

Six Characteristics of a Citizen of Heaven

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Introduction

When I was a child, personal computers were just beginning to become popular. My father brought our first computer home when I was about nine years old. It was a glorious device: an Apricot F1 with a green monochrome monitor. It had a wireless keyboard and mouse — in 1984! This didn't come to other machines until the 1990s. It was also the first computer that could be programmed to print Turkish characters; not even the more popular IBM clones or Commodore 64 could do that at the time!



Apricot F1 Computer (Source: oldcomputers.net)

But what made all computers of that era vastly different from the ones today was that they came with thick user manuals, that detailed every part of usage. Nothing was intuitive about these computers. We have Steve Jobs and Apple Computer of the late 1990s to thank for the semi-intuitive usability we have today. In the 1980s and 1990s you actually had to know what you were doing and to know that you had to read the manual. This became apparent to me a couple years later when my dad started researching a machine to replace our ageing Apricot. We looked at a Toshiba laptop, which was an IBM PC clone, and despite the command prompt looking identical to our Apricot's, very few of the commands that I knew worked, since the Apricot used a different dialect of PC-DOS. To use the other computer, I needed to learn a new language; I needed a new manual.

Similarly, this passage that we're going to look at in Philippians is a short manual for how a citizen of heaven should conduct him- or herself. Even though Paul has already taught these things multiple times to his readers, he finds it necessary to remind them of how to live as a Christian. This reminder is tied directly to the statement in Philippians 3:17-21, which we looked at last week. Paul exhorts his readers as follows:

Join in imitating me, brothers, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For I have often told you, and now say again with tears, that many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction; their god is their stomach; their glory is in their shame. They are focused on earthly things, but our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humble condition into the likeness of His glorious body, by the power that enables Him to subject everything to Himself.

Note especially in verse 20, the statement that “our citizenship is in heaven”. This would have been a radical concept for the Philippians, over 40 percent of whom were Roman citizens¹, and thus elites in the world. The closest thing to being a Roman citizen today would be to hold a Japanese or Singaporean passport, each of which can enter 190 countries in the world without a visa!² Being a Roman citizen was a great privilege and often earned at great expense (see [Ac. 22:28](#)). Yet Paul has the audacity to tell his readers that their citizenship is elsewhere, namely in the Kingdom of Heaven, with Jesus Christ as our king! This would have been mind-blowing to the Philippians who gloried in their Roman ties.

Like them we are not first and foremost Zambians, Germans, Turks, Americans, Australians, Persians, Koreans, or Filipinos, to name just a few possibilities. No, brothers and sisters, we are first and foremost citizens of heaven. We are simply sojourners who happen to hold passports to various other nations. Thus, our mindset must be different; our words must be different; our conduct must be different; and Paul shows us in our passage for today how our conduct must be. In Philippians 4:1-9, he gives us six characteristics of a citizen of heaven, which we will look at in turn together.

¹ Julyan Lidstone, *Give Up the Purple*, Kinde Edition (Carlisle, UK: Langham Creative Projects, 2019), p. 29.

² Matt McIntyre, “The 10 Most Powerful Passports in the World”, *Wealthy Gorilla* < <https://wealthygorilla.com/most-powerful-passports/> > (accessed 2021-05-31).

So then, my brothers, you are dearly loved and longed for—my joy and crown. In this manner stand firm in the Lord, dear friends. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I also ask you, true partner, to help these women who have contended for the gospel at my side, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses every thought, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable—if there is any moral excellence and if there is any praise—dwell on these things. Do what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

(Philippians 4:1–9)

This passage is packed so full that we could preach six sermons on it. I will try to do my best to do it justice, considering the limited space I have, but please understand that I will need to gloss over some things in order to look at the passage as a whole.

Paul begins this passage with an exhortation to stand firm in the reality that our citizenship is in heaven and our resurrection and future dwelling there is guaranteed. Look at verse 1.

So then, my brothers, you are dearly loved and longed for—my joy and crown. In this manner stand firm in the Lord, dear friends.

As such, his readers, whom he loves dearly and who constitute his reward before Christ, should display six characteristics.

1. A citizen of heaven is committed to Christian unity (4:2-3).
2. A citizen of heaven rejoices, despite the circumstances (4:4).
3. A citizen of heaven is gracious and gentle in his or her conduct (4:5).
4. A citizen of heaven prays instead of worrying (4:6-7).
5. A citizen of heaven focuses his or her thoughts on what is good (4:8).
6. A citizen of heaven practically lives out what he or she knows (4:9).

We will look at each of these in turn.

1. A citizen of heaven is committed to Christian unity (4:2-3)

First, a citizen of heaven is committed to Christian unity. In verses 2-3 Paul writes the following :

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I also ask you, true partner, to help these women who have contended for the gospel at my side, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the book of life.

