



Speaker:
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Model Citizens of Zion

◀ Series: Philipians · 11 of 11

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We who are believers are citizens of a world which can't be seen. This has nothing to do with passports. We are citizens of whichever country we live in, but we're also citizens of heaven itself.

The UK would be better off if its people were all model citizens. People who didn't commit crime. People who put others before themselves. But for us who are the people of heaven, it's far more important for us to be model citizens of **that** country.

Our author in the Scriptures today, the apostle Paul, is the one who tells us about this other country. *Our citizenship is in heaven*, he says. As far as I'm aware, this is the only place in the Bible where the word citizenship is used.

We have here a description of certain people who were enemies of the gospel. And then Paul turns to another short description but this time of the citizens of heaven. So I'd like us to think about those very different descriptions and then turn to thoughts about how we can become the best citizens possible in this kingdom of God we're in, a country whose capital is heaven itself.

Citizens of this present world

Paul begins his first description in verse 18. He tells us they're "enemies of the cross of Christ". **Enemies of the gospel**. Enemies of the one who the gospel is about.

The next thing he says about them is found at the beginning of verse 19. It says, "Their end is destruction." I did wonder whether this meant *their end goal* is destruction. Their purpose is to destroy that which is good.

These people certainly fit that description. But the most popular interpretation is that these people, like all other enemies of Christ, face the **destruction of themselves**. Unless they repent, they'll end up in a place of outer darkness forever.

It'll be useful for me to point out that this word *destruction* doesn't mean "annihilation". It describes a state of utter ruin brought about through an eternal separation from God. No access to even the smallest of his mercies. No consolation. No *hope*.

Friends, you and I deserve to be in that place right now. Even before we were old enough to know our right hand from our left, we'd shown clearly our love of sin. By the time we entered adulthood, we'd already racked up a huge weight of evidence against ourselves; and in the many, many thousands of days which have passed since then, **we've managed to sin against God in every one of them.**

Yet we who find ourselves today in the company of the redeemed see how we were earmarked to become examples of the great grace of God.

But not these. Further in verse 19 we read these people had made a "god" of their own belly. What on earth does that mean?

The Bible tells us anything we devote ourselves to can become a god to us. A good example is football. Take our two local teams. Everton Football Club has as one of its mottos, *You're in my heart, you're in my soul*. Most devoted followers of Everton gladly confess this sports team has a place in their heart and in their very soul. Few would call Everton a "god", but by the Bible's definition, this is what it's become to them. The same club erected a giant poster opposite an evangelical church in Walton, picturing three of their most famous footballers and with the blasphemous caption, *The Holy Trinity*.

I suppose I should pick on the other club as well, just to be fair! A while back, I had a gospel leaflet made which had the crest of Liverpool Football Club on it. Alongside the crest was the question, "Is this your religion?" A few of us gave these out to the Liverpool football fans. Not long afterwards, a new item of merchandise appeared in their shop. It was a T-shirt displaying the phrase, *Liverpool is our religion; Anfield [Anfield Stadium] is our church*.

But before any of us get on our high horse, we can all make gods out of things. If you love your family—your children—more than God, they become your god. And there are innumerable other ways we can make gods out of people or things. You take a legitimate liking for something but end up investing far too much of your heart in it. That's how something good can become something sinful without you even noticing it.

But what does it mean to make a god out of your belly? I'll offer a couple of suggestions of what it could mean, then present what I think it most likely means:

- Perhaps the first thought which comes to mind is it's about gluttony. Eating far more than we need. Again, this starts out as something innocent. We all have to eat, and the Bible tells us we **should** eat. We're to look after ourselves. Jesus even took care of himself by eating to give him the nutrition and energy he needed. But if that liking for food grows too much, it can start to become gluttony, and you've started sinning.
- Another possibility is it's describing those who take *too much* care about eating healthily. They're obsessed with wellbeing, and they expend lots of time and thought making sure they put precisely the right balance of foods into themselves. They're

the type, you know, who'd recoil from you in horror if you offered them a pork pie! Eating sensibly has for them become a sinful preoccupation.

