them with Indian-style serpents were considered Laotians. On the other hand, those who ate long-grain rice, built their houses on the ground, and decorated them with Chinese-style dragons were considered Vietnamese. The exact location of a person's home was not what determined his or her nationality. Instead, each person belonged to the kingdom whose cultural values he or she exhibited. So it is with us: we live in the world, but as part of God's kingdom, we are to live according to his kingdom's standards and values." John Hess-Yoder, Portland, Oregon. *Leadership*, Vol. 7, no. 3; Illustration available at <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1996/june/1498.html>

² It may be they are lovers of rich food, or routinely gorge themselves, or he may use the term "belly" metaphorically. Ancient authors sometimes did so to describe the innermost feelings or desires—what we would call the heart.

But their appetites, like all false gods, are never satisfied. They demand more and more and more, until they bring destruction. Your belly, your lusts, your need for approval, your greed cries out to be filled only to leave you more empty each time. But Christ offers himself as a fountain of living water who fills us to overflowing with life, joy, and peace.

2. They glory in their shame

What ought to have been shameful to them—their sin—they regarded as their glory. They delight in their darkness, an attitude not too uncommon in our day either as people “Shout [their] abortion” and brag about their greed and broken sexuality. Christians too may fall prey as we delight in unholy ambition, seek comfort while sacrificing compassion, or simply twist the Gospel of grace to give ourselves license to live by our belly and glory in our shame.

3. Mind set on earthly things

Paul says it most generally, their minds are set on earthly things. They concern themselves only with what is immediate, present, and earthly. Only what’s right in front of me matters. We are steeped in a culture of instant gratification, and “you do you”—and it affects how we set our priorities and spend our resources.

4. Their end is destruction

The only possible outcome for those who live by these values is destruction. Down the road there is only a dehumanizing tangle of brokenness and loneliness—and ultimately destruction—for those who foolishly live only for those immediate, self-serving, and self-gratifying desires. God’s wrath will be poured out on all unrighteousness at the last judgment, and this course of life always and only leads there.

Illustration:

In C.S. Lewis’s, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, John, the Pilgrim, comes upon a group of men who have experienced the dehumanizing effects of sin. Because they were so disfigured, he at first did not recognize them as men. They seemed to be suffering from a disease of a “crumbling and disintegrating” kind. He wonders if their own life still animates their bodies, and quickly discovers they are infested with small reptilian, vermin. The “dark, but beautiful” witch Luxuria, carries an intoxicating cup from which the men long to drink, and John watches as a young man who seems to be in good health other than his strange looking fingers resists the drink two times before finally giving in. Only then do the worms where there should have been fingers become unmistakable.

Lewis comments that sin leads to “the loss of the man’s unity.”³ Making a god of our belly, and having a mind set on earthly things, disintegrates us and crumbles the image of God in us and ultimately leads to destruction.

There is a better way,

B. The Christian community lives by values from Heaven

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, 216-222.

In contrast to those who focus on earthly things, Paul describes heavenly values in v. 20-21:

20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 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.

1. Our citizenship is from heaven (cf. 1:27)

We become citizens of heaven through faith in Christ. Yet, Christianity is not pie in the sky in the sweet by and by. When the Philippians thought of their Roman “citizenship” they didn’t think of someday going to Rome—they thought of bringing Roman culture, values, and ways of life to Philippi. So, it is with the Christian community, as we pray “Thy Kingdom Come” we also seek to bring the justice, healing, and peace of the kingdom to bear on our lives, families, and everyone we meet.

2. ...from [Heaven] we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ

We are a waiting people. We don’t live just for what is immediate, nor believe we will bring God’s kingdom in its fullness through our own efforts. We await (v. 20) a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. As we wait for his return, we live under the Lordship of Christ, his teachings, his example of sacrificial love.

3. ...who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body,

Our glory—what we delight in—is not that our every want and desire will be met in this life. Our glory is that when Christ comes again he will make us like him. We take up our crosses and share in his suffering, so that as Paul said earlier in chapter 3, we “might share in [his] resurrection.” Our deepest desire is to live for Christ, to be more like Christ, in our character and ultimately in our resurrection.

4. ...by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself.

