

“How to Make Heaven Our Home”  
Philippians 3:17-4:1

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The year was 1846. Abraham Lincoln was running for a seat in the U.S. Congress. His opponent was a Methodist Circuit Rider by the name of Peter Cartwright. One night, Lincoln went to hear Cartwright preach. As the fiery Cartwright came to the conclusion of his sermon he said to the congregation, “Everybody here who wants to go to heaven, stand up.” The whole crowd stood up except Lincoln. Cartwright, who considered Lincoln an infidel said, “I observe that all present want to go to heaven except for Mr. Lincoln. Mr. Lincoln, may I ask where you are going?” Mr. Lincoln rose to his feet and said, “Brother Cartwright, I intend to go to Congress.” That year he did.

What does it mean for us to make heaven our home? How can we discover a little bit of heaven here and now?

After a rousing week of resounding patriotism, I would like to talk with you about living as resident aliens on planet Earth. As Christians, we need to be reminded from time to time that we are in the world, but not of the world. While most of us want to go to heaven when we die, I don't find many of us in a hurry to get there. Turn with me to Paul's joyful letter to the Philippians. Let's see what he has to say about living on Earth in the light of eternity. (3:17-21)

HEAVEN, IT'S A MATTER OF CITIZENSHIP. V. 20 *Our citizenship is in heaven.*

When somebody sings “My Old Kentucky Home” I stand, put my hand over my heart and a little tear trickles down my cheek. I am learning to do the same with those lyrics: *Rocky Top, you'll always be, home sweet home to me. Good old Rocky Top, Rocky Top Tennessee.* Never in my lifetime have so many sung it so proudly, as we have in recent months:

*God bless America, land that I love,  
Stand beside her and guide her,  
Through the night with a light from above.*

Everybody needs a place, a land to call home, a citizenship in a beloved country. It is refreshing and good to be American.

But, I say you today, that our ultimate citizenship is in heaven. We have residence in another realm. We pledge allegiance to another kingdom. This world is not our home; we are just passing through. We live here with a lightness of being. We tell time by another clock. We set values by a different system.

We become U.S. citizens by birth or naturalization. With a simple birth certificate most of us claim the rights and privileges of being an American. We did little to earn it. We may do little to fortify it. Nevertheless, we have all the

privileges of the Constitution, all the protections of the government, and all the rights provided its citizens.

Some become citizens by naturalization. You answered 100 questions about our history and government. You learned to speak and write English. You declared your allegiance to our way of life and you became one of us. We never take citizenship lightly.

By water and the spirit, we are born into the kingdom of God. Through the grace of Jesus Christ we are claimed as children of God. By the process of confirmation we embrace the rights and responsibilities of a godly relationship. We are citizens of heaven. Don't ever forget your homeland and where you really belong.

HEAVEN, IT'S A MATTER OF CHARACTER. V. 18 *As I have often told you before and now say again, Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ...Their mind is on earthly things.*

As a parent, do you ever feel like you are swimming against the tide trying to raise children by Christian principles? As a business person, do you ever feel like you stand alone for the cause of integrity and honesty in the marketplace? As a teenager, do you feel the pressure of others to become what you are not? Of course you do. It is because of who you are. You follow a God who is at odds with the world. People might even consider you weird for not setting your values by public opinion. The devil is telling you everyday that it is too much, that the standard is too high, that you can't reach it. He is quick to point out the places we fail, encouraging us to just give up.

But, I have come to say to you today that you are children of another world. Your citizenship is in another land. You embrace a new set of values and they are Kingdom values. Jesus was very explicit about it. You have heard it said, "Do not murder," but I say, "Come to grips with your anger." You have heard it said, "Do not commit adultery." But I say, "Lust is a multi-billion dollar business that steals hearts away." You have heard it said, "Divorce is legally possible," but I say to you, "marriage is a spiritual union." You have heard it said, "Speak the truth under oath," but I say, "speak the truth all the time." You have heard it said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," but I say, "if you live that way, the world is going to become blind and toothless." These are not the world's values, but Kingdom values. The world has no intent to live up to those values. It is not the world's purpose to do so, but it is our calling to do so.

Paul says in V. 17, in a very bold and brave statement, *Do as I do. Imitate me as I imitate Christ.* Can you say that? Dare we live with such character, with such integrity, with such honesty in our lives that we could look to someone else and say, "Don't do as I say, just do as I do"?