- It could be either of those two things. But if Paul's talking about the same group of enemies we've been looking at in previous weeks, it'd lead us to a different understanding. If he's still talking about fake Jews, those who don't have the spirit of Christ, **it points us towards Jewish food laws**. You might recall the Jews had become obsessed with outward practice of the Mosaic law. The apostle Paul had been one such person. And they were fixated on all these rules about food. It was so bad even Jesus said to them one day, *You seem to think eating the wrong stuff causes spiritual defilement, but you're wrong. It's the stuff that comes OUT of your mouths that defiles you!*

Remember: these Jews believed they could attain to the perfect standard of God's righteousness through their own efforts. And part of that effort was making sure they were devoted to ticking all the right boxes. They were more careful about this than meditating on the spiritual things of God. And in this way a proper observance of the law of Moses became sinful.

Let's move onto the next item Paul lists, still in verse 19. "They glory in their shame." We might guess it means they were proud about behaviours which were sinful. And that would be true.

But if we think Paul **is** still dealing with the same group of people who'd been causing him so much trouble, we can consider a more particular sin. You remember a while back we talked about how the Jews boasted about their membership of that group of people called "the circumcision." All those who'd been circumcised.

Paul doesn't usually refer to circumcision itself as something shameful. It was, after all, instituted by God, even if it was for a certain people and only for a certain period. So if this is about circumcision here, why would Paul say it was shameful?

I don't mind mentioning circumcision in my messages. But you'll also notice I don't go into detail. It's about something very personal, so as far as possible we speak about it in a careful and dignified way.

It'd seem that the Jews were so proud of their circumcision that they'd begun to speak quite openly and explicitly about their circumcision. Instead of it being a subject they'd blush when speaking of, it'd become the subject of inappropriate language and even boasting.

And think on this too: this was the generation which had had the Messiah walk among them. And if they hadn't been so hard hearted, they might have understood that circumcision in itself is meaningless. Instead of distasteful boasting, they should have come to the same conclusion Paul did and count their circumcision as rubbish. Something to be written off along with their Jewish pedigrees.

I'll concede here something else might have been meant. But what I've said seems the most likely to me at present. Without a doubt, the same phrase about glorying in shameful things could be applied to the sinful world that we live in today. For example, we saw a few weeks ago how a group of people in our city, who indulge in practices which are repugnant to God, paraded their sin through our streets. They have so little fear of God they even dare to have the word "pride" emblazoned on all their banners.

In that and many, many other ways, we are even today surrounded by people who take those things God calls "evil" and present them as morally good. And the attitudes and actions God **does** command, they ridicule and oppose.

Lastly in verse 19, we have Paul saying these enemies of God have their minds always on worldly things. We could think of this as a summary of their entire way of life.

Man has always had this tendency. Most people who've ever lived go through life as if the material world around them is all there is. This is why their focus is on getting as much as they can out of life before they die. They chase money. They devote themselves to charity work. They pursue casual relationships. They'll get married and have children, thinking they'll find fulfilment through playing happy families.

And no matter how satisfied they claim to be, the biggest and most important element for fulfilment in life is missing. **They don't have God.**

These enemies of God in Paul's day were pretty wicked people. It's no wonder he says in verse 18 he'd warned the believers about them often. If you read Paul's other letters you can see this. He's always telling them to *Watch out!*

You might think it a bit strange Paul admits he was crying as he wrote this letter. Okay, he had a deep love for the believers. Remember as well that he may have been worn out, what with all the opposition and things.

But I'd like to offer another suggestion as to why Paul was so upset. I know he's been ripping these trouble-causing Jews to shreds with very strong language. But let's not forget he still had an affinity with his own countrymen. He still felt a sense of belonging to his own people. He loved them!

It seems to be frowned on today to have a special fondness for the people of your own nation. It's true; Christians are to have a love for the whole of humanity. There's not a single race or group of people in this world that we don't want to be reached with the gospel.

But it's okay to have a special fondness for the people in your own family...your circle of friends...your community...your city...and your country!

Paul had a love for his own countrymen. In his letter to the church in the city of Rome, he describes it as his heart's desire that his fellow Israelites would be saved. That they'd all turn to Jesus Christ for salvation.

And his love for those who he had a mere natural connection to was so great he came out with this astounding expression: **he said he'd go to God's eternal hell in their place**, if such a thing was possible. If God offered to save all of them on the condition Paul spends eternity in the outer darkness, Paul says he do it.

I won't try to dress this up, friends. I don't have that level of love for the people of this land. I'd suffer an eternal hell in the place of my wife and children, but no one else. It makes you think, doesn't it? We say we love our neighbour, but do we love them like Paul did?

Citizens of heaven

Verse 20 sees a shift to Paul's description of the believers. He includes himself, the believers at Philippi, the believers in all the other churches of his day, and all the believers who would ever live down through the ages. It includes us.

