

Citizens of Heaven

By
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“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.”

-Hebrews 11:13-16

As we prepare to celebrate 250 years of American independence I thought it would be a good opportunity to meditate on an interesting concept that we find in the Scriptures, that Christians are citizens of heaven and how that reality manifests itself in our earthly citizenship and responsibilities. When we think of the gospel, or the good news of Jesus Christ, we tend to think about the forgiveness and redemption that Christ purchased for us on the cross, which passages like this illustrate really well:

“Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...”

-1 Corinthians 15:1-3

The center of the gospel is that Christ died “for our sins”, meaning that because we have sinned against God, unless Christ atones for our sins and makes a way for us to be forgiven by God, we can’t be saved from the consequences of our sins which would be eternal separation from God. However, this initial cause of salvation is not the full picture, the above passage from Hebrews 11 gives us a more full picture of salvation.

Salvation is not just about being saved *from* the effects of our sins, it is also about being saved *for* an eternity with God. By using the metaphor of “citizenship” the writer of Hebrews is helping us understand a more complete picture of what Christ did for us on the cross. Other sections of Scripture use the concepts of adoption and marriage to help us understand this, but they are all communicating different aspects of this same thing.

Salvation is about becoming unified to Christ and not just about being separated from our sins.

Using this metaphor for the sake of today's study, Christ didn't just purchase a way for us to be forgiven, He also enabled us to become literal citizens of heaven. That we now *belong* to His heavenly kingdom and therefore are offered entrance into that kingdom. This invitation doesn't just begin at the point of our death, God has given us His Spirit to connect us to His kingdom on this earth. We manifest our citizenship through participation in His body, the church, upon this earth, and we long for our full entrance into His kingdom when we meet Him face to face.

While each of those points could be explored in much greater detail, for our purposes today let's simply focus on how this heavenly citizenship and how our earthly citizenship can serve our heavenly citizenship. Like with the metaphors of adoption and marriage, the better we understand earthly family and earthly marriage the more prepared we are for heavenly glory. But since these things are so powerful, they can also become idols that prevent us from seeing the glory of God. So we will navigate three elements of earthly citizenship that will encourage us to become better citizens of heaven.

And in order to do this, we will study moment when the Apostle Peter got this point wrong and had to be corrected by the Apostle Paul:

"Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? "We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, "knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. "But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! "For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. "For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. "I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain."

-Galatians 2:11-21

Participation

“Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.”

-Galatians 2:11-13

The impetus for this conflict between Paul and Peter seems innocent enough, but Paul treats this issue as a matter for grave concern in the early church. To give a little background, at this point in church history, the bulk of the church were Jews who had accepted Jesus as their Messiah. As such, these Jews had taken the various customs and rituals of the Old Covenant and continued to practice these things, seeing them as expressions of the ministry of Christ.

However, starting with the Apostle Peter, the message of Christ went out to Gentiles, another word for non-Jews, who also accepted the faith of the Jews. The first major conflict in the early church circled around whether or not the gentile believers had to become “citizens” of Israel. Namely, did they have to adopt all the rituals, Holy Days, and cultural practices of the Jewish faith in order to serve the Jewish Messiah.

This issue was settled in Acts 15, where a council in Jerusalem determined that the Gentiles did not have to become “Jewish” but had to avoid the pagan excesses of their own cultures. This began a long process in which the pagan converts to Christianity slowly transformed their pagan cultural practices into Christian expressions of faith. It was this process that gave us the modern expressions of Christianity contained in the modern Christian churches.

However, in the first century, this process was in its infancy. The gentile believers were having issues in *how* to properly adapt their cultures to their Christian faith, and men like the Apostle Paul were foundational in trying to help them do this, which is why the bulk of our New Testaments were written by the Apostle Paul to various churches set up in the pagan world. Due to the fact that the pagan converts were still a little rough around the edges and continued in behaviors that the Jewish believers found distasteful and even disgusting, there was a type of segregation that happened in the early church, and unfortunately, Peter participated in this segregation.

