



Citizens of Heaven

Philippians 3: 12-21

It's been Barack Obama week here in Britain with the first UK visit of the US President. I was fascinated by one of those conspiracy theory videos about him that appeared in the internet. It suggested that he was not a native US citizen because according to them he was born in Kenya (his birth certificate says Hawaii), has Indonesian citizenship (he lived there once) and because his middle name is Hussein (his dad was a Muslim - he must be an evil AL-Qaeda operative). In fact his mother is a white American of British descent and a strong Christian family.

Why was that so important? Because to qualify as a US President, he has to be a natural born US citizen. Because his mother is and he was born in Hawaii, that clearly makes him a qualifying citizen.

Citizenship is a very important thing if you want to have the rights and privileges of living in a country. In Britain, you can only have full rights and privileges if you are a UK citizen. You're either born to it, or acquire. Interestingly, people now coming into citizenship must take a UK test and pledge allegiance to the Queen to become a citizen. I wonder how many of us born here could pass the UK citizenship test?

Last week's sermon on Philippians was about reaching the goal and that goal was the call to the life above. It's an eternal call and we saw how our righteousness comes through Christ and how we run the race to win the prize – we keep our eyes on the ball – we focus our eyes on where we're going. Keep your eye on the ball!

The passage this week is a continuation. The last verse we had was *14 So I run straight towards the goal in order to win the prize, which is God's call through Christ Jesus to the life above.*

What's interesting is that he follows it with this verse

15 All of us who are spiritually mature should have this same attitude.

Attitude. Do you remember that from the other week? *2:5 Your attitude should be the same as the one Jesus' had. He was talking about their problem with humility and obedience.*

Now he's dealing with the attitude that mature believers have. And what's that – the attitude of having the right perspective in how we approach life – to live life like there's going to be an eternity – because there is one! It's the mark of a mature believer – to not be dominated by how the world thinks, but to let their lives be controlled by an eternal perspective.

And then Paul recognises that some may have a different attitude. The implication is simple here – there were some who lacked maturity and a mark of immaturity is the failure to get the God perspective. Perhaps the phrase God will make that clear to you if that's the case is said more in hope than in certainty.

It's clear who are the mature Christians in a church – they are the ones that have eternity in mind. It's the interests of God and the interests of the future that control their present. Either way it

doesn't make any difference to Paul as the way forward for both is: **16 However that may be, let us go forward according to the same rules we have followed until now.** Paul says in effect "follow the right principles and you'll go the right way anyway."

Which brings us back to where we were a few weeks ago. What are those principles: **17 Keep on imitating me, my brothers and sisters. Pay attention to those who follow the right example that we have set for you.** Be imitators of me. As I noted last time from chapter 2; it's a bold Christian that says "follow my example" but Paul had that credibility but he wasn't there with them. But there are those who followed his example who were. The message is simple – follow the role models – the godly saints that you can see in your midst; the people that give you the right example.

What was the alternative? **18 I have told you this many times before, and now I repeat it with tears: there are many whose lives make them enemies of Christ's death on the cross. 19 They are going to end up in hell, because their god is their bodily desires.** Let me give it to you from the Message which seems to get the feel of the passage: **There are many out there taking other paths, choosing other goals, and trying to get you to go along with them. I've warned you of them many times; sadly, I'm having to do it again. All they want is easy street. They hate Christ's Cross. But easy street is a dead-end street. Those who live there make their bellies their gods; belches are their praise; all they can think of is their appetites.**

There seem to be two sorts of people Paul is going for as people you should beware of in this passage. Let's go back to the beginning of the chapter as the first lot are near the beginning and I didn't say much about them last week. **2 Watch out for those who do evil things, those dogs, those who insist on cutting the body. 3 It is we, not they, who have received the true circumcision, for we worship God by means of his Spirit and rejoice in our life in union with Christ Jesus. We do not put any trust in external ceremonies.**

In Philippi there were those who opposed Paul – they were people of a Jewish background that saw faith a matter of doing things in a prescribed way – according to law. For many Jewish Christians, their Christian faith was just an extension of their Judaism and they followed the law much as they had done before. They opposed Paul. Judaism as it has been called is one of the early causes of divisions in the church. Did Christians keep the law with all its practices and customs, or did it mean something else? To Paul, the law was a killer because righteousness comes through faith in Christ. He calls these particular people dogs (Jews called gentiles dogs – it was the worst insult to give a devout Jew).

