

Citizenship in Christ

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everyone. As we sit, let's bow our heads and pray together. Our gracious Father, we hear Paul's exaltation to stand firm in the Lord.

And Father, as we look at the world around us, we begin to see that your people really do need to step up and to stand firm.

So Father, we pray this morning that you would inspire us by your Holy Spirit to do just that. To step up and to stand firm in Jesus.

In whom our citizenship depends. And we pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. So I want to preach to you on a verse from our reading this morning.

Paul says this in Philippians 3 verse 20. Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 : 0 8] So a couple of months ago or thereabouts, I was really looking forward to a trip up to my hometown in Cheshire.

To see my friends from the days when I wasn't a Christian. And just to hang out with them for a few days. And so I had booked early.

And because I'm old and creaky, I get a senior's rail card. Which means I can get a third discount. And that's about the only thing I like about getting old.

So I'm at the station, Yatou. Get on a train to Temple Meads. Where according to my ticket, I have to change trains and get to Newport in Wales.

And then get a train that will take me up to Chester. And then from Chester to Stockport. And then from Stockport to Knutsford. By the time I got to Newport, I was still eager.

[2 : 1 4] Eager to get there and hang out. Unfortunately, when I got to Newport, there was no mention of my train on the digital sign.

So I went up to a nice porter and said to him, did he have any idea what had happened to the 1021 to Chester?

I don't know, he said. But it is a... I can't remember what they call the Welsh Railway Company. But he said it's a Welsh train. And he said, anything could happen. And I'm like, well, that's encouraging.

And then he came and found me about three minutes later. And he said, I'm afraid your train's cancelled. Oh, and by the way, you need to know, you've told me you booked a first class fare.

I said, yeah. He said, there is no first class service on that train anyway. By this time, my nose was feeling strangely as though it might start to bleed.

[3 : 1 7] So I got on a train, went back to Bristol Parkway, got on a train to Birmingham, had 35 seconds to cross the station to get on a train to Stockport.

By that time, I was hoping the defibrillator was in useful distance. In the end, I got there, and during that day, I have made eight changes on various railways.

As it happens, I had a great time. But what I do want to say is the eagerness that I had as I started my journey had just about drained out through my shoes by the time I got there.

We're waiting eagerly, eagerly, said Paul, for the Lord Jesus Christ to return.

Let me ask you a question. Is that your experience? I mean, this was just, in the end, can you believe this? I was just an hour late. Some of us want to say to the Lord, come on, Lord, it's been 2,000 years now since you told us you were coming back, and we're still hanging on.

[4 : 34] Is it fair to say that our eagerness can be tempered once whatever it is we're seeking to achieve gets very drawn out?

I think that's a reasonable thesis. So I want to talk to you today about something that Russell made very clear a few weeks ago for those of you who are here, and that is our primary identity as Christians is in Christ.

Paul puts it a slightly different way here. He says our identity is as citizens of heaven. Today, I think you could say that our culture is very interested in, maybe even obsessed by identity.

Everything now becomes an identity issue. It was interesting to me that in the feedback from the first question, as far as I know, only one person said that the primary factor that determines their identity, who they are, only one person in church today said, my identity is in Jesus.

Not telling you off when I say that. Mostly. So everything becomes an identity issue. Recently, there was an article in the news about something that is really terrible in our culture, and that is we are not recruiting enough women to be engineers.

[6 : 17] This obviously was a result of dreadful oppression and abysmal behavior, but not many women are showing up to be engineers. It didn't occur to the author of this article.

There may be some women who don't choose to be engineers, but it became an issue about the identity of women. That example could be reproduced thousands of times, not just about gender issues, race issues, whatever.

And I want to try and explain to you very briefly today two reasons why it is that identity has become such a critical issue.

And part of the reason it has become a critical issue, almost an obsession is partly due to the fact that it has been given a free ride on social media.

So here are two reasons why we're obsessed with identity today. One is called, a philosophical concept called determinism.

[7 : 23] That is, everything you are is buried in your past, and they're all external factors. So they could be disadvantages that are perceived to be disadvantages in today's culture.

Could be to do that you had awful parenting when you were a child. Could be to do with your genetics. It could be to do with the fact that you came from a household which had no educational aspiration and no money.

Could be to do with any of these things. But the big deal is, who you are is not your fault. All to do with external factors that happened to you in the past.

And of course, of course there is truth in that. Nobody's pretending that part of us all in church this morning isn't a product of stuff that happened to us in the past.

We'll come back to that. The second thing I want to try to explain to you is a word that I hope you will forget the moment you leave church this morning.

[8 : 37] And the word is intersectionality. Okay? This is kind of taking determinism into a kind of more extreme form.

