

Lent is a time to reflect on our Lord's sacrifice of his life for our sins and his victory over death that we would know the joy of eternal life. As we consider what this means in our own lives we realize how our perspective on life is different than the world's. Our expectations of life have changed. Our spiritual destiny has taken on a whole new dimension. Our lifestyle is different. That's what we're going to talk about this morning, about how our understanding of ourselves as citizens of heaven impacts our walk with God and with those among whom we live and work.

PRAYER

READ Philippians 3:17-4:1: Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.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.¹⁹ Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.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.^{4:1} Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

Paul gives us two different pictures of life. On the one hand, there are those people who are "citizens of heaven," people who are saved by grace, who believe the Bible, who love Jesus, and who live their lives fearlessly, in peace, and with hope and joy.

On the other hand, there are those people who "walk as enemies of the Cross of Christ," people whose "god is their belly... (who) glory in their shame."

I want to talk about the "enemies of the Cross" first. Paul said he wrote this "even with tears." Paul wept for Christians who had lost their faith, people who had once loved Jesus but had somehow lost that love and had chosen to follow the world.

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

When Paul said “their god is their belly” he was talking about people whose character was shaped by worldly cravings, which could be physical, emotional, and/or intellectually. He wasn’t talking about people who ate too much.

He said such people “glory in their shame.” Church father, John Chrysostom, said this means that one takes “pride in what they ought to conceal. For it is bad enough to do shameful things. But if the doer is ashamed, it is only half so terrible. When, however, someone preens himself on his own shame, that is the extreme of shamelessness.”

There are many things that happen in this world which are absolutely abhorrent to the Christian. We see behavior in the public square that shocks us, on TV and in the movies that disgusts us, in politics domestic and international that terrify us. And we say to ourselves, How can these things be? Surely the end is near!

My word of encouragement is this: Never ever stop being shocked and disgusted! You do not have to accept the new normal as your normal. Remember who you are, to whom you belong, and remember God’s gift to you: you are a citizen of heaven.

St. Paul wrote, **Philippians 3:17,20-21, Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us....²⁰ 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**

One is either nuts or extremely confident to say something like “join in imitating me”! For to do so you’re just asking for trouble, you’re just asking for your life to be put under a magnifying glass.

Paul wasn’t nuts. He was a Christian businessman and evangelist who knew who he was and to whom he belonged. He was confident in his own skin.

For a Christian to be confident in his own skin means that he's not afraid to be himself. He believes God loves him, and he loves him in return, and he will not let the expectations, the demands, and the fickle opinions of this world compromise that love.

After his conversion to Christianity, Paul's life was a roller coaster. Half of the time he was being beaten up, imprisoned, and half-starved for publicly sharing his faith. The other half of the time he lived in peace, caring for his own needs and those of his fellow Christians through his tent-making business.

When Paul told us to imitate him I don't believe he was telling us we should be itinerant evangelist with part-time work as tentmakers. Rather, he was telling us to live like citizens of heaven in a broader more general sense.

What does the life of a citizen of heaven look like? I think there are at least three pillars which support the our citizenship. They are security, morality, and identity.

As a citizen of heaven you and I have no reason to worry about anything, fear anyone, or be stressed out about anything. Our hearts and minds are anchored in the security of knowing that "the Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

Compare this to those of whom Paul speaks, those whose "god is their belly." I'm going to call them the Belly God People. They have nothing but fear! They're afraid that they'll be too weak and afraid if they're ever confronted with true danger. They worry themselves into heart attacks, they have stress-related ulcers, and they give other people ulcers too!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus died for us and he rose from the grave for us so that we need not ever worry about anything, fear anyone, or be stressed out over anything.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." That is all the security we need to be a citizen of heaven.

Second, a citizen of heaven is concerned about morality. That is, we have a moral compass that is true. We are not confused about what is right and what is wrong.

There is no moral ambiguity in our lives. Indeed, Jesus said we can judge all things based on two commandments: Love God and love neighbor.

On the other hand, the Belly God People are very confused, for in their world everything is relative. They generally don't have an opinion concerning what's right or wrong unless something you propose to do would interfere with the signal their getting in their satellite dish.

But Jesus said "You are the salt of the earth." Friends in Christ, it is our call to take a stand, express to others what we believe is true, to be the salt of the earth, adding flavor to this tasteless world.

And, third, citizens of heaven do not have any questions as regards their identity. God tells us in a thousand different ways how much he loves us and cares for us and watches over us with the most vivid imagery. He tells us we are like chicks a mother hen protects, that we are children of our Father in Heaven who loves us so very much, that we are heirs of the throne of Christ and that we shall rule the nations of the world with him, that we are sheep of the Good Shepherd who will protect us, care for us, and lead us.

But the Belly God People? They are chameleons. They change identities faster than the weather changes in Southern California. Which way is the wind blowing—what do you want me to be? No problem. I'll be whatever you want me to be.

Citizens of Heaven, please say, "I'm a child of God." (I'm a child of God.)

Thank you. I'm glad there are no chameleons in the house this morning, confused people who don't understand how much Jesus loves them, loves them so much that he suffered for them, that he died for them, and that he rose from the grave for them.

I'm a child of God. Please say it too. (I'm a child of God.)

In Jesus we fear nothing for the Lord has given us a sense of security that nothing on earth can steal away from us. In Jesus we have a morality which gives us an anchor with which to secure our ships lest they flounder and we drown in the

ravishing storms of this world. In Jesus we have an identity which is unshakable, which is grounded in God's love for each and every one of us.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week may you be filled with a sense of thankfulness for how God has made you a citizen of heaven, rescuing you from the Belly God!

This week may we grow as citizens of heaven, gaining strength in our sense of security, morality, and identity.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share the good news of how God has lifted us up from the shameful things of this world and filled us with light with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.