It goes without saying that Paul condemned legalism. That brand of legalism is long gone but you don't have to go very far to come across legalism in the modern church. It manifests itself in lots of ways – only our church is right, only our doctrine is right, you must use the AV, you must pray like this, you must dress like this, you must speak in tongues, you must worship in a particular way. All these things are big issues to legalists in some way or another.

Yet Paul was happy to abandon his Judaism and the importance he laid on it for the sake of Christ. So was Paul suggesting that they be antinomian (without law)? Certainly not. As we go down the passage, he was expecting them to imitate (and obey) him.

In fact the second bunch of people he criticises are the ones on the opposite end of the spectrum and were antinomian. Just as legalism is self serving, so is antinomianism – living without law. Let me read the passage from the Message again: **There are many out there taking other paths, choosing other goals, and trying to get you to go along with them. I've warned you of them many times; sadly, I'm having to do it again. All they want is easy street. They hate Christ's Cross. But easy street is a dead-end street. Those who live there make their bellies their gods; belches are their praise; all they can think of is their appetites.** Their end is hell it says in the Good News. The principle is simple, if you have understood the nature of your salvation, you seek to honour Christ in the way you live.

Despite his rejection of his Jewishness, Paul had strong standards but they weren't to keep external ceremonies but were about inward attitudes and outward worship of God by means of His Spirit. Paul's call for them to imitate him and as it says in 2:12, to obey him was what he expected them to do. And what did that involve? Let me take you back to 2:12-13 **So then, dear friends, as you always obeyed me when I was with you, it is even more important that you obey me now while I am away from you. Keep on working with fear and trembling to complete your salvation, 13 because God is always at work in you to make you willing and able to obey his own purpose.**

In the end our attitude and Paul's, goes back to Jesus in Phil 2:5-11 which is a pivotal passage in Philippians. Jesus was humble and obedient to God which let Him to serve God and redeem man. And what was the result: *9 For this reason God raised him to the highest place above and gave him the name that is greater than any other name. 10 And so, in honour of the name of Jesus all beings in heaven, on earth, and in the world below will fall on their knees, 11 and all will openly proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

The reward for obedience and humility was that God has exalted Jesus to the highest place. What do we strive for as we seek to win the race which Jesus has put us in for? The answer is our citizenship in heaven. The prize is the call of Jesus to the life above and that is a place of honour as citizens of heaven -. It's a privileged and special position and it's for all of us who believe.

If we are citizens, then our lives need to honour Jesus now as we run the race because it's not just a case of getting our passport as we read in this passage; *20 We, however, are citizens of heaven, and we eagerly wait for our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, to come from heaven. 21 He will change our weak mortal bodies and make them like his own glorious body, using that power by which he is able to bring all things under his rule.*

We are going to be changed, different. We strive to honour God in our humility and in our lives, but we shall be changed from what we are to being like Jesus. This morning I encouraged us to embrace the idea that we have a God who can and does change impossible situations in our lives. What is the end of all that? The most "impossible" thing of all, that we may spend eternity in His presence, like Jesus; as citizens of heaven.

How does that encourage us now:

- to deal with issues now – God does make a way
- to show humility and obedience to Christ
- to influence our attitude to life – to live as who we are in Christ

Let's pray

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Scripture Quotes TEV unless otherwise stated*

UK Citizen's Test – from the BBC Website

Question 1

Life in the UK says to be British means you should...

A: "Respect laws, the elected political structures, traditional values of mutual tolerance and respect for rights and mutual concern."