A lady called Kimberley Crenshaw, 1985, developed this theory. And the theory is this. That certain people suffer from serious disadvantages in our culture.

What intersectionality does is it kind of creates a sort of grid, a matrix, whereby all those factors are factored in. So, I'm not trying to parody any particular kind of person here, but if you are black, if you are a person of colour, if you are a woman, if you are a white heterosexual male, if you are a lesbian, if you are gay, all that, we're told, creates disadvantage in your life.

And what intersectionality does is it kind of gives you a score on how disadvantaged you are. And of course, there's an element of truth in all that.

But there are some things in life that if you blowtorch them so much, if you focus on them so much and get them out of kilter, then they become very difficult, I think, for societies to process and to live with healthily.

[10 : 14] Let me give you an example of another human characteristic, which broadly we would agree is good, but if taken to an extreme, can become extremely not good. Loyalty.

Loyalty is really important. It's important. It's important in organizations. It's important in marriages. It's important in all kinds of areas. But there comes a point where loyalty becomes a cop-out.

Why do I say that? Because we still give people who whistleblow, as we say in organizations, who break ranks with loyalty to try and tell the truth about what's going wrong in the organization.

If we didn't have people like that, people would continue to get away with appalling behavior in the name of loyalty. So these two things, intersectionality and determinism, basically have this one profound disadvantage, and that is, together, they create a kind of factory for victims.

People who can say, this is not my fault. I don't have to take responsibility because this wasn't me. There was a church up in Leeds where the guy was trying to attract young families, so he started a toddler group.

[11 : 43] It was a great idea. And then he kind of thought, how can I move this from being a great toddler group to being a place where people might find Jesus Christ? So he talked to the women, mostly women then, who brought their kids to the toddler group.

He said to them, what is your greatest anxiety about bringing up children? Oh, they said, as one, this is simple, it's potty training. Guy scratched his head, he said, seriously?

You know, you're not worried about famine? No? Potty training. He discovered the reason for this was that some kind of hacked doctor had written in the local newspaper, basically an article which said, if you get potty training wrong with your children, you are breeding the next generation of serial killers.

Mark my words. So he did a course. And the course was run by a responsible GP who came in and did five sessions on healthy potty training.

Must have been a real blast, mustn't it? The last one, the vicar did. He studiously avoided potty training and talked to them about the need for them to recognize the spiritual seed that God had put into every child which needed to be nurtured.

[13 : 17] The result was a great playgroup became into a great recruitment group for Jesus Christ. Someone say amen. So those two things mean that we get very focused on identity in such a way that we persuade ourselves that actually nothing much is our fault.

And to a point, let me say, I'm not taking extreme view of this. To a point, there is something in both those ways of thinking. But if pushed too far, they become very difficult, even nonsensical in our society.

So Paul, in Philippians chapter 3, has just been talking about how he considers all that went before as, this is his words, not mine, as rubbish, that he may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of his own that comes through the law, but that which is through faith.

At the beginning of our reading, Paul said this, not that I have already obtained all this. See, those of you who know Jesus Christ in church today, would you say that you have obtained all the blessing that God wants for you?

And the obvious answer to that is no. Why? Because you've not found your way into heaven yet. The blessings to come are very real, but they are in the future.

[14 : 56] We have not yet obtained them. He said, neither have I been made perfect. Listen, hands up. If you think you're perfect. Hands up.

Of course not. Most of us still have glaring things in our lives that we know are not right and the people we live with, if we're blessed to live with somebody, know about them only too well.

But, says Paul, despite the fact that I'm not where I will be one day, despite the fact that I'm not perfect, he says, I press on.

You repeat that after me, just say, I press on. See, the idea of that is, we will have disappointments in our walk with Christ, but as Paul says, I have them, but look, I'm going to press on with Jesus.

And then he tells us that he has a strategy for pressing on. First of all, he says, forgetting what is behind.

[16 : 08] My goodness, that is so challenging, isn't it, for those of us who are in a more determinist mindset. Some of you have had horrific things happen to you in your past.

Some of you have had those things and have managed to kind of rise above them and get past them, but some of you haven't. And maybe today, this is the day that Jesus speaks into your ear and says, look, do as I ask.

Let go of what is in the past. In 2 Corinthians 5, verse 17, Paul tells us we're new creations. What Paul meant about that in that context was simply this.

I have become a new creation and the past has become wiped out. The problem is, we can know we're forgiven, we can know that there is a possibility that we can leave the past behind, but unfortunately the devil uses that stuff to trip us up.

in Isaiah chapter 43, verses 18 and 19, some of my favorite verses in the Old Testament.

[17 : 34] Verse 43, sorry, chapter 43, verses 18 and 19. forget the former things, says the Lord.

