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THE CHOICE OF CITIZENSHIP (Philippians 3:17-21)

In the early 5th century, Christian theologian and philosopher Augustine of Hippo wrote one of the most decisive treatises for the church in all of Western history. In his massive work City of God Augustine addressed some of the major themes of biblical teaching, including suffering, sin, and politics from creation to the end of the world as it is predicted in Scripture.

City of God was written, in part, to counter the thinking and attitude that Christianity was responsible for the fall of Rome. To do this, Augustine made it clear that there were two distinct groups of people in the world since the beginning of time – those who belonged to the City of God and those in the City of Man.

In describing these binary choices in this work, Augustine wrote, “For the good make use of this world in order to enjoy God, whereas the evil want to make use of God in order to enjoy the world.” He also made it clear that there are two eternal destinies awaiting every person, depending on their choice of citizenship.

The Apostle Paul, inspired by God, also wrote about this duality. He also stated plainly that all people have to make a choice with only two options with two possible eternal locations. That’s what we see in our text for this study.

CHOOSE YOUR EXAMPLES CAREFULLY

*Philippians 3:17-19 – Brothers, **join in imitating me**, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For **many**, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, **walk as enemies of the cross of Christ**. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.*

Paul could not have laid out the choices more clearly than he does here. There is simply no way that we can

operate as humans without gravitating toward people we wish to emulate. Paul knows that and he also knows that we all need the accountability as well as the motivation that comes from following an example. The key, as these two verses avow, is to settle on the right example. Choose the wrong one and the results can be disastrous; choose wisely and you will never regret it.

Do you have enough confidence in your own life and character to challenge someone else to follow your example? Paul did. In fact, he wrote this command in other letters as well. This verse, though, shows the reason he could be so sure to encourage people to act like him:

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

This isn’t an arrogant statement by Paul. If Christlikeness is a hallmark of our way of life, then we can, with assurance, invite others to follow that walk. Surely this is an important part of parenting, but should roll over into all other relationships also. Being a good example is a goal we all should have along with the principle from verse seventeen that we must pick positive role models to imitate.

So not only does Paul give the positive exhortation to choose good patterns, he also warns us to take care to avoid those who will lead us in harmful directions. Notice the list of characteristics of a negative role model. Enemies of Christ, headed for destruction, slaves to their appetites, loving shame, earthly thinkers.

Here’s where Augustine agreed with this passage. Those who are bent on membership in the City of Man will leave this kind of legacy. What a waste of a life when someone is so invested in the things of this world, opting for the pleasures of the temporal when the glories of the eternal are available. We actually spend, or exchange, our lives in the pursuit of one or the other.

*Colossians 3:1, 2 - If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. **Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.***

When Jesus' hearers fretted over their material possessions, his teaching to them pointed them in this same direction.

*Matthew 6:33 - **But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.***

We can all look around us and see people in both categories, so the decision as to whose example we follow is laid before us. We have to choose.

CITIZENS OF AN ETERNAL COUNTRY

*Philippians 3:20, 21 - **But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 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.***

The contrast to the previous verses, or the lives of those who are citizens of the City of Man, is to remind the Philippian believers that they ultimately have a different citizenship.

That isn't to say we aren't citizens of countries on earth. Depending on our location, parentage, and time period, all humans are a part of some society on an earthly level. But in a very real sense, we who believe in and trust in Christ have our feet in two different kingdoms. And Scripture is explicit about which kingdom deserves our highest allegiance.

Hebrews 11 is a powerful chapter listing some of the heroes of the faith. There are many ordinary people who did extraordinary things because of their faith in an all-mighty God. In the middle of this Hall of Faith, the author makes this amazing statement.

*Hebrews 11:13-16 - **These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having***

*acknowledged that **they were strangers and exiles on the earth.** For people who speak thus make it clear that **they are seeking a homeland.** If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, **they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.** Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, **for he has prepared for them a city.***

THE EARTHLY CITY GLORIES IN ITSELF, THE HEAVENLY CITY GLORIES IN THE LORD.

**AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO
CITY OF GOD**

A distinguishing characteristic of one who is a citizen of God's kingdom is that they understand the concept of "already, but not yet." An accurate realization of this truth is that believers are already a part of the kingdom of God, but the full expression of that kingdom is yet to come. These saints of great faith in Hebrews 11 sought a homeland, a better country, while they were living by faith in this life.

*1 John 3:2 - **Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.***

Choosing whether to be a citizen of the City of God or City of Man is left to each individual. We have free will. But faith must play its role as well and that is a gift of God. If you have any desire at all for this heavenly kingdom that is still to come, pursue it and don't stop. That desire is God's gift of faith in your heart leading to salvation.

*Psalm 16:11 - **You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.***