

WHAT KIND OF CITIZEN ARE YOU?

PHILIPPIANS 3:20

For the next few weeks, I am going to be embarking on a new teaching series. When I first began thinking and praying about this series the titles I was considering were, "An Upside-Down Response to the Coronavirus Crisis," or "Holiness in a Global Pandemic." But in the aftermath of George Floyd's tragic death, and the eruption of hurt and anger and fear and sense of betrayal and injustice that have resulted from it, I have decided to broaden my focus. And so, I have changed the title of my sermon series to "Living Right Side Up in an Upside-Down World."

Be assured, I am not interested in giving political commentary on the goings on in our culture. How these crises get politicized so quickly is a sad commentary on our state of our country. How Christians get sucked into the political fray is sadder still, and all I can say is, "May God have mercy on us!"

What I would like to do in this series is explore what God has to say about our perspectives and attitudes and behavior in times like these, and how our Lord would have us think and feel and respond to what is going on. I firmly believe that Jesus not only has definite opinions about how we should think and feel and respond in our current crises (which are found in His Word), He also has a specific role for us. And I believe that if we do not fulfill that role then God's intended purposes will not be accomplished in the way He wants.

I also believe that Jesus *is* the ultimate Solution for the crises we are facing. I am not saying we don't need changes or that we shouldn't push for reforms in our governance, policies, or justice system. I am saying that deeply flawed human beings are incapable of making things truly right and securing real and lasting peace.

Last week, the satirical journal called *The Babylon Bee* published an entitled, "Nation Wishes God Would Send Someone Who Could Unify People Across Races, Classes, Genders, Tribes, Tongues." One imaginary local citizen was interviewed who mused, "What if there was someone who could take the dividing wall of hostility between races down and destroy it, becoming peace for us?"

Sound familiar? God already did that. And that Someone, Jesus Christ, is still the Solution, even if He is presently being ignored or misrepresented. He is the only One who can make things truly right and the only one who can secure real peace. And He *will* do so one day when He comes again. But whether things will be made right in America *before* He comes, or whether America disintegrates into anarchy and global irrelevance is something none of us can know.

One thing is certain, if there *is* to be real change for the good in America, if there is going to be real and lasting peace and justice and righteousness and love and respect and racial equality, it is going to happen as the church of Jesus Christ in America fulfills its duty to represent Him and express His life and His love in our homes, neighborhoods, work places, schools, and the public arena.

The way we do that is actually quite simple: We be who we are. More specifically, we be who Jesus, by His death and resurrection, regenerated us to be disciples who have been given His nature and indwelt by His Spirit, who have a new and completely different operating system than everyone else in the world.

When we function with this new operating system—without defaulting to the impulses and reactions of our old operating system (the flesh), without inserting or integrating the opinions and perspectives and conclusions of our old operating system (the flesh)—we get to reflect the character of Jesus and do the will of Jesus. And that has a healing, calming,

settling influence in the communities where we live.

In this sermon series, “Living Right Side Up in an Upside-Down World,” I want to address four different aspects of our identity as Christ followers that have bearing on how Jesus expects us to navigate the current crises in our nation and world. The first one (that I will be addressing today) has to do with our dual citizenship, and I have entitled today’s message, “What Kind of a Citizen are You?”

Earlier this year, the Library of Congress awarded Garth Brooks the esteemed *Gershwin Prize for Popular Song*. Brooks is a country music legend and a marvelous entertainer, and his talent was on full display that night. After the speeches had been made, the accolades had been given, and the award had been presented, he put on an unforgettable show. Throughout the performance he had the audience, comprised of congressmen/women from Capitol Hill, in the palm of his hand. They were laughing, singing, dancing, clapping, giving each other high fives, and having what appeared to be a grand, ol’ time. Republicans and Democrats seated close to one another looked as though they actually liked each other, even though this event came right on the heels of the impeachment hearings.

At the conclusion of the concert, Garth Brooks made some personal comments. He said, “When you get to my age people ask you, ‘What do you want to be remembered for?’ Well, I want to tell you who I am.” Then he took off his cowboy hat and said, “First and foremost, I am a child of God and Jesus Christ.” There was polite applause.