B: "Share in the history and culture of an island nation with a character moulded by many different peoples over more than two thousand years."

C: "be part of a modern European democracy, one with a tradition of sharing our ways with the world and allowing the world to bring its ways to us."

The answer was A

Question 2

Almost 60m people live in the UK. By what factor do the native-born English outnumber their Scots or Welsh neighbours?

A: By nine to one

B: By seven to one

C: By six to one

The answer was A

Question 3

"The origins of our Parliament were in the early Middle Ages. In 1215 the great barons forced rights from a tyrannical King John". What is that document called?

A: The Mappa Mundi

B: The Magna Carta

C: The Bill of Rights

The Answer is B. The Mappa Mundi is an ancient map of the world held at Hereford Cathedral and the Bill of Rights came later in 1689.

Question 4

When did all 18-year-olds get the vote?

A: 1918

B: 1928

C: 1969

The answer is C. Women over 30-years-old got the vote in 1918. Ten years later the law equalised the franchise for all men and women over 21. In 1969 the then Labour government lowered the voting age to 18.

Question 5

There are four national saints' days in the UK, one for each nation. Which order do they fall in the calendar?

A: St Andrews, St Patrick's, St David's and St George's

B: St David's, St Patrick's, St George's and St Andrews

C: St George's, St Patrick's, St Andrews and St David's

The answer was B

The dates are 1 March (David for Wales), 17 March (Patrick for N Ireland), 23 April (George for England) and 30 November (Andrew for Scotland)

Question 6

According to Life in the UK, where does Father Christmas come from?

A: Lapland

B: Iceland

C: The North Pole

The answer was C

Question 7

According to the book, where does the myth of Father Christmas come from?

A: The Victorians

B: Pagan myths updated by Shakespeare

C: German/Swedish immigrants to the USA

The answer was C

This is a hotly disputed issue, not least because of the role of the Coca Cola Company in updating the legend in the early 20th Century.

Question 8

Life in the UK explains what to do if you spill someone's pint in the pub (we're not making this up). What, according to the book, usually happens next?

A: You would offer to buy the person another pint

B: You would offer to dry their wet shirt with your own

C: You may need to prepare for a fight in the car park

The answer was A

Manners should prevail, says the guide, saying it would be "prudent" to buy a replacement.

Question 9

You've unfortunately had that fight and are bleeding from a well-placed left hook. Which two telephone numbers can you call for an ambulance?

A: 999 or 112

B: 999 or 111

C: 999 or any other digit three times

The answer was A

The UK introduced the 112 number to help foreign visitors who may not know that 999 is the main emergency number.

Question 10

What or who is PG (again, according to the guide)?

A: One of the brand names for the national British drink, tea

B: A Personal Guide, a British-born mentor provided to each immigrant applying for nationality

C: Part of the cinema film classification system

The answer was C

It means Parental Guidance and applies to films where viewing is at the discretion of the parent. The other classifications are U, 12, 15 and 18.

Question 11

The British are a nation of animal lovers, says Life in the UK. What must dog owners do?

A: Get a licence

B: Get the dog neutered

C: Get a collar with the owner's name and address

The answer was C . Dog licences were abolished in 1987, but Life in the UK says there is still an obligation for a dog to wear a collar with the appropriate details.

Question 12

Back to that pub. The police turn up with the ambulance and an officer asks you to attend an interview at the station. What are your rights?

A: You don't have to go if you are not arrested, but if you do go voluntarily you are free to leave at any time

B: You must go. Failure to attend an interview is an arrestable offence

C: You must go if you are a foreign national

The answer was A

Question 13

What's the minimum time you must have been married before you can divorce?

A: Six months

B: One year

C: Two years

The answer was B

Question 14

And finally, what does Life in the UK tell you it is "very important" to do when engaging a solicitor?

A: Ask if they have a potential conflict of interest

B: Ensure they are qualified in the area of law of concern

C: Find out how much they charge

The answer was C