When we think about sharing meals today, the significance is rather minimal. We tend to eat very quickly, sometimes alone, sometimes around total strangers, and we see it more as a utilitarian exercise to receive nourishment than as a ritual of communion, unity, and hospitality like our ancestors would have. To put this point more simply, Peter snubbing the gentile believers when certain “men from James came”, was not merely “rude”, it was an act that showed a lack of unity, hospitality, and communion between the gentiles and the Jews. Consider this quote from an article entitled “Understanding Jewish Meals in Their Ancient Context” by Professor Peter Shirikov:

“The mealtime customs depicted in ancient biblical texts are still practiced by many people living in the lands the Bible describes. In this region of the world meals are not utilitarian and mealtime customs can express social, cultural, deeply symbolic and spiritual ideas. Sharing meals often expresses the universal Near Eastern value of hospitality (Gen 18:1-8; Heb 3:12; Rom 1:13). Meals can affirm kinship, friendship and good will (Gen 31:33-54), acknowledge one’s status (1 Kgs 17:8-16, 2 Kgs 4:8-11), recognize a peaceful disposition and commitment to non-aggression (Gen 26:26-33; Josh 9:14). Depending on the context and occasion meal fellowship can convey an array of non-verbal messages relating to interpersonal relationships.

“A vast number of biblical passages revolve around meal settings and the value of studying mealtime customs is a deeper and more precise understanding of these passages. Ancient Israelite meals can be divided into ordinary, festive and sacred. In the East all aspects of life are perceived as spiritual occasions and when it comes to meals the kitchen table and the altar are inseparable. For example, the inhabitants of Qumran whose vast libraries of scrolls were discovered in the Dead Sea region saw themselves and their meals as a living human sanctuary. For most Jews meals connected directly to sacrificial worship were considered especially sacred and thus can be seen as a separate category.”

With this context in mind we are ready to understand the first primary value of citizenship, participation. Notice how Professor Shirikov points out how the ancient world saw meals as a unifying pattern for the culture as a whole. It wasn’t just about “eating” per se, it was more about sharing and communing. The line that is most interesting to me is when he says “the kitchen table and the altar are inseparable”. All meat was offered up to a particular god in the ancient world. Since the Gentile believers were not forced to participate in the Jewish temple system, their meat came from pagan markets that offered up to pagan idols.

This concept of communion then extended out to the people that they ate with. To refuse to eat with someone conveyed the idea that we are not of the same tribe or

citizenry. It showed a lack of trust or commonality, it showed that we don't participate in the same culture.

Participatory Citizenship

If we think about this for a second, this ancient practice makes a lot of sense, and in a way, we still practice it to this day. Take currency as a prime example. If someone visited America from a foreign country, the currency that they use in their nation wouldn't be accepted in most places in ours. Their foreign currency, though valuable, marks them as an outsider. We would know that they don't participate in our economy, that their money comes from a foreign nation.

On the other hand, when someone is from this country and offers us our currency, we know that they do participate in our nation. Their money was earned by offering goods and services to our fellow citizens, and their income is taxed to pay for the various common goods provided by our government. Even though a foreigner can convert their currency to our own, it isn't the same thing. Their income is taxed by a foreign government and it does not create direct goods and services for our citizens. This doesn't make them necessarily hostile to us, but it does mean that in some sense, they don't "commune" with us.

We will talk more about this concept of communion later on, but on this point, earthly citizenship conveys the idea of societal participation. To be a citizen of a nation means, among other things, that my life is devoted to something higher than myself. Just as a portion of their food was offered up to the deities of their particular nation, so a portion of our time and money are offered up to the higher societal goods that we enjoy. We aren't just living for ourselves, we are living for something higher than ourselves that serves others.

This concept of participation goes deeper than this. We have numerous participatory things within our society that point to this same principle. This is why we sing the national anthem before sporting events, why we recite the pledge of allegiance, why we vote, why we participate in the legal system through jury duty, and we celebrate particular days that are significant to our national identity. All these things convey this idea of societal participation. These are things that make up our shared "culture". We must remember that the word "culture" comes from the same root word as "cultivate". These participatory structures are what root us in a common soil and create the societal expression that we enjoy.

One of the ways that we can know that our modern world is forgetting the concept of citizenship is that we think of "culture" as being synonymous with the arts. But the arts

aren't actively participatory. The arts are things that we observe and enjoy, and, in a sense, they are a part of culture, but traditionally they were a much lower form of culture and citizenship than these other more foundational, participatory elements of culture.