He continued, “Second of all, and almost as important, I’m a citizen of the greatest country this planet has ever known.” There was thunderous applause.

I have thought a lot about those comments since I saw that television show, especially in light of the turmoil our nation has experienced since this event took place. Garth Brooks could have been speaking for many of us. Most of us love America and consider it a great privilege to have been born or naturalized here. Most of us revere our founding fathers and the Constitution they crafted. We cherish the freedoms and rights and privileges we are afforded as American citizens.

But Christians who live in America have *dual* citizenship. Paul declared that those who have put their faith in Jesus are citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20), even though we have not yet been to heaven and have very little understanding of what heaven is like. Jesus Christ, who is sitting on heaven’s throne, is our King—our Sovereign—even though we have never seen Him and won’t see Him until we die or He returns to visibly establish His kingdom on earth.

Which means that we not only receive this heavenly citizenship by faith, we accept it by faith. We have no physical documents that prove we are citizens of heaven, nor do we have any other tangible evidence. We believe that we have certain freedoms and rights and privileges as citizens of heaven, but we cannot objectively *prove* that we have them, for they are invisible, just like King Jesus is currently invisible to us.

So, with regard to our dual citizenship, only one of them, our U.S. citizenship, can be substantiated by tangible, physical evidence. Only our U.S. citizenship can be validated in a court of law. If we tried to prove our heavenly citizenship in an earthly court the case would be dismissed for lack of evidence, because that citizenship is received and accepted by faith.

Which raises a couple of very important questions—questions that reveal a great deal about you, and questions that are extremely consequential in terms of how you live your life. Which of your two citizenships has your *supreme* allegiance and loyalty? When push comes to shove, when there is a clash between the principles, values, and obligations of these two citizenships, which one *trumps* the other?

And how do you know? Here's a hint: your attitudes and behavior, especially when going through national crises like we are right now, is what really proves your supreme allegiance.

Before I show you why that is true, I want to be sure you have a firm grasp from Scripture about your heavenly citizenship, so that you don't just take my word for it—you can see it yourself. I already alluded to Paul's statement in Philippians where he declares that our citizenship is in heaven. The Philippians were very familiar with the concept and benefits of citizenship. Located in the heart of Macedonia on the famous Appian Way, Philippi was a Roman colony, which meant that citizens of Philippi were automatically Roman citizens, possessing all the rights and privileges of Roman citizenship even though most of them had never been to Rome. That citizenship was something they cherished, something of which they were extremely proud, something that gave them a great sense of security.

Therefore, when Paul reminded the members of the church about their heavenly citizenship, a citizenship that surpassed their Roman citizenship, they would have understood its implications in terms of their identity and their sense of well-being and security.

But Paul also wanted them to understand it in relation to way they lived their lives. In verses 18-19 Paul described people, professing Christians who were not *really* Christians, who lived for the here and now. For them life was all about immediate gratification. "Let's have as much fun as we possibly can! Let's eat, drink and be merry and not worry about the consequences. Let's sin so that grace may abound!" These were people whose minds, Paul said, were on earthly things. They were living for the temporal pleasures of this world.

But that is not true of genuine Christ followers. We are citizens of heaven, and that means our minds are preoccupied with heavenly things and we are living for the day when we go to heaven and our salvation is complete. That is a logical, natural response to really believing that we are foreigners and aliens in this world. It is a logical, natural response to really believing that heaven is our real home, and when we get to heaven we will start to *truly* live.

Citizens of heaven, even though they have never been to heaven and have never seen the King of heaven, understand that heaven is where they belong, heaven is where their hope is, heaven is where their true affections are, heaven is where the One resides to whom they have given their supreme loyalty and allegiance.

Don't forget, that supreme loyalty and allegiance is a condition of one's relationship to Jesus in the first place. On one occasion Jesus said "*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple*" (Luke 14:26). He said the same thing in another way in Matthew's Gospel. "*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me*" (Matthew 10:37).

