

Sermon for February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2010  
Text: Philippians 3:17-4:1

I really like the Olympics. I've been disappointed these past few weeks that I haven't had the opportunity to watch many events. When I do get a chance to watch, I love to root for the Americans, no matter what sport it is. I identify with them. Those are my people. When an American wins a gold medal and wells up with tears during the National Anthem, I often find myself getting a little teary as well. I am proud to be an American. I am proud to be a citizen of the United States of America. This country may not be perfect, but it is certainly better than any of the other options, and I thank God all the time that I was blessed to be born here and to live here. But being a citizen is about much more than who I root for in the Olympics. It comes with some very important rights and responsibilities. I have the right to freely express myself and my point of view. I have the right to purchase and sell property as I see fit. I have the right to start a business and choose my own profession. I also have the right to elect my leaders and representatives, and if they don't do a good job I have the right to fire them. At the same time, I am responsible for living within the laws of this great nation. It is my responsibility to pay taxes and to vote. Ultimately, I am called to be an ambassador for the United States wherever I go and whatever I do.

The apostle Paul understood the importance of citizenship as well. As a Roman citizen Paul enjoyed many privileges that were not afforded to regular folks. Roman citizens were exempt from scourging and from arrest except in extreme cases. They also had the right to appeal to the emperor if they felt they had been wrongly accused. We see Paul take advantage of these rights during his ministry. I love the story about Paul getting flogged and then informing the authorities of his citizenship. You can almost see the blood draining from their faces as they realize what they have done. It was one thing to beat a regular person, but flogging a citizen came with serious consequences. During the First Century it was a huge advantage to be a Roman citizen.

However, Paul understood that his Roman citizenship was inconsequential compared to his heavenly citizenship. Paul tells the Philippians, "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." As citizens of heaven we have some pretty amazing rights. We have the right to freedom from sin that is offered in Jesus Christ. We have the right to avail ourselves of the benefits of Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection, and like Jesus we too will be raised again to new life. As Paul says, he "will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body." However, these rights do not come without responsibilities.

This is one of the issues that Paul addresses in his letter to the Philippians. Philippi was a city in Macedonia that was founded in the last century BC and named for Philip of Macedon. It was the home to many retired Roman soldiers, and citizens of Philippi were also Roman citizens. There were not enough Jews in the city for it to even have a synagogue, so Paul is writing to a largely Gentile church. For this reason, we find no references to the Old Testament in Paul's letter. Instead, Paul uses an image that the people of Philippi would have readily understood and identified with: citizenship. The problem that Paul found in Philippi was that there were antinomians in Philippi who believed they should be granted the rights of citizenship without the

responsibilities. As far as they were concerned Jesus had died to set them free from the Law and consequently they were required to live by no law at all. They simply lived as they saw fit.

Paul begins this morning's Epistle lesson by telling the Philippians to "join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us." At first this may seem a bit presumptuous of Paul. After all, who is he that we should be imitating him? However, in 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul says, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." Thus, to imitate Paul is to imitate Christ. Paul understands that being a citizen of heaven comes with great responsibility. It is not enough to simply be a citizen, we need to act like one, and we often learn how to behave through imitation.

The other day I was watching an old episode of the 90's show "Friends." In this episode, Rachel is trying to teach Joey how to sail. If you've never seen the show before, Joey is not the brightest bulb in the chandelier, so he is having a hard time learning all of the intricacies of sailing. Joey's inability to learn becomes very frustrating to Rachel and she ultimately blows up at him with a lengthy tirade that she has obviously heard directed at herself before. As soon as she's done Rachel sits down and says, "Oh my God, I sound just like my father. I've been working so hard to not turn into my mother that I completely forgot about not becoming my father!" I think many of us have probably had similar experiences and the older we get the more we begin to see the influence of our own parents on our lives. This shouldn't surprise us at all. As I often say to the parents of teenagers, our kids may not always do what we tell them to do, but they will never fail to imitate us. As human beings we learn mostly through imitation, so it would make sense that as children we would imitate those people we are around most, namely our parents. As we get older, that sphere of influence widens and changes. We start seeing people that we admire or people that we want to be like and we try to spend time with them so that we might become more like they are.

As citizens of heaven, we need to ask ourselves a couple of questions. First, who are we choosing to imitate? Are we simply ignoring our responsibilities as citizens and imitating the people of this world, whose "end is destruction," and whose "god is their belly?" Or, are we choosing to imitate Christ? If we want to imitate Christ, we need to make sure that we are spending time every day studying his word and knowing what he did. After all, it is impossible to imitate someone if you never spend any time with them. If you are not doing this, I challenge you during this season of Lent to make daily Bible reading and study a top priority in your life. This leads to our second question, which is, are you being a good example for others to imitate? Our responsibilities as citizens of heaven extend beyond us. We are called to be ambassadors for Jesus Christ wherever we go and whatever we do. Our behavior will either draw others into a loving relationship with the Savior of the world or it will push them away. If we are imitators of Christ, then his light will shine through us and others will be drawn to imitate our way of life as well.

Our citizenship is a gift that we receive not through birth or naturalization, but by accepting the sacrifice Jesus made for us on the cross. We need to take that citizenship seriously. Citizenship is about so much more than cheering for Olympians or enjoying certain rights afforded to us. There are responsibilities as well. As ambassadors of the Kingdom of Heaven, we need to be sure that we are imitating Christ in all that we do so that others might imitate us.