Think for a second how strange it is that we actively thank veterans for their service. As a veteran myself, I can say I appreciate the gratitude, but am also worried about what this means for the trajectory of our nation. For most of human history, men serving in the military was a given, something that was all but expected for most families, especially in war time. The fact that a basic function of citizenship, the defense of the homeland, has become an extraordinary act of bravery in our culture doesn't bode well for how we view citizenship. The war time journalist Sebastian Junger comments on this in his book "Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging":

"When I turned eighteen I received my selective service card in the mail, in case the United States needed to draft me, and I declared that I wasn't going to sign it. The Vietnam War had just ended and every adult I knew had been against it. I had no problem, personally, with fighting a war; I just didn't trust my government to send me to one that was completely necessary. My father's reaction surprised me. Vietnam had made him vehemently antiwar, so I expected him to applaud my decision, but instead he told me that American soldiers had saved the world from fascism during World War II and that thousands of young Americans were buried in his homeland of France. "You don't owe your country nothing," I remember him telling me. "You owe it something, and depending on what happens, you might owe it your life."

-Sebastian Junger - "Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging"

The fact that such a statement would seem odd to the average American in the modern day shows us how removed we are from this concept of participation. Just as we associate culture with consuming arts, which is a passive form of appreciation, we associate citizenship with what we are owed by our nation and not what we owe our nation.

Because of this fact, we can understand how earthly citizenship prepares us for the concept of divine participation. Just as our earthly citizenship requires a level of communal participation towards a higher societal good, so our heavenly citizenship conveys a very similar thing. It is this lack of "citizenship" that is so fundamental to our current divisiveness in our nation. We don't participate with one another in any meaningful way, we barely share the same holidays, we don't feel that we owe our nation anything, and even our arts are becoming more and more coded towards particular political bends. We don't participate with one another, and so it is no wonder that we don't feel like we commune with each other anymore.

Baptizing Our Culture

“Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.”

-Galatians 3:24-25

Paul here reiterates a point that we have been discussing. In light of Christ, the law, which was the written instructions of the Jewish identity that had to be participated in to be a citizen of Israel, now primarily is there to prepare the Jew to receive their Messiah and become a citizen of heaven. This doesn't mean that they give up their culture, but they “baptize” it into the knowledge of Christ.

This means that our earthly citizenship has a similar dynamic. It prepares us for the gospel and our citizenship in heaven. We don't give up our culture in order to become Christians, we baptize our culture in the knowledge of our God. Meaning that every earthly culture will have elements that need to be “washed” they need to be brought into subjection of our heavenly home. But, if we do this properly, we add to the glory of our earthly “kingdoms” the heavenly glory of the New Jerusalem ruled by Christ:

“But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it.”

-Revelation 21:22-24

But it is significant, and understandable, that in light of our current issue with seeing our earthly citizenship as participatory, that we also miss this concept in our heavenly citizenship. Many today struggle to understand why their Christian faith needs any type of participation. After all, if our faith in God saves us, what need is there to do anything else? Like our earthly citizenship, we think of our heavenly citizenship in terms of what heaven owes us and not in terms of what we owe heaven.

Our good deeds are not merely an act of gratitude towards our Father in heaven who saved us, though they are that, they are acts of participation in His heavenly kingdom. Just as we pay taxes towards our earthly citizenship, so we pay a tithe towards the work of the kingdom of heaven. Just as we have holidays that celebrate the significant events in our national history, we celebrate holidays that celebrate the significant events in our heavenly kingdom.

Also, since we are not yet home in our heavenly kingdom, the church then functions as a type of embassy for the kingdom of heaven. If we traveled to a foreign nation that is

friendly towards our own, there would be embassies present. These embassies are manifestations of our nation on foreign soil. In these buildings, the laws of America are present, as are our customs, and our citizenship is recognized. The church is similar. Though we aren't home yet, we have a place where the "customs" of God's kingdom are present upon the world. The citizens of heaven are welcome to commune with each other and with God. We can worship Him together, participate in His word, and partake of His sacrifice together, being nourished together as one congregation.