Who Euodia and Syntyche were, is not known, neither is what they were disagreeing about. It is thought that they were likely two of the women who first came to faith when Paul preached to the Philippians about 10 years earlier. Paul's language here again shows his affection for these two ladies. When he asks them to "agree in the Lord", he is using the same language as in chapter 2, where he exhorts the Philippians to be of one mind and have the same attitude as Christ. For Paul, the unity of the local body is of paramount importance.

We, too, often end up disagreeing on theology and practice, because we think we are right.³ The Devil loves these disagreements, because they break the unity of the church and thus besmirch our witness before the world. Jesus prayed that we would be one so that the world will know that the Father sent Jesus to save the world ([1n.17:21](#)). Our unity is one of our greatest witnesses to the world, thus the Enemy will do what he can to foster disunity.

Note that Euodia and Syntyche are called to agree in the Lord. This unity is something that comes from submitting to God. In light of the example of Christ in Philippians 2, it means that we do not hold fast to our rights, our

³ For more thoughts on this, see J.M. Diener, "Unity and Division in the Church Part 1 – Unity", *WolfHawke.com* < <https://www.wolfhawke.com/musings/devotionals/church-unity-and-division-1-unity> > (accessed 2021-05-31).

education, or our theology, but rather submit ourselves to the truths in the Bible and unity of the body, speaking the truth in love.

Sometimes we can't do this ourselves, which is why Paul asks his friend Syzygus to help. Syzygus literally means "yokefellow", which the HCSB renders as "partner". This name is most likely a pun here — which sadly most translators choose to not acknowledge. Paul shows that he likes to play on names in Philemon; so, he is likely doing the same thing here.

Syzygus is supposed to be the go-between like in [Matthew 18:15-20](#), who is to win his sisters back to the unity of the body so that the witness of the Philippian church will be maintained. Likewise, we are called to maintain the unity of the local body in prayer and deed. When there are brothers or sisters who are in contention, we are called to "look to their interests" ([Php. 2:4](#)) so that unity will be maintained.

Who do you know who is struggling with unity in your church or circle? What can you do to help them agree in the Lord? For we are called to be committed to the unity of the local body. As a citizen of heaven, our loyalty and our zeal should be for the benefit of our true home: the kingdom of Jesus Christ. This should be our first characteristic.

2. A citizen of heaven rejoices, despite the circumstances (4:4)

Our second characteristic is found in that famous verse of Philippians 4:4.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

A citizen of heaven rejoices, despite the circumstances.

Last year, I was asked to speak on a theology of joy at a conference, and in preparing for this sermon, I went back and looked at that talk. There were two key things that popped out at me in that.

First, was the statement from Nehemiah, where he orders the people who are grieving over their sin, to not grieve, "because the joy of the LORD is your stronghold" (Neh. 8:10). Some of your translations will render this as, "The joy of the LORD is your strength." However, the Hebrew actually uses the word for "fortress" or "stronghold". The joy of Yahweh — the joy Yehoshua — is our fortress, where we can stand strong in the face of the contentious struggle for the gospel, both within the Church and without. This is why Paul makes this statement here and now in light of his pleading for unity among Euodia and Syntyche. Note the repetition!

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

This is something we must commit to do. This rejoicing has been very hard for me in the last year, especially in view of the imprisonment we have been experiencing through these lockdowns. It is not easy to rejoice when you can't do what you want to. Yet we are commanded to rejoice. We are commanded to live joy. Besides our passage today, Paul commands us to rejoice two more times:

Finally, brothers, rejoice. Become mature, be encouraged, be of the same mind, be at peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. (2Co. 13:11)

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write to you again about this is no trouble for me and is a protection for you. (Php. 3:1)

Not only that, he states in [1 Thessalonians 5:16](#) that our rejoicing is to be continuous; all the time.

Several years later, Peter states that rejoicing in our sufferings will result in our being able to rejoice more in eternity ([1Pe. 4:12-13](#)).

So, how are you doing in making sure you're rejoicing? What methods do you use when the world, the flesh, and the devil are grinding you down to lift your eyes and offering up the sacrifice of thanksgiving ([Ps. 50:23](#))? For me personally, I sometimes just have to stop and get away to talk with God, maybe listen to some good Christian songs. The mixture of uplifting music and deep words rarely fails to bring me to joy.

The best way to get into the rejoicing mindset, however, is to apply verses 6 and 7, which we will come to presently.

3. A citizen of heaven is gracious and gentle in his or her conduct (4:5)

First, however, Paul reminds us that a citizen of heaven is gracious and gentle in his or her conduct. Look at verse 5.

Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

The word rendered “graciousness” here is difficult to translate, as it has a broad meaning in the Greek. It embodies the ideas of mildness, forbearance, gentleness and gracious. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, this word is used to express the kindness and gentleness of Yahweh.⁴ It reflects Christ’s character as mentioned in [Philippians 2:5-11](#).

A citizen of heaven is to be known as gracious and gentle in his or her conduct. This is by no means easy. As I mentioned when we talked about the characteristics of the spirit-filled life in our series on Ephesians last year, only the strong can be gentle, because they have the ability to control their movements precisely. Weak people cannot do so.⁵

When it comes to gentleness, the most shining example I can remember is a gentleman by the name of Carlton. I knew him when he was in his seventies before he passed into glory. All of his conduct was kind and gentle, even when dealing with difficult topics. I knew I could go to him and talk to him about anything, because he would listen kindly and not explode, even if what was talked about was terrible. He embodied this trait; and people loved him for it.

So, how does one become gentle — especially an intense person like me? I know that I can be gentler when I’ve spent sufficient time in the presence of God, submitting myself to him, emptying myself of my own strength, admitting my weakness and then filling myself with his strength. I think that my struggles over the last year may stem from not doing this enough in during the darkness of the pandemic; rather trusting in my own strength and endurance to get me through.

I will admit, this is not easy; and it requires being filled with the Spirit to do. So, pray with me for the filling and for Christ’s strength to be gentle as he is.

4. A citizen of heaven prays instead of worrying (4:6-7)

Paul now moves on to an exhortation that contains a promise. Let’s look at verses 6 and 7.

Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses every thought, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

A citizen of heaven prays instead of worrying.

The word that we translate “worry” here can also mean being anxious or filled with cares. It can mean taking responsibility for someone or something — which can be both positive and negative, though in this instance the meaning is clearly negative. Jesus himself also forbade worrying in the sermon on the mount ([Mt. 6:25-34](#)), as it is not only foolish, but is also disrespectful to God, since it shows that we do not trust him to provide for us. We take responsibility for things we are not responsible for.⁶

That is why the antidote to worry is prayer. Note here that the prayer and petition are tied up with thanksgiving. In Psalm 50:23 (ESV), the Asaph says,

⁴ W. Bauder, “Humility, Meekness,” ed. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), pp. 256-259.

⁵ For more on this thought, see J.M. Diener, “Getting to Know the Holy Spirit”, *WolfHawke.com* < <https://www.wolfhawke.com/musings/devotionals/getting-to-know-holy-spirit> > (accessed 2021-05-31).

⁶ J. Goetzmann, “Care, Anxiety,” ed. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), pp. 276-279.

*The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me;
to one who orders his way rightly
I will show the salvation of God!”*

Giving thanks is often not easy, but it glorifies God. Our requests must be made with thanksgiving, submitting to the will of God, because we know he is good. God is good ... all the time! That is why we can thank him even in the direst of circumstances. That is why we can thank him when we pray and petition and make our requests.

How are you doing in your prayers? Do you truly submit to the will of God, or do you hold on to what you ask of him, demanding that he do it *your way*?

Because if you submit to him, Paul promises that the amazing, unimaginable, counter-intuitive, mind-blowing peace of God will protect your heart and mind, keeping you calm so you can be gentle and rejoice.

The word for peace here is used in the Greek Old Testament to translate *shalom*⁷, that wholistic peace that is not the absence of turmoil, but your soul finding rest in Yahweh alone. It means that you are safe in the cleft of Jesus' love, and you can approach all situations, both good and evil, with equal calm. That is a peace worth having. The world cannot understand it; many Christians cannot even understand it. It is a gift of the Spirit of God, which comes when we submit ourselves to him through prayer and petition with thanksgiving.

5. A citizen of heaven focuses his or her thoughts on what is good

But to be able to do this we must have the fifth characteristic found in verse 8.

Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable—if there is any moral excellence and if there is any praise—dwell on these things.

This passage could be a full sermon in and of itself. For our purposes today however, we will note that a citizen of heaven focuses his or her thoughts on what is good. Paul uses six words⁸ here to express what we are to think about.

First is “true”. What truths should we dwell on? Are we constantly thinking of the truths found in Scripture? Hitler's propaganda minister, Josef Goebbels is credited with saying that if you tell a lie loud enough and long enough, people will believe it contrary to the truth. Brothers and sisters, we are constantly surrounded by lies and half-truths that are loudly repeated by the culture around us. Are we repeating truth to ourselves regularly to keep ourselves from being overwhelmed by the lies we are constantly hearing? Are we making sure that our world view conforms to Scripture, rather than culture and contemporary thought? For these are at war with one another.

Second is “honorable” or “noble”, which means worthy of respect. What concepts are worthy of respect that we must consider? Ones that are based in truth and focused on what God has revealed.