Do not dwell on the past. See, I'm doing a new thing. Now it springs up. Do you perceive it? Do you not perceive all? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.

See, for those of you who feel that your lives are a bit like a desert, there is hope because God wants to do a new thing. But to do that new thing, some of you are going to have to let go of stuff from the past.

And here's the tricky thing. See, some of us are so messed up by our past that it identifies us.

I mean, it might well have been, I wouldn't expect any of you to say this in a kind of public forum like that. But the bottom line is, it would be very difficult, not impossible, but very difficult, if you were physically or sexually abused at some stage in your past.

[18 : 46] It would be very difficult to let go of that. I appreciate that. But I want to say it's impossible because God wants to do a new thing in your life.

Friends, are you pressing on? Or have you just become stuck in your spiritual life? And the problem is, there's a part of our culture, what I call therapy culture, that encourages us to dwell in our past.

It's been around for a very long time. Therapy culture didn't just begin in the 20th century. It began with Job. Remember Job who lost everything, could have spent the rest of his life dwelling in what happened to him.

And the only advice his friends could give him were, look into your past, Job. There must be something that you've done wrong. And Job could find nothing, and the Bible declares him as righteous.

And this can become kind of pan-generational. people. You know, the way I am is not my fault, it's my parents, it's my grandparents. Even people now, you know, have these DNA tests done to tell what kind of racial background they have.

[20 : 09] My sister told me, I am 3% Anglo-Saxon. And he mentioned the next time, next time, if I get caught speeding and wind down the window and a policeman says, you were speeding them, do you recognize that?

And I say, well, give me a break. I'm 3% Anglo-Saxon. You think that would work? I don't think so. Not my fault.

And Ezekiel tells us that it's the soul that sins that will surely die. Not my relatives, but the soul that sins.

Forgetting what is behind. Second part of Paul's strategy is verse 15 where he gives us the analogy of a running race.

It tells us that we've got to keep our eyes on the prize, if I can summarize it like that. Here's what he says.

[21 : 14] Can't find it. Can't find it. Can't find it. Can't find it. Can't find it. Can't find it. Can't find it. For getting what's behind and straining towards the reason, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

See, if there's part of our culture, therapy culture, that asks us to dwell in the past, the kind of current culture of well-being, of mindfulness, tells us to live in the moment.

I mean, as far as I can best tell, I don't have much choice about that. You know, the moment is, I'm living in the moment right now. Any minute now, my knees could buckle.

But I'm living in the moment. Stop yawning at the back. The analogy of a running race. Listen, most people who are competitive don't enter a race with the idea that the most exciting thing about entering the race is, I'm going to have to train.

Now, most people enter the race because they think with the right schedule, training schedule, they might have a possibility of actually winning. I don't know how that happens.

[22 : 33] You know, we used to have to do cross country in my school. I remember you know, I normally come in about 33rd when we had competitive running races. And one day, I can't remember I'd been training with any more diligence.

In fact, I don't think I'd been training at all. And suddenly, it all came together. And I won the race. Couldn't believe it. Nor could our games master. Here's the thing.

We're supposed to keep our eyes on the prize. Don't forget that you have a future in Jesus Christ. And it's based on the promises of God and also what Paul mentions here in verse 20.

Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under control, will transform our lowly bodies, so that they will be like his glorious body.

Paul, before that, and interestingly, I would always think, you know this business, when we get, you know, some of you are in age where you kind of walk through town, and you're like, oh my goodness, you know, what are these people doing?

[24 : 03] Why do they behave like that? You know, why do people throw litter? Why do people smoke cigarettes? Why do people do all this stuff? In other words, you become just a little bit judgmental. And interestingly, my perception of St. Paul is that he might have the kind of character that might become a little judgmental.

But when he talks about the people who are not Christian, who have not accepted citizenship in heaven, he talks about them, he says, with tears.

And then he says, many live as the enemies of Christ. Sorry, enemies of the cross. What does that mean?

I mean, most of the people who walk around Clevedon, who don't know Christ stand, don't show any interest in knowing Christ.

They probably never think about the cross. Probably even know about it, probably never heard about it. You know, in Tokyo, I mean, I know Tokyo is a long way away, but I read in an article that in a shop window in Tokyo, there was a figure of Father Christmas on a cross.

[25 : 23] How confused is that? see, one being the enemies of Christ, the cross, means that they have no interest in the currency of seeking the best kind of forgiveness that can be achieved on planet Earth, and that is the forgiveness of God through the shedding of Christ's blood on the cross of Calvary.

Enemies of the cross show no interest in wanting to be healed. Paul goes on, then destiny is destruction. Has it ever occurred to you when you look at our world and its current state, that there seems to be a kind of deep self-destructive facet to the way we're behaving?