Our citizenship is in heaven. Our CITIZENSHIP is IN HEAVEN!

- This is the very epicentre of this other world we inhabit
- It's the origin of all of us who've been born again
- And it was at our conversion we were made naturalised citizens of this heavenly Jerusalem.

Although it's common to hear about believers *travelling to* heaven, the picture the Bible gives is heaven *coming to us*.

- When we pray, *your kingdom come*, we're asking for the power *in* heaven to influence our world.
- We want heaven to, as it were, *come to us* so we might see the world turned upside down for God.
- In the book of Revelation, all of God's elect people who've ever lived are collectively viewed as a perfect bride coming *out of* heaven.
- When we pray for our final deliverance, we ask that Jesus would come quickly *from* heaven to us.
- And what is the world to come if it isn't a complete saturation of this world *by* heaven, creating the promised paradise?

But now, we wait. We hope every day our saviour will return. We're not idle while we wait. We carry on with our duty. But we're always hoping today will be the day!

Our great God and saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ is soon going to make his appearance. The date and the year has already been established. There is some date, like 21 April 2032. An

actual date when the long war of the ages will come to an end. When you will drop everything and stop what you're doing. When the entire population of the world will be out on the streets, wondering what's happening.

And for us? I expect we'll know what's happening! If any of us are alive when this happens, we'll witness all the dead believers raised to life in a glorious new state. And seconds later, all the believers already alive on that day will be changed where they stand.

Verse 21 tells us our Saviour himself "will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body". So they, and all their brethren raised from the graves, will be together with their Lord.

So if people wonder why—**that's** why we look!

But I suppose we'll probably be dead when he returns. And as we said last time, to be raised is our great hope. Paul's whole life was lived, and our lives are being lived, for this one great goal: **the resurrection**:

- To be made alive
- To appear in glory
- To be part of the great reunion of the church of God
- To cry with joy and relief that you'll never suffer again
- To finally experience absolute sinlessness
- To **see Jesus** in his glorified state

And our confidence in all this is in our belief in the power of Jesus Christ. Verse 21 says it's the power by which he rules this world and will eventually subdue it.

You might remember when we tackled verses 10 and 11, I encouraged you to pray for this power from on high. That it may fill you and empower you to do great exploits for God.

If your Christian walk is a faint one; if you're not inclined to draw on this power from heaven; if your life as a believer has been marked by little experience of the power of Christ; your confidence in the resurrection will be weak.

But the more we experience his power in our day-to-day service, the more confidence we have *in* the power. And the more familiar we are with his power, the stronger will be our belief in the resurrection. As sure as you are that you're going to die, you'll be sure that Christ will raise you again.

The Model Citizen

Paul has presented us with a pretty clear distinction here. There are those who make their decisions in life based only on what they can see. They have a horizontal perspective. In

their religion, they suffer from being short-sighted. And because of this, their decisions are bad. Their religion is not a heavenly one but a carnal one.

Then there's us. We understand there's more to life than the material world around us. We have a *vertical* perspective. In our religion, we consider the world to come, and eternity is never far from our thoughts. Because of our true spiritual connection with God, we are able to make **good** decisions. Our religion is not a carnal one but a *heavenly* one.

What we've done so far has established that we who serve Jesus Christ are citizens of a kingdom which isn't geographical but is made up of a king and subjects who live in different places.

But I said earlier about becoming model citizens of this heavenly kingdom we find ourselves in. We not only have a duty to reflect as far as possible the goodness of God, but it's our *delight* to do so.

So how were the Philippian Christians supposed to do this?

Paul's advice to them was, *Do as I do **and** do as I say!* Paul presents himself to them not only as a teacher in the church but as a living example. *Don't just listen to my teachings, he says, but watch the way I act and copy it!*

This might sound presumptuous. But what we need to realise is this was a generation which didn't have the word of God as we do. It's not even as if they had copies of the Old Testament in book form tucked under their arm. The printing press was many centuries away.

Perhaps this will make you that little bit more appreciative of your Bibles. You not only have access to the entire canon of Scripture, but you have it in printed form. You have your own copy! You have maybe *more* than one copy. And you can even view the Bible on a computer or a phone now.

For these early Christians, one of the best ways they could learn Christ-likeness was to have role models in their lives. Paul not only presents himself as one whose example is worth following, but he encourages the people to look out for other role models. So even when Paul wasn't there, they'd have other people they could aspire to be like.