Truth is why the third attribute, “just” is so important. That word can also be translated as “right”, which refers to the Hebrew concept of righteousness. We must think about what is in line with the rightness and the justness that God's standards embody and thus is worthy of his approval.

We are called to think on what is “pure”, what is morally pure rather than tainted by the world. This word also expresses what is “chaste”. Avoid the double entendre or dirty jokes. Think about how God wants you to see things morally.

The word “lovely” occurs only here in the New Testament, however in the Greek translation of the Old Testament it is used to describe the loveliness of Queen Esther. It is a sight that makes the heart beat higher; that makes you go wow! What is it that is beautiful? Who is it that is beautiful?⁹ Do you take time to enter into the beautiful, which is God himself? Do you take time to dwell on that?

⁷ Colin Brown, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), p. 777.

⁸ The following word explanations are based on Homer A. Kent, Jr., “Philippians,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), p. 152.

⁹ A great song for meditating on this is Cloverton's “Take Me Into the Beautiful”, *The End is the Beginning*, © Cloverton, 2012.

“Commendable” is once more a word that only occurs here in the New Testament. “It denotes what is praiseworthy, attractive, and what rings true to the highest standards.”¹⁰

If we take all of these aspects, there is only one being that encompasses them all, and that is God himself. Of course, because this world is God’s creation, you can find these attributes sprinkled throughout it, too. But these should always bring us back to reflecting on our Lord.

Paul leaves it to his readers to determine what these are for themselves with the statement “if there is any moral excellence and if there is any praise”; but he calls us to “dwell” or “think deeply” on these things. The Greek word expresses both an intellectual and an emotional engagement with these attributes.¹¹ It is similar to the meditation that we are called to in [Psalm 1](#). However, it is contrary to our sinful nature and therefore it will take effort — lots of it. The devil knows that thinking about these things will render us impervious to his attacks and make us effective for the gospel, and thus he will encourage us to meditate on other things; like how to fix our problems ourselves.

We must commit ourselves to thinking about God and about these attributes: “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable—if there is any moral excellence and if there is any praise”. Then we will be able to pray with thanksgiving, be gracious, rejoice at all times, and be committed to unity. It starts in the mind and heart.

6. A citizen of heaven practically lives out what he or she knows (4:9)

But it must not stop there. This is why Paul’s statement in verse 9 is so incredibly important.

Do what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

A citizen of heaven practically lives out what he or she knows. This verse is a repetition and deepening of Philippians 3:16, where Paul writes, “In any case, we should live up to whatever truth we have attained.”

The Christian life is not merely head knowledge. It is a transformation of the human being, so we actually apply what we know in our head. God often waits for us to apply the truths he has shown us before he shows us new ones. So, if you feel you aren’t growing, take stock: what has God taught you that you are not yet applying?

Paul points out that truth is obtained in two ways. First, we learn and receive, which means that we get them through Christian education, such as Bible studies or sermons. Then we hear and see them in other believers, which means through observation and being mentored. We should not only be looking to the Word for examples of Christian conduct, but to the mature brothers and sisters around us. We should be living lives that allow us to say to others, “do as I do”. We must desire to be mentors, as well; for that is how we are taught Christian conduct.

We must do what we know. We must encourage others to do as we do.

It is *then* that the peace of God — the wholistic *shalom* we mentioned above — will be with us. Doing what we know and what is right brings peace even in turmoil; and we can be serene, like the wise ones, even in the face of injustice and evil, knowing that our God is in control and as citizens of heaven it is our task to merely do as he desires, nothing more, nothing less.

Conclusion

Today we have looked at six characteristics of a citizen of heaven. These are,

1. A citizen of heaven committed to Christian unity (4:2-3)
2. A citizen of heaven rejoices, despite the circumstances (4:4)
3. A citizen of heaven is gracious and gentle in his or her conduct (4:5)
4. A citizen of heaven prays instead of worrying (4:6-7)
5. A citizen of heaven focuses his or her thoughts on what is good (4:8)
6. A citizen of heaven practically lives out what he or she knows (4:9)

¹⁰ Kent, p. 152.

¹¹ J. Eichler, “Λογίζομαι,” ed. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 825.

In closing I must note that doing these are impossible for a person who does not have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, as they require the strength of God to actually apply. However, as Jude reminds that God “is able to protect you from stumbling and to make you stand in the presence of His glory, blameless and with great joy” (Jude 24).

So, my call to us is for each is to live up to our high calling as a citizen of heaven, both individually and corporately, so that God will be glorified, the gospel will go forth in power, and the church will grow here in Ankara and around the world.

[T]o the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority before all time, now and forever. Amen. (Jude 25)

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