This is what Peter failed to represent properly. By refusing to eat with the gentiles, he was in essence conveying a lack of participation with the gentile believers. As if their food was offered up to different gods and therefore could not be shared. But this wasn't true. Just because the gentiles were not worshipping in the Jewish temple doesn't mean they weren't worshipping the same God. They had ceased from worshipping their pagan deities and were participating in the kingdom of heaven through their baptized culture.

Pride

"But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, 'If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?' 'We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles...'"

-Galatians 2:14-15

This is, admittedly, a sticky issue to understand. Citizenship doesn't just give us a source and orientation for collective participation, it also gives us a source of collective pride. Before we talk about the benefits of this, we must first address some common objections to this problem. Ever since World War 2, where the worst excesses of national pride, namely the fascist movements in Europe, nearly brought the world to an end, the west has become weary of the pride that citizenship engenders. As such, the west has slowly declined in their patriotism and civilizational pride, fearing what such pride might engender. And I think Peter in this story reveals this excess quite well.

Because he is proud of his Jewish identity, he is actually creating a hierarchy between himself and the Gentile believers. To put this another way, his ethnic pride served to puff him up and to put other people down, this is, admittedly a massive danger associated with cultural pride. The other problem comes from pride itself. To be proud of something moves us dangerously close to the sin of pride itself. But in this danger is also the benefit of cultural pride, I like how C.S. Lewis put this point:

“We say in English that a man is ‘proud’ of his son, or his father, or his school, or regiment, and it may be asked whether ‘pride’ in this sense is a sin. I think it depends on what, exactly, we mean by ‘proud of’. Very often, in such sentences, the phrase ‘is proud of’ means ‘has a warm-hearted admiration for’. Such an admiration is, of course, very far from being a sin. But it might, perhaps, mean that the person in question gives himself airs on the ground of his distinguished father, or because he belongs to a famous regiment. This would, clearly, be a fault; but even then, it would be better than being proud simply of himself. To love and admire anything outside yourself is to take one step away from utter spiritual ruin; though we shall not be well so long as we love and admire anything more than we love and admire God.”

-C.S. Lewis - “Mere Christianity”

In this quote, C.S. Lewis gives both the benefits and the true detriments of this form of pride. Since we are already on the topic of its detriments, let's start there. As I said before, being proud of something moves us near to the excesses of individual pride, but in a different way. To be proud of something is very different than being proud *because* of something, and it can even move us toward the virtue of humility. To be proud *because* of something is a source of our own individual pride. We see the various facets of our identity as things that serve ourselves and our own interests.

Our race, our gender, and all our achievements become ornaments that serve to exalt our own ego. This is how pride works. It sees everything around it as a servant for its own interest. This is again why modern society views the nation as a servant to their own self-interest. Being proud *of* something is similar, but distinct. To be proud of something is to make the object the center of attention, it becomes the ego that we serve. So if someone is proud of their nation, it means that they serve the nation, and not the other way around.

So in some ways, being proud of something is a cure for our own pride and makes us a servant instead of something higher than ourselves as opposed to a master towards all other things, and we will return to this point when we talk about the benefits of this type of pride. However, as Lewis points out, while this cures us of our own pride, it threatens us with the sin of idolatry. Idolatry is when we put anything in the place that only God deserves to be in. So, instead of this one area of pride serving our ultimate citizenship in heaven, it supplants our heavenly worship and makes it so even our Christian identity serves the things that we are proud of.

This is a way to understand the fascist movements in western Europe. The Nazi's in particular took their national identity, which had a racial component to it, and elevated it

above all other things. So that even their faith served the national identity and made it “good” for them to subdue all other races and nations.

This is a way to understand the excesses of national pride that are afflicting the Apostle Peter and why Paul treats this problem with such severity. What Paul was noticing is that the ethnic, and religious pride that the Jews had was turning into an idol that even threatened the very message of salvation. Instead of being merely proud of their identity, they saw their identity as being fundamentally right, and therefore they saw all other identities as wrong.

This is one of the facets of God. God doesn’t just teach us about goodness, He fundamentally *is* good which means that all of our morality is measured against God’s character. To take something we are proud of and make that the center of morality is to subdue God to something beneath Him. Instead of the Jews being merely proud of their heritage and the beauty of their traditions, they made their identity the measure of morality. This disabled them from seeing the beauty in the Gentile culture, everything that was different about the Gentiles was now deemed “wrong” by the Jewish believers and a bigotry started to form within the early church.

