

Our Dual Citizenship

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

When the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, what was the first thing they did? Of course, they got off the ship. But what did they do after that? They built a church. Before they built their permanent homes, before they broke ground for the first planting, they built a church. We certainly do not agree with everything the Pilgrims taught as a church. They did not understand the difference between the law and the gospel. I certainly would not put a couple in stocks simply for holding hands on Sunday. But we admire them in other ways. They started a distant colony thousands of miles from home across a vast sea in an unknown land. They came as loyal British citizens. But by building a church first, they were also saying they were loyal citizens of God.

It is the Fourth of July weekend. I know there is arguing in our nation right now about the merits of our nation, but please don't let that shame you from your love for your country. And don't let that stop you from acknowledging the blessings we receive from God through this country. We can do this because we are citizens also of God's kingdom. Our sermon text from Hebrews tells us we have dual citizenship. May we practice that dual citizenship as loyal citizens of this nation and as loyal citizens of God's Kingdom.

I. Loyal citizens to our country.

In our Old Testament reading earlier, you might have heard a phrase that should have been a bit puzzling. ***“Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”*** What is strange about the Lord's words here? Babylon invaded Israel. They then carried them back to Babylon as exiles. What does God advise? God doesn't tell them to resist and find a way to escape. He commands them to pray for Babylon's success. Yes, pray for your enemy. Pray for the ones who murdered your citizens, destroyed your church, and toppled your government. Why? For two reasons. First, because they were now citizens of this new country. Second, as citizens of Babylon, if Babylon succeeds and prosper, so will they.

Scripture is very clear on this. God wants us to love, honor, cherish, obey and respect our country and its government no matter who it is. Romans 13 is the well known section on this and it starts off, ***“Everyone must submit to the governing authorities.”*** Then it continues in verse 7, ***“Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.”*** God says that believers should submit to their government and give it their money, taxes, loyalty, even lives in time of war. This is not an option. It is what is holy, that is, morally right and not sinful and destructive. And this isn't just Paul speaking here. Jesus said the same thing in our gospel reading: ***“Give to Caesar what is Caesar's.”***

Why should we? We could come up with all sorts of reasons not to. No government, including ours, is perfect. We can point out poor stewardship as tax money is wasted. We can argue against some of the policies that government establishes. We can criticize how it is promoting morally destructive behavior, and we can argue this not just from the Bible; we can base it on logic and reason alone.

So, why does God tell us to obey those in authority though they are not perfect? Well, how about this: he tells us so. That should be enough. But God does give us good reasons why. Again, as he says in Romans 13, ***“Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, FOR THERE IS NO AUTHORITY EXCEPT THAT WHICH GOD HAS ESTABLISHED.”*** To hate, dishonor, disobey them means you dishonor, disobey and hate God. He established government because this sinful world needs it. God is not dumb. He knows what is wrong with the world. He knows that sin lurks in our hearts and it wants to come out and do harm. Just ask Cain whose jealousy led to murder. God knows that. That is why he set up government. Example: what did God do after the flood? God gave government power. So we don't live in constant fear for our lives, he said that if man sheds blood, by man, that is the government, shall his blood be shed. And in Romans it says the government has a sword to keep the wrongdoer from doing wrong, and if he does wrong, to punish him.

Finally God uses Government to shower us with his blessings. The news is so negative, but the blessings are countless. So far I don't have to have my sermons approved by some government agency. We enjoy fire and police protection, a military to protect our borders, and even though Covid is hurting us, we still have what God promised: food and clothing and shelter, more than most others.

That is why God told his captive Israelites to pray for Babylon. Even though they didn't chose Babylon, they found themselves its new citizens. So pray for Babylon. When it succeeds, they will succeed. God will use Babylon to bless them.

II. Loyal citizens in God's Country.

May we do the same. Let's be loyal citizens of our country and reap the blessings God sends through it. But we are also citizens of another country known as God's Kingdom.

Our reading from Hebrews comes from what I like to call the "Hall of Faith" chapter. It describes all these wonderful believers in the Old Testament. Wouldn't you like your name listed here as well? Definitely, especially when we see their example. ***"All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."***

What do you look forward to when you turn 75? Are you planning to travel to a foreign nation where you don't speak the language and start your life over? Hardly. You look forward to retirement and settling down and spending time with the grandkids. If you get a chance, read Hebrews chapter 11. See all these heroes of faith. One of them was Abraham. When he was 75 God told him to pack everything up and move to a distant, foreign nation. He did it for two reasons. First, he trusted God. He didn't need a full-page explanation what God was up to and what will happen. God said go, so he went. Second, it didn't matter where he pitched his tent and laid down his roots, whether here or there. It didn't matter because Abraham knew he was a stranger on earth. His home is heaven.

He regarded heaven his home because of an interesting phrase in our text. I don't know if you caught it. It says, ***"Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has a prepared a city for them."*** God is not ashamed to be called their God. He should have been. Look at this list of heroes of faith. I would be embarrassed if some of them were my family! Noah embarrassed his family by getting drunk after the flood. Abraham was known to lie and commit adultery and produced an illegitimate child. Isaac lied to his father and cheated his brother. Moses took the law into his own hands and murdered someone. Rahab sold her body as a prostitute. Samson was a bit arrogant, prone to anger, and liked to hang around with prostitutes. David would murder his best friend to get his wife.

What shameful things could be attached to us? We, too, like the best of them, have lied, cheated, lusted after people not our wife or husband, loss patience, flew into anger. If you pulled out a photo album of things I said or did, or worse, what went on in my heart, I would be ashamed. So would my family. So would you.

It is shameful what sinners do, but God is not ashamed to be called their God. It is not that God likes to surround himself with shameful people. Quite the opposite. He is holy and all he is and says and does is morally perfect and right all the time. The thing is, he wants us badly, so much so that he did something about us. Piece together the sermons we had these past weeks on Romans. We heard that God knows we have no righteousness of our own so he provides it for us. We listened how he removes the barriers between us and God by reconciling us to himself through the death of his son. He doesn't make us try to do things to earn this, which is a formula for failure, so he gives it to us through faith alone.

Even though God should be ashamed of us, he isn't because Christ, his holy Son, the Son of God, washes us clean with his holy blood. The shame of the cross undoes our shame. Now you know why Abraham moved. It didn't matter where he lived or which national flag flew over him. By faith in Christ, he was but a stranger here. Heaven was his home.

Yet, he still was loyal to any kingdom he lived under. He even raised an army and went to war for the sake of earthly kingdoms. His longing for heaven was not an excuse to ignore God's representatives on earth. His loyalty to God in fact strengthened his loyalty to kingdoms on earth.

It is not wrong to celebrate our nation and enjoy the fireworks or the history or how God blesses us through it. It has its warts and imperfections; whenever sinful human beings are present, you will have imperfection. But God tells us to pray for our country warts and all. If it prospers, so do we. Yet, this doesn't contradict our citizenship in heaven. Rather, it benefits from it. Because we are strangers here and yearn for heaven, we recognize government for what is, God's representative, and our loyalty to it reflects our loyalty to God. You can do both: give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what is God's. Amen.