Will Willimon illustrates it this way: At confirmation one year, Joe, a young adult, became a mentor for Max, a 14-year-old kid. Joe took his responsibility seriously, saying to Max, "Drop by my apartment anytime. Let's be friends." About three

weeks later, Max did stop by Joe's apartment. At the time, Joe happened to be in bed with his girlfriend. He was embarrassed. A week or so later Max asked Joe, "When did you decide to live by this set of standards?" Joe, embarrassed, said, "That's none of your business. It's my life." Max replied, "I just wanted to know. My girlfriend and I have been trying to decide our own sexual ethics."

Christians ask a different kind of question. We don't ask, "What do others do?" We ask, "What would Jesus do?" That is dramatically different. It is one thing to take a public opinion poll and set our values according to the majority. It is another thing to ask a deep question, "What would Jesus do in this setting and this circumstance?" and then have the nerve to go out and try to do it. It is a matter of character.

If this life is all there is, then there may be good reasons to go on dancing, to bring out the booze and have a ball. But, you are not of this world. Your values come from a different place. So, you do not use people for personal gratification, make choices by the standard of selfish gain, throw your commitments to the wind, or even try to get ahead by climbing the ladder of self-righteousness. That is not who you are, whatever others do and say. The paradox is worth it.

HEAVEN. IT'S A MATTER OF CHRIST. V 20 *And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.*

What if heaven were not so much a place as a person? What if heaven were not somewhere to get to, but someone to come to? What if it were not a land far away, but an experience here today? Not so much about mansions, but more about meaning? What if heaven can't wait? What if I need it now?

One hundred years ago, optimistic Christians set out to build God's kingdom on earth. They announced the dawning of the Christian Century. They believed in 100 years the world could be Christianized and the Kingdom of God would come on earth as it is in heaven. Here, at the dawn of the 21st century, the world is more materialistic, hedonistic, and secularistic than it was then. The Church, once a pivotal player in world affairs, is now in a mode of self-survival. What happened? I suggest a simple answer. We do not build the kingdom of God, we receive the Kingdom of God. It is not in our power and might to make the Kingdom of God come on earth as it is in heaven.

Ted Turner, owner of CNN and Superstation TBS, said, "Almost every religion talks about a savior coming. When you look in the mirror in the morning, putting on your lipstick or shaving, well, you are looking at the savior. Nobody else is going to save you so get out and save yourself." I am here to say, Mr. Turner, you are wrong! If we set out to save ourselves, we are miserably lost. Our salvation must come from outside of us and filter through us with such power that it makes us new.

*Give the winds a mighty voice, Jesus saves, Jesus saves.*

*Let the nations, now rejoice, Jesus saves, Jesus saves.*

*Shout salvation full and free. Highest hills, and deepest caves,*

*This our song of victory, Jesus saves, Jesus saves.*

When Jesus saves, heaven comes down and glory fills our souls. When Jesus saves, there is a little taste of heaven on earth. When Jesus saves, justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. Heaven. I'm talking about it here and now in this present experience of life. It comes to us as a beautiful gift of God. We ought to taste it and share it with the world.

HEAVEN, IT'S A MATTER OF CONTINUATION v 4:1 *Therefore my brothers and sisters, stand firm in the Lord.* The longer I live the more I am interested not in great starts, but great finishes, of making it to the finish line as a person of faith. Bonhoeffer resisted Hitler in the name of Christ at the cost of his life. Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to his friends in the Résistance asking the question, "Who stands firm?" Then he offered this answer, "Only the persons whose final standard is not their reason, their principles, their conscience, their freedom, or their virtue. But those who are ready to sacrifice all this when they are called to be obedient and responsible in action in exclusive allegiance to the Kingdom of God." Bonhoeffer had a lot of problems with the Church of his day that sought ways to compromise and live into the Hitler regime. He reminds them and us that to stand firm is to be faithful.

Sojourner Truth was a slave woman who could neither read nor write, but could not stand slavery and the second class treatment of women. One day during an anti-slavery speech, Ms. Truth was heckled by a man who was listening to her talk. "Old woman, do you think that your talk about slavery does any good? Why I don't care any more for your talk than I do for the bite of a flea." Sojourner Truth looked the man in the eye and said, "Perhaps not, but the Lord willing, I plan to keep you scratching as long as you live." I intend to stay in there with you reminding you of the wrong of this day. I keep on keeping on. That is heaven on earth.

I pledge allegiance to the Kingdom of God and the principles for which it stands, one people, under God, indivisible with liberty and grace for all.

Amen.















