

A Citizen of Heaven

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For about the past ten years especially, one of the major policy issues confronting the United States has been the issue of illegal immigration. Today, there are millions of people living within the borders of this country who do not have a legal right to be here. Their presence has provoked a heated debate. Many Americans are sympathetic to these immigrants' desires to earn a better living for themselves and ensure that their children are born American citizens. Just as many other Americans consider them lawbreakers, regard them as an unwarranted drain on American resources, and want to spend a great deal of money deporting them and keeping others out. This dispute is likely to continue for years.

Underlying the entire discussion is the concept that being a citizen of a particular country is a big deal. It gives us rights that non-citizens don't have, it changes the way that we interact with the authorities of that country, and it determines where our loyalties lie. In short, citizenship is one of the core identities that we have as human beings.

The apostle Paul reveals something critical about our citizenship in Philippians 3:20. In earthly terms, being an American citizen is one of the very best kinds of citizenship to hold. For this, we need no better evidence than the fact that so many have considered unlawful residence in our country to be preferable to lawful residence in their own.

However, as precious as this earthly citizenship is, it is not our true identity. As Christians, we hold a higher citizenship in heaven. The legalities say that we belong here, but in reality, we belong there. We often sing, "This world is not my home", but it is equally true that this country is not our home either. We are just as alien to this place as is the rawest undocumented worker in east Joliet. In a nation as patriotic as ours is, this is a jarring notion to many Christians, but that does not make it less accurate. Let's see what it means that each of us is first and foremost a citizen of heaven.

The Origin of Citizenship

Any citizen of heaven has become one because he **HAS BEEN TRANSFERRED BY GOD**. Paul describes this process in Colossians 1:13. Even though illegal immigration is so prevalent in this country, our laws also set up a process for legal immigration. By fulfilling certain legal requirements, citizens of other countries can get a green card which entitles them to live and work inside our national borders. If they fulfill further legal requirements, they can become naturalized citizens, which entitles them to almost all the rights held by those who were born citizens.

This text describes our naturalization process as Christians. All of us began life as citizens of God's kingdom. When we sinned, we abandoned that kingdom and became citizens of the dark domain of Satan. At some point, we realized that being a subject of the devil was not a good thing to be, because the only "right" that he had to offer us was the right to eternal death. We decided that we wanted to re-establish our citizenship in God's kingdom. Just like the United States has naturalization requirements, so too does the kingdom of heaven. We had to believe, repent, confess, and be baptized for the forgiveness of our sins. Once we completed that process, God transferred us to His jurisdiction. Anyone who has not gone through that process, whatever they may claim, does not possess heavenly citizenship and is not entitled to any of its rights. On the day of judgment, they will be deported to the devil's kingdom where they belong.

The Citizen and the World

A citizen of heaven has sought escape from the kingdom of the world because he **KNOWS EARTH IS TEMPORARY**. The apostle John highlights this point in 1 John 2:17. Typically, when people immigrate to the United States, they do so because they are dissatisfied with some aspect of life in their country of origin. Maybe they can't find a job there. Maybe they fear political oppression. Regardless, those things drive them from their homelands to come here.

What has driven us from our homelands is the understanding that life on earth is limited. It is limited in the happiness that we can achieve here, and it is limited in the duration that we can stay here. In short, earth isn't good enough to keep our loyalty. If we truly understand this, it needs to be reflected in the decisions that we make. One of my big financial priorities is setting aside a retirement fund. I want to make sure that when I am no longer able to preach, my family and I will still have money enough to live on. Any financial website online will agree that saving for retirement is an important goal. However, it's even more important to save for our spiritual retirements. I may drop dead at 55 and never spend a dime of my retirement savings, but I am guaranteed to need the treasure I lay up in heaven.

Third, a citizen of heaven **REJECTS THE UNCLEAN**. Paul quotes Isaiah on this subject in 2 Corinthians 6:17. This text refers to the time when the Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity. They had been exiled from their land for 70 years before the Persian king Cyrus allowed them to come back. If they wanted to return to their homeland and enjoy God's welcome there, they had to leave behind all of the evil practices of the lands where they had been exiled.