In ancient Near Eastern thought the words "love" and "hate" did not always refer to one's feelings or affections. And so, Jesus was not saying that His disciples must hate their loved ones in the sense that they should dislike them or disavow them. He is saying family members should not come before Him. Commitment to Jesus takes precedence over all other commitments, including our commitments to family members. If we would be Jesus' disciples, He must be our first priority; we must obey His will above anyone else's will. And if His will is contrary to the will of a loved one then we must choose His will. Because *loyalty to Jesus trumps loyalty to anyone else, including our nearest and dearest loved ones*.

And if that principle of supreme allegiance is true of the ones we love the most and to whom we are most devoted on this earth, then it is certainly true of everything else in our earthly lives, including our U.S. citizenship. I'm guessing that if Jesus were speaking today

to people who passionately love the U.S. and feel a strong sense of patriotism, he would say, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate America, he cannot be my disciple.” And please understand, Jesus would not be advocating “hatred” in the sense of despising or dishonoring or disavowing America. It would be a reference to our supreme allegiance—that our commitment and loyalty to Jesus always takes precedence over our commitment and loyalty to America.

We are primarily *kingdom* citizens, and secondarily U.S. citizens. So, as much as I like Garth Brooks, when he said, “First and foremost, I am a child of God and Jesus Christ,” and “second of all, *and almost as important*, I’m a citizen of the greatest country this planet has ever known,” I would respectfully disagree with the notion that those two citizenships have almost the same importance.

Our identity as U.S. citizens, as wonderful as it is, is not nearly as important as our identity as kingdom citizens. And so, when push comes to shove, when there is a clash between the principles, values, and obligations of these two citizenships, our kingdom citizenship always trumps our American citizenship.

Incidentally, the principles and values of those two citizenships clash more than we know, and those clashes are more pronounced in troubled times where people are on edge and emotions are running high. During such times we are confronted with the temptation (whether we know it or not) to default to our American principles and values and let them dictate how we think and feel and behave. But as people who are first and foremost kingdom citizens, we cannot let that happen. We must be alert and intentional about being ruled by kingdom principles and values because that is how the healing, reconciling love of Jesus will be expressed to our communities. That is how we are salt and light, that is how we are distinguished from everyone else, not as people who merely have strong feelings and “right” opinions, but as the catalysts for healing and peace.

Let me identify three areas where the rubber meets the road. First, in times of crises our heavenly citizenship is displayed by an eternal perspective. One of the fundamental principles of heavenly citizenship is that the world that we live in is temporal—it is passing away (1 John 2:17). This world is cursed by sin and this world, in its present state, is a spiritual battleground because it is still under the dominion of Satan. One day, according to 2 Peter, God is going to obliterate this world and create a new heaven and a new earth. And so, our role in this world is not primarily to preserve it or save it from destruction. Our role is to prepare ourselves and the earth’s inhabitants for the new world.

Many people in the world right now are in a heightened state of fear and apprehension because of the Coronavirus, which ultimately is rooted in a fear of death. This is an opportunity for Christ-followers to point them to the One who *shared in their humanity so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death* (Heb. 2:14-15). Our greatest need in this pandemic is not a vaccination. Our greatest need is to be set free from our fear of death. And Jesus is the solution. So, our current circumstances are a great opportunity for us to point people to Jesus.

But here is how I have seen some Christians respond to the Coronavirus Pandemic: “It’s a scare tactic by our government to control us.” Or, “I’m sick and tired of being told that I have to wear a mask or stay in my house.” Or, “I’m not going to allow anyone to do contact tracing with me—that’s an invasion of my privacy!” Or, “The government is persecuting the church by trying to keep us from meeting together and saying we’re not essential.”

Do you realize that none of those reactions have anything to do with the real issue, which is that people need Jesus? All of those reactions are about how “I” am being treated,

how "I" am being deprived of my rights, how "I" am being lied to and taken advantage of. It's all about "me," and it comes from my old operating system, the flesh. It's a worldly perspective (which is about self-preservation), rather than an eternal perspective (which is about making Jesus known).

You might be saying, "But I can't help it if I have so much angst about this! I have to express my opinions! And thank God for Facebook so I can!"

If that's what you think and how you feel, you are part of the problem, and you are forfeiting the opportunity to be part of the solution. Repentance is in order. Reboot your mind, and start relying on your new operating system (the Holy Spirit). Let Him give you His perspective.