The interesting thing about Peter is that Paul doesn't actually think that Peter is failing, directly, in this sin. He doesn’t believe Peter is actually bigoted, but he does think that Peter is a hypocrite. So when Peter is alone, he has no problem eating with the Gentiles and embracing some of their customs. But when “certain men” come, he instead reverts back to being “Jewish” and not communing with Gentiles. This is why Paul later mocks Peter by saying:

“But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! “For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor.”

-Galatians 2:17-18

This is meant to be a sarcastic statement that condemns the idolatry of the Jewish believers. In other words, if Gentile culture is indeed sinful, then Peter’s participation in it would make him a sinner, and since Christ filled the Gentile church through His Spirit, then obviously He would be a minister of sin. But obviously Paul’s point is that these things are not so. While we can make judgments and say that cultural behaviors are morally right or wrong, or that some are even more or less wise, by making a singular culture the arbiter of right and wrong, we are making it an idol. But does this mean that Paul did not have any pride in being a Jew? No:

“What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God.”

-Romans 3:1-2

“I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.”

-Romans 11:1

Paul was proud of his Jewish ancestry and the customs of his Jewish traditions, but he saw his Jewish identity as *serving* his Christian identity. This is what he means when he says at the end:

“For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. “

-Galatians 2:20

Everything in Paul’s life, including his citizenship and ethnic identity served his identity as a Christian. This is the proper way to do this. It isn’t that we cease to be proud of our nation, our race, our family, our culture, or anything else, but all these things must serve God. Which means that where these things violate God’s word or hinder us from following Him correctly, we must baptize these identities, cleansing them of what is dirty, but redeeming the things that can be brought under the subjection of Christ.

But why not do away with this pride altogether if it can become idolatrous. We have already talked a little about this, but our pride in something first, prepares us to serve Christ. If we aren’t proud *of* anything, then we are either rootless or we are proud in the sinful sense. It is no wonder that as national pride wanes in our society, we have literal parades to pride in our nation.

When national pride goes away, it has to be filled with something, and this tends towards individual pride. Instead of being proud of their nation and what it has done, people are only proud of themselves and the various quirks to their identity. This is why we have all of a sudden become obsessed with race and sexuality. We are taking parts of our physical identity and making them the things that we are proud of. We have to serve something, and so this fills the void that national pride has left.

But more than this, national pride gives a sense of grounding. When we learn to be proud of things that we are a part of, and we learn to participate in them, we become curious and we pause to reflect and to admire, something that we don’t do much of

anymore. Take someone who is proud of a sports team. This pride leads them, not merely to celebrate this team, but to *know* it and *participate* in it. They long to learn trivial facts about the team, and they become proud of this knowledge. They want to go to games to participate in the team spirit and to partake in various victories.

Many Christians criticize this type of pride as foolish, but it isn't. This is a primer for how our pride in our heavenly citizenship should go. Being proud of our faith means that we are truly and genuinely interested in Christ. We should long to know Him and participate in His body. But it is particularities that cause us to truly pause and adore, not universalities. Meaning that no one really thinks about the beauty of baseball in general, they root their adoration in a team, a particular game, or even a particular player. Our general affection is exalted by our particular interest. And it is this type of particular interest that pride engenders that has all but faded from our modern world. I like what the Christian writer Martin Shaw says about this:

"I was on the run from the noble and ordinary obligations that mark someone else as being indebted to a place. I didn't want that, so I floated. The price was quite literally a rootlessness, a difficulty in striking up meaningful friendships; I didn't know what it meant to be claimed by a place... When I say claimed I'm making a distinction between being of and from a place. You can be from a place and have no real knowledge of its ecosystem, history, cultural weight—you just scoot from A to B. To be from a place has staleness of vision attached. You've rather tuned it out due to overfamiliarity. There're millions in this position. This creates a mindset where you no longer cherish the idiosyncrasies that make up your little corner of the earth. The things you identify with are the same things that unite people everywhere these days—we all want the same phone, sneakers, insurance... Make your place blush. Be loyal to the bells of your village, I say. To do that, we have to trade a little growth for depth, we have to be more reluctant to sever."