Obviously, he didn't want them to copy him in every respect. If he lost his temper one day, it would have been obvious to everyone they weren't to all start ranting and raving at each other. We can sum this up in this way: **Paul wanted them to copy him in whichever ways he copied Christ.** He said as much in his letter to the church at Corinth:

1 Corinthians 11:1—Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

This means if they succeeded in copying him in all these good ways, they weren't really becoming more like Paul at all **but were becoming more like Christ**.

Not everyone liked Paul. There were some in the churches who were probably genuine Christians that had a sinful attitude towards him. They'd obviously be reluctant to have Paul as their role model.

But if people couldn't avoid thinking about Paul's failings, **they could at least copy him in his expressed desire to be more like his saviour**.

Today, we have in our possession a standard far better than what Paul offered. God has blessed us with our own copy of the word of God. You have something people haven't been able to own for most of this world's history.

So read it. Become more familiar with it this week than you have been. Keep your heart open to its direction. Obey God's word, and you can become more and more a model citizen of heaven.

Here it is: our magnificent guidebook to life and eternity. But I don't mean that we've now done away with the idea of role models. I should be a perfect role model of Christ-likeness for you to follow—and I'm not. And there's no excuse for it. I want to be that person, but I fall over every day. If only I could be the person Paul wanted Titus to be when he said:

Titus 2:7—Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity...

But the truth is I am **supposed** to be some kind of role model. If I were to tell you that you shouldn't copy me in any respect whatsoever because everything I do is wrong, then how can I even be a believer? And why on earth have you allowed me to stand in the pulpit today!

I'd be denying the grace of God at work in my life if I tried to sound too humble and say I'm awful in every respect. The grace of God *has* enabled me to do some good works. The grace of God *has* given me a level of integrity and dignity that Paul urged on Titus. And I need to keep on praying that God would help me in all these things.

I should reach the point where Paul was at the very least. But for now, let me suggest this. If you believe I have a genuine desire to stop sinning, have the same mind as me. If you think I sincerely desire more of the power of God at work in my life, you should think that way too. If you see me act at any time in a Christ-like way, by all means copy me.

Just remember this: you're not copying me at all. **You're emulating Jesus Christ**. My actions would be nothing more than a mirroring of his. Any graciousness you saw in me is just a reflection of what's in him.

But what about you? Some of you have been Christians a lot longer than me. Should we copy you? If not, why not? You men: are you role models for future church leaders? You ladies: are you good examples for the next generation of young women? If not, why not make this exhortation a turning point, whereby you start afresh to become the person you should be?

Whether you're inspired by the actions of others, by something you've heard preached, or teaching you got straight from the Bible, it all amounts to the same thing: **you're becoming more Christ-like**. And in doing this, you are on track to becoming a model citizen.

There's a couple more points Paul makes. In the first verse of chapter 4, it tells us to stand firm.

- Satan wants to shove you in a ditch through temptation to disrupt your service of the Lord. Don't let him! Stand firm.
- The citizens of Babylon, the enemies of God in this world, want to scare you into cowering in a corner. They want to make you ineffective. Don't let them! Stand firm!
- And that sinfulness which lives in the flesh wants you to indulge every desire *of* that sinful nature so that you offend God and disturb your relationship with him. Don't let it! **STAND FIRM.**

A Christian friend of mine used to be a doorman (a bouncer). One day, he had to stop a fight developing in the pub. And he went over to one lad and tried to move him away from the scene. But this lad wouldn't move! I mean my friend was twice as big and heavy, but he said this other lad was like a rock. He got the impression he was a boxer and had trained so well he was almost immovable.

Brethren, you too are to be highly trained as soldiers of Christ. You're to grow in strength and become immovable. So when the world, the flesh or the devil try to move you from that place of readiness, you'll stand firm. Listen to this old hymn:

*'Mid the battle's raging fury, standing firm,
Face the legions dark before thee, standing firm;
In the strength of our Redeemer,
Make the pow'rs of hell surrender,
Be a valiant overcomer, **standing firm.***

And remember: you're not a one-man army. You have your brothers and sisters. What does Paul say about his fellow Christians? He loves and longs for them, and they are to him his joy and crown.

During your education and training to become a model citizen of God's kingdom, you're to foster the same attitude as Paul. Love your brethren! Love them so much you're counting

down the days till you can see them again! Love them so much you take every opportunity you can to meet with them!

Love them so much you'll devote your life to helping them to become model citizens and humbly allow them to help you become the same.

Amen.