I mean, you could look at that in a number of areas, in political life, in moral life, you could look at it in terms of the environment, you could look at it in lots and lots of different terms, but listen, Paul nails it.

They are into self-destruction. Third thing is, he says they're hedonists, all they're interested in is pleasure. That's what it means when he says their God is their belly or their stomach and their glory is in their shame.

Has it ever occurred to you when you hear celebrities or whatever, when they are kind of making themselves popular off the back of the most despicable behavior?

[27 : 00] Glorifying in their shame, says Paul. But no, he says, we are citizens in heaven. Citizenship implies a privilege. You're a citizen of the United Kingdom.

There are certain things that you are allowed to do that if you are not a citizen, you cannot do. You have a right of entry into this country. You're allowed to live here.

I'm going to say you're allowed to pay taxes, but you might not be too keen on that. Citizenship in heaven also implies privilege. If you are in Christ, you have a right of entry into heaven.

You're not going to get a passport, but you will get a free pass into heaven if you are in Christ. Citizenship in heaven needs to be lived now in the light of what will be.

That means we need to start thinking differently, friends. In that Matthew chapter 5, you remember on the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks to us about something that have been called the Beatitudes.

[28 : 11] These are what you might call the values what it means to be a citizen of heaven, to be in the kingdom of God.

And if you read them, I'm not going to read them all to you now because you're looking like you need lunch, but if you read them all, these are the complete antithesis of the way the world lives.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Who thinks that? blessed are those who mourn. Who thinks that? Blessed are the meek. Does anybody down in the city of London believe that?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. None of these things play a part in 21st century Western culture. Friends, we need to think a little differently.

And meditating on those Beatitudes might be something you might like to think about. And we need to behave differently. Do you remember Jesus talked about the need for us to be lost in order to be re-found by him?

[29 : 27] Even Gandhi, who actually pinched quite a lot of his best stuff from Jesus, Gandhi said this, the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.

Pretty close to what Jesus was on about, in fact. Citizenship in heaven means death will not be the end. In fact, Paul implies this very strongly in this passage, that we shall have a new body that will be more like the risen Christ.

When you define yourself, do you ever think about this? Do you ever think that your identity, primarily, if you're a follower of Jesus Christ, is exactly in that truth?

Being in Christ is my identity. And what do we need to do with citizenship? We need to gratefully receive it and not put it to the recesses of our thinking or of our minds.

My own family, according to my sister, came, my mother's family, came here from Germany at some point in the past.

[30 : 53] I think my great-great grandfather must have seen the writing on the wall for Jewish people and decided that Europe was not a safe place.

So they came to this country. If you are Jewish, most Jews would say to you that their primary identity, even if they don't practice Jewish religion, is that they're Jewish.

When my family came here, they decided the only honest thing to do was to deny their Jewishness.

And so my grandfather opened a chain of butcher shops in the north of England, northwest, and sold pork. forbidden in the Torah, the law. Let me ask you a question.

Are you hiding your citizenship? Are you frightened of being found out to be a follower of Jesus Christ?

[32 : 13] Those of you who still have paid employment in the West would have very good reason to be a little anxious about coming out too strongly in your identity?

When I was in the House of Lords, I cannot tell you how many maiden speeches I heard. Only once, only once, did I hear somebody in a maiden speech own up to their citizenship in heaven.

there was a good friend of mine called Michael Farmer, Lord Farmer, as it is now. He stood up in that chamber and he nailed it.

I have maximum respect for him. And it made me think, you know, maybe I've got to nail it a bit more often than I'm inclined to do.

Anybody sitting in church today who feels the same, I would think so. Friends, we're citizens in heaven. Someone say amen.

[33 : 20] Friends, we are citizens of heaven. heaven. Someone say hallelujah. Friends, we are citizens of heaven. Somebody shout, thank you Lord. But you shout a bit louder if you go down to the football, right?

I want to just end by saying to you, as I said at the beginning, as I said last week, and as I will say till they drag me off this planet.

Friends, this may not feel like our time, but it is our time. Stand up, speak up, pray up, and let's see what happens.

Jesus started with twelve men. Think what we could do. Imagine it.

God, but it needs you to begin by owning your citizenship. Let's pray. Father God, we thank you that we are citizens.

[34 : 33] Lord, not because we're any great shakes, or because we earned our way into your presence, but Lord, because of your grace. Your love shown to us, even though, Lord, we all know that we don't deserve it.

So, Father, come, we pray today. Fill our hearts, fill our minds, fill our souls with this wonderful truth that we are citizens of heaven, that we can let go of the past, and Lord, you will heal us of anything that today distracts us down.

so, Lord, bless this congregation, I pray thee. Lord, that they may bless many in your name and to your glory, and the people who agreed, said together, Amen.