Second, in times of crises, our heavenly citizenship is displayed by our attitudes toward people with whom we disagree and who rub us the wrong way. Let's face it: Our country is drowning in acrimony and bitterness right now. We are so polarized that civility is on the verge of extinction. And while this is extremely sad, why should it surprise us? Most people in our country do not know Jesus, and they talk and behave and react like people who don't know Jesus. Why should we expect them to be otherwise? They are being who they are, and until they come to know Christ and are transformed by Christ, they cannot be any different. They are controlled by the operating system we used to have, and it results in terribly skewed judgments and bad behavior.

You say, "But those people are my fellow citizens, and they're ruining America for the rest of us!"

Wait! Don't forget that you are primarily a kingdom citizen, and that citizenship trumps your American citizenship. America, just like the rest of the world, is passing away (1 John 2:17), and those people will tragically pass away with it, too, unless they become citizens of the kingdom.

You know what we ought to be doing during this time? Praying for those people. Loving those people. Reaching out to those people. In fact, I would encourage you to think of two or three politicians that rub you the wrong way and pray every day for them—for their salvation, for wisdom as they govern. I would encourage you to think of those lawless people that you see on television roaming the streets and pray for them. They're lost. They're confused. They are going to hell if they do not meet Jesus.

And so instead of being angry or condemning, allow the Holy Spirit to let you see them as He does—as sinners for whom Jesus died because of His great love for them. Don't be mad at them. Love them. Don't be exasperated with them. Pray for them. Don't argue with them, listen to them. Then point them to Jesus. Only He can change their hearts and make them good.

Finally, in times of crises our heavenly citizenship is displayed by how loosely we hold onto our earthly rights. As U.S. citizens our rights are spelled out in the section of our Constitution called the Bill of Rights. They guarantee self-expression, self-protection, and self-preservation.

Self-expression. I have a right to say whatever I want, to whomever I want, even if it is inflammatory.

Self-protection. I have a right to defend myself and my property, even with my own firearm.

Self-preservation. I have a right to live in whatever manner I feel is best for me and my interests.

We have those rights as American citizens, and we cherish them. But as Christ-followers who are primarily kingdom citizens there are times when we are called upon

by King Jesus to surrender those rights, because kingdom values always trump American values.

America says, "Assert yourself!" Jesus says, "Deny yourself." America says, "Defend yourself!" Jesus says, "Turn the other cheek." America says, "Protect your life!" Jesus says, "Lose your life. Take up your cross daily."

In times of crises the old operating system (the flesh) is more pronounced, because there is a heightened tendency for self-expression, self-protection, and self-preservation. That's why people are so opinionated these days. That's why we had a toilet paper crisis. That's why people rail against being asked to wear a face covering.

But that's not how followers of Jesus operate. Followers of Jesus operate on the principle of love and consideration and service. "Consider others as more important than yourself" (Phil 2:4). "Do unto others what you would have them do to you" (Matt. 7:12). "If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:39). "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two" Matt. 5:41). "Whoever wants to be first must be last." "Whoever wants to be great in God's kingdom must be the servant of all."

Our Kingdom citizenship is never about self-expression, self-protection, and self-preservation. It's about loving the Lord with all our hearts, minds, and strength, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. And it's only when we, as Christ followers, operate with these kingdom values and principles that we will be the catalysts for healing, reconciliation, and salvation that Jesus intends for us to be.

May God do a work in us, so that it will be so.

What Kind of Citizen Are You?

Philippians 3:20

Main Idea: Christ-followers are primarily citizens of the kingdom and secondarily citizens of countries on earth, so kingdom values and loyalties trump earthly values and loyalties

Our Dual Citizenship

One is acquired by birth and is visible and verifiable

One is acquired by faith and is invisible and unverifiable

One Citizenship Trumps the Other

Jesus demand for supreme loyalty

When push comes to shove

How Kingdom Citizenship is Displayed

By an eternal perspective

By our attitudes toward people with whom we disagree or who rub us the wrong way

By how tightly or loosely we hold onto our U.S. right

Living Above the Fray