-Martin Shaw - "Liturgies of the Wild"

To be proud of our nation, our city, our family, and even our own expression of Christian worship is a good thing. It roots us in the particular so that we can give glory to the universal. I can see the goodness of my particular place and see God's universal glory shining through my own little piece of land that God has given me to steward. I can see the beauty of the heavenly kingdom peaking through the "kingdom" that God has asked me to participate in. Without this we are truly rootless and cut off from anything beyond naked self-interest and pride.

But if we do this right, and we truly see the things we are proud of as serving the thing we are most proud of, namely our relationship with God. So we won't unfairly judge

identities, and we can even learn to appreciate differences, without denigrating ourselves. But we will also be open to seeing the faults with our particular identity. Since it isn't an idol, we can subject it to criticism. But since we are proud of it, we won't reject it just because it is flawed. This is what is so interesting about our current moment. People will, rightly, point out the many flaws in American history and say that because of these things we can't be proud of our nation. This is an idolatrous attitude. Only God is good and therefore beyond fault. Every other piece of our identity will be deeply flawed. We don't justify these things, but we again, baptize them, redeeming what we can and cleansing what we can't.

Belonging

"...knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. "But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! "For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. "For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. "I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain."

-Galatians 2:16-21

The end of Paul's speech is truly the best. Beyond pride and participation, the greatest thing that citizenship does for us is provide us with a sense of belonging. But a sense of belonging is built by these other things not apart from them. Meaning that if I haven't yet participated in an identity, and I am not proud of it, it can't be a source of belonging to me.

Take children for a second. Though my children belong to our family, meaning that they are welcome in our home and celebrated there, this sense of belonging is not yet felt to a high degree. It is, more or less, a constant in their life. Something that they are entitled to and not yet thankful for. When we actually develop a sense of belonging, a sense that we are truly welcome in a place and we actually feel that it heals a lot of our sense of loneliness and alienation, is when we are actually proud to be a part of something and will therefore willingly sacrifice for it and participate in it.

I think about my own service in the military. I don't think I have ever felt a deeper sense of belonging then when I came back from my first deployment. To be a part of a unit that

I was proud of, a group of men that had my back and were willing to fight and die for me was something, but knowing that I would also die for them was something else. To this day I still feel a sense of pride that I was a part of that particular unit, even though I am not really sure what good, if any, we accomplished all those years ago in Afghanistan.

I would say one of the greatest lacks in our country is this sense of belonging. We are all a part of many things, from neighborhoods, to churches, to businesses, to schools, and even to families, but most of us don't feel any sense of belonging in any of these places. This is because we lack the above two things. We don't really participate in these things in a way that puts these things above ourselves, and we really aren't proud to be a part of any of these things, therefore, even if we are a part of them and welcome within them, we feel no real sense of belonging. Instead, many of us feel cut off and alienated from others, isolation and loneliness may be some of the most common emotions felt by modern people and it is because of this.

The capstone of Paul's speech is when he recognizes this fact in the kingdom of heaven. This great feeling of pride that Paul had for God's kingdom is what taught him that he was unworthy of it. But beyond all hope, Paul knew that he was accepted by the grace of God and not by anything that he could do. Because of this, he gloried in his ability to participate in this heavenly kingdom. That Christ not only forgave and redeemed him, but that He actually lived through the Apostle Paul to exalt His own kingdom through Paul.

And it is this point that fundamentally distinguishes our heavenly citizenship to any other source of identity that we have. Every other identity requires us to serve it, our acceptance is only through our fidelity. So even though doing this carries with it massive benefits, there is no real certainty and rest in these identities. Listen to how the Apostle Paul words this when he describes his own conversion to Christianity:

"...though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith..."

-Philippians 3:4-9

So while our earthly identities can provide us with an amazing sense of belonging, this belonging is dependent on our own faithfulness. Paul finds an amazing liberty in His heavenly identity that comes through faith that allows him to rest in all his other identities.

So this fourth of July it is good to celebrate our nation and to be proud of it in a Godly manner. But more than this, I hope that this celebration would serve as a potent reminder of the beauty of our heavenly citizenship and the joy we have in our great King who is coming back.

“Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us.”

-1 John 4:17-19