Today, if we want God to lead us to the Jerusalem in heaven, we must also be separate from the worldly people around us and refuse to participate in their evil practices. We must be a holy people, and being holy is a lot like being

pregnant. Either we are or we aren't, and there is no in between. If the devil succeeds in contaminating us even a little bit, he has compromised our holiness, so we must rid ourselves of anything that makes us unclean in God's eyes. A few years ago, I was a big fan of a fantasy series called "A Song of Ice and Fire." I really enjoyed reading it, and I recommended it to several people, among them Josh and my little sister. Independently, both of them came back to me and said that they couldn't read it because it was just too filthy. I thought about it and realized that they were right, and that I shouldn't be reading it either. That was a tough decision for me, because the books were really good, and then HBO had to go and make it tougher for me by turning the first book into a miniseries that is also supposed to be really good. However, I know from my brother that it's just as filthy as the books. No matter how much I would enjoy watching them, I don't dare put that sort of garbage inside my head. There's enough garbage there already; I don't need more. As Christians, we have to think that way. It doesn't matter if something's fun. What matters is if it's righteous.

Fourth, the citizen of heaven **DESires A BETTER COUNTRY**. We learn a lot about this subject from Hebrews 11:13-16. In this, there are three main points that we must grasp. First, we see that the citizen of heaven doesn't want to go back to the country he came from. Not only does he live a holy life, but he also doesn't even want to live an unholy life. Many Christians struggle with this part of their citizenship. Maybe they don't sin, but a big part of them wants to, to go back and live in spiritual Egypt, with all the delights that the devil promises. Friends, when the devil starts telling us how wonderful it would be for us to "be allowed" to sin all the time, we need to remember one thing. The devil always lies. Always. This world cannot make us happy. Sin cannot make us happy. When we want to be sinful people, we desire the very thing that will destroy us. It is foolish to long for the world we left behind.

Instead, we must long for heaven. This too is a challenge. It's very easy for us to fall in love with even the innocent delights that the world has to offer. I love to grill out in the summertime, I love to garden, and I love to play with my daughter. There is nothing wrong with those things in and of themselves, but I must always keep in mind that they are not all that there is. Heaven is not only better than the times of suffering in our lives. It is also better than even the times of greatest joy. Each day, we must live for it and not for them. If we get our priorities mixed up, if we begin to seek the earthly over the heavenly, then the joy of this life will be the only joy that we will ever know.

Third, we must confess that we are strangers and exiles on the earth. When I'm walking down the street, I can't tell who has a legal right to be in the United States and who doesn't, but everyone who talks to us should be able to tell that we don't belong here, and that we don't want to belong here. A lot of Christians are very cagey about expressing their faith. They won't try to persuade those around them to obey the gospel, and they won't even discuss spiritual matters generally with those outside the church. Brethren, that is not us confessing that we are strangers and exiles, and we don't like to make that confession because it comes with a price. This is true even in earthly terms. I guarantee you that if we were to go to the federal building in Chicago, we would not see a whole bunch of people walking up and down in front of it, shouting, "I'm an illegal immigrant! Here I am!" Nobody does that, because they know that if they do, they will end up in the country where they are citizens, and not here. Likewise, if we go around telling people that we are spiritual aliens, that will cost us too. It will cost us with our families. It will cost us with our friends. It will cost us with our co-workers. However, that confession is the only way to ensure that we end up in the country where we are citizens.

The Citizen and Heaven

If indeed the citizen's loyalty is to heaven, he **OBEYS THE LAWS OF HEAVEN**. The Hebrews writer warns us about the impact of these heavenly laws in Hebrews 12:25. Any body of law contains both positive and negative laws. For example, under the law of the United States, I am forbidden to murder people, but I am required to pay my taxes. We talked earlier about how we must reject unclean things. However, that negative responsibility is only half of the responsibility that we have. Because we are citizens of heaven, God expects us to obey the positive laws as well. In many cases, this is much more difficult. I have gone through my entire Christian career without ever starting a fistfight, but there has never yet been a single day in which I have completely fulfilled my obligation to love. There is always something more that we can do to show mercy, or to be a peacemaker, or to pray without ceasing. Most people in the world don't stress about this. They just drift from day to day without making a concerted effort to be more righteous. However, as citizens of heaven, we must acknowledge that all of heaven's laws apply to us and dedicate ourselves to obeying them.

Finally, the citizen of heaven **PUTS HEAVEN FIRST**. Peter displays this attitude in Acts 5:29. As Christians, we obey the human laws of our land because God commands us to obey them. We obey our employers because God commands us to be good employees. If our loyalty to God is what it should be, that should make us better citizens and better employees than the people of the world will ever be. However, we must never forget that our first loyalty is to God. If this earthly nation ever commands us to do that which is contrary to His will, we must obey God rather than men. If our employers ask us to lie or deceive, or to spend so much time on the job that we must neglect our families and our God, we need to have a frank discussion with them about their expectations. If they insist, we will be better off seeking work elsewhere. As important as all of those other things can be, we live for God and not for them.