Here is the ground of our hope—God will apply to us the same power by which he will subject all things to himself. Christ is going to return to set up his kingdom, and God will make all things new. If we have received Christ through faith and persevere in faith, we have been rescued from the coming judgment and will reign with him in the New Heavens and the New Earth. We set our minds on this glorious future hope.

Illustration:

Maybe you’ve heard the phrase “too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good.” But after the war in Uganda had dragged on for over 20 years, Professor Todd Whitmore from Notre Dame moved into the refugee camps in northern Uganda to hear the stories of the displaced people. He discovered that the most practical and helpful workers there were also the most heavenly-minded.

These Christian workers thought a lot about Christ coming back to subject all things to himself. As one of the Christian workers in the camps said, “God is tired [of this war and suffering], and he will intervene.” Precisely because they

believed that God would some day intervene, they also believed that it was worthwhile to work for good here and now.⁴

You probably won't move across the world, but we all need to ask ourselves how can I bring kingdom values to my home, how can I show the sacrificial love of Christ in my relationships, how do I willingly share the sufferings of Christ because he is my glorious hope?!

Heaven's citizens live by heaven's values, and here's where community comes in.

III. Relationships between fellow believers play a key role in helping one another live by heaven's values in this hostile world.

In a world that is opposed to our God, opposed to our values, community plays a key role in several ways. First, Paul tells us that

A. Being in community helps us learn what being a disciple looks like.

This is what Paul says in v. 17:

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

Paul appeals to his own example and the others who follow his example,⁵ so he says "imitate me." Paul's example is that he counts everything in his former life as a loss because of the surpassing worth of Christ. He strives and presses on to be more like Christ and live in the power of his resurrection.

13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

You can't imitate what you can't see. Community is where we learn to imitate those further along in the faith.

And,

B. Being in community encourages us to hold fast to our allegiance to Christ.

As we saw last week, we have the opportunity to help one another through ongoing mutual encouragement and exhortation. Hebrews 3:12-14 says:

12 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of

⁴ Adapted from Jason Bayassee, "Eschatological Innovation," Faith & Leadership (8-4-09)

⁵ People have come into the church in Philippi seeking their own interests, but Timothy (2:19-22) thinks only of the welfare of the people and the interests of Jesus Christ.

Epaphroditus too is a commendable example, though he was near to death he longed to be with the people in Philippi, and was more concerned about the grief of the church than his health.

sin. 14 For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

Community helps us hold fast to Christ and our allegiance to him in the midst of a hostile world.

C. Being in community exhorts us to live by heaven's values as we wait for Christ's return.

Again the book of Hebrews helps us, Hebrews 10:24-25:

24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Community encourages us to live out heaven's values—to "love and good works"—as we see the Day of the Lord drawing near.

As we talked about last week, here at CCC Groups are an opportunity to experience the community God has created in Christ. And they are also vital in helping one another live as citizens of heaven in a hostile world.

We are praying for new leaders to step up, and we're planning a gathering for existing and potential group leaders in June. To lead a group is worth your time and efforts, it is an opportunity to embody the love of Christ, sustain brothers and sisters as they live out the values of Heaven's King in this hostile world, and to help strengthen our faith in the Gospel.

Conclusion:

The Gospel is the message that Christ sought our best interest not his own. He laid down his privilege so that we might be given his perfect righteousness and made citizens together of heaven. These are gifts to us from our loving God, and we can only receive them, by faith. We don't live by heaven's values so that God will love us, we live by heaven's values because God loves us so. He offers that love freely to any who would believe.

As we look to Jesus the King of Heaven, who did not think of his own interests but laid his life down for us, let us take seriously the call to live by heaven's values and encourage and support one another in this hostile world.

Response:

Heavenly Father, make it known to our hearts that we are united by a common faith in the cross of Jesus Christ who is our resurrection and righteousness. We confess the power to live as citizens of heaven does not come from our own strength but from Your Spirit working in us. We cling to your promises, and remember your gracious love for us. With your help, we commit ourselves again by faith to joyful life together in Christ.

Adapted from Worship Sourcebook, Remembrance of Baptism #6

Benediction:

1 Thessalonians 3:12-13 (adapted)

12 and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all... 13 so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.