

Passport Power

Ephesians 2:11-22 | 7/22/2018

U.S. citizens, armed with a little blue book, can get into 158 countries without needing to secure a visa in advance -- pretty good access to the world. If you hold a German passport, on the other hand, you get to enter 161 countries, which makes your burgundy-colored book the world's most powerful passport. No other country in the world offers its citizens more unfettered access to the nations of the globe than Germany.

Your U.S. passport, as strong as it is, will not get you *everywhere* without a visa. Let's say you want to see the Great Wall of China and the Forbidden City. You get tickets for Beijing. Oops! You need a visa to travel to China. Fortunately, your passport will be checked stateside to make sure you have a visa. If you don't, you will not be permitted to board the plane. You go home. Your passport's power is limited.

Just in case you didn't know, a visa is a permit from the country you are visiting to be there for a period of time. A man who wanted to go to China insisted that he didn't need a visa. He was told by a member of the State Department that he certainly did. "Oh no," he replied, "I've been to China 4 times and they always accepted my American Express."

So what are the five worst, least powerful, passports in the world?" Any guesses? The least powerful passports in the world are: Somalia (35), Syria (34), Pakistan (32), Iraq (28) and Afghanistan (25).

When Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, he recognized that a kind of passport crisis was occurring within the church. Some congregations then, and perhaps now, required certain ethnic, political and theological visas before entry or full acceptance was granted. Racial and cultural divisions between the Jews who had come to faith in Christ and the many Gentiles now flocking to the church had reached a breaking point. Jewish Christians did not recognize the gentile passport as offering proof of full citizenship in the kingdom of God. They argued that a visa was required, and in this case, that visa was the physical passport stamp of circumcision (Ephesians 2:11). Since the time of Abraham, circumcision meant that one was truly an Israelite. Without that mark, the Gentiles could only be second-class citizens by comparison.

But here's where Paul intervenes in the situation like a fair-minded customs officer. As a Jew (and a former Pharisee at that) and as an apostle to the Gentiles (whose culture he also knew well), Paul understood the dilemma but also knew the solution. He proposed that the old passports held separately by Jews and Gentiles were now invalid. In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond or free, he wrote to the Galatians.

Your Jewish passports and your gentile passports are invalid, he said. As citizens of a new sovereign realm, you've been freely given a new passport with a visa that will get you into any community of faith anywhere in the world. Visit the church in Rome; they'll let you in. Visit the church in Corinth; they'll let you in. Visit the church in Thessalonica; they'll let you in. Your old passport, your connections to a previous life, have been replaced by a new common citizenship where the only qualification is faith in Christ and the only visa needed is the mark of Christ's blood, shed on the cross.

At one time, Gentiles -- as far as the Jews were concerned -- were considered to be passportless "aliens and strangers" who were at least temporarily without a country, without hope and "without God in the world" (v. 12). But now, said Paul, those who were once "far off" have received a new identity along with God's covenant people -- an identity stamped with the blood of Christ (v. 13).

So, what does this new, incredibly powerful passport represent and what kinds of access does it open up to the rest of the world? Paul offers a short list of some of the rights and responsibilities of faithful passport holders of the sovereign realm of God.

First, this passport transcends artificial boundaries and borders. In verse 14, Paul reminded the Ephesians that Christ "in his flesh" has made both Jews and Gentiles into one group and has "broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

Paul had been accused of bringing a Gentile into the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 21:28). Taking a non-Jew beyond a particular dividing wall in the temple was such a heinous breach of Jewish law that even the Romans permitted Jewish leaders to execute anyone who violated that sacred space. Paul was spared only because of his Roman citizenship and was given the right of appeal. Awaiting the outcome of the appeal, he was held by authorities in Rome, and took up letter-writing. The readers who first cracked open this scroll would have known why Paul was in prison. For them, the barrier between Jew and Gentile was best symbolized by the "dividing wall" of the temple (v. 14). But Paul announces -- and this must have come as a powerful shock -- that this dividing wall had been shattered in Christ who takes the place of the temple and enables all people to come together in him.

There are still plenty of "dividing walls" both inside and outside the church, just as there were in Ephesus. Divisions of race, politics, practices and doctrines often cause Christians to look at others as inferior. Paul says that faith in Christ transcends these artificial boundaries. Like him, we must be bold enough to cross those boundaries even if it costs us something. If we are in Christ, the only passport and the most powerful one is a passport of that one country of which we are all citizens, the Kingdom of God.

Second, the passport of the sovereign realm of God also brings with it a new set of rules. Paul wrote that Christ has "abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace" (v. 15). The "law" to which Paul referred was the Law of Moses and its practices that separated Jews and Gentiles. Paul saw this law as fulfilled in Christ. The death and resurrection of Jesus made peace between God and humanity *and* between Jews and Gentiles. Citizenship in the Kingdom of God is thus marked by faith in and obedience to Christ and not by what we eat, what we wear or how we worship.

Third, the citizen of the sovereign realm of God has direct access to the Sovereign through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This is power! The old covenant was mediated by priests in the temple who offered sacrifices on behalf of the people for the forgiveness of sins. But now, says Paul, through Jesus "both [Jews and Gentiles] have access in one Spirit to the Father" (v. 18). Instead of a customs gatekeeper who chooses to allow people into the country based on the passport they hold, Jesus acts more like a welcoming host who enables us to bring ourselves directly to God. We have also been given the Holy Spirit, who intercedes for us in ways that are beyond our understanding (Romans 8:26-27).

Because we have access to God, any place we go is an opportunity to share God's love in the power of the Spirit. There is no border or boundary that the Spirit cannot cross, and when we embrace our citizenship in the kingdom we have way more access to the world than even a German passport can grant. Whether it's just walking across the street or flying across the expanse of the globe, every day is an opportunity to represent Christ and invite others to become citizens of his kingdom.

Fourth, Paul reminds us that this heavenly passport never expires. When Obama and Xi Jinping announced a 10-year visa agreement a few years ago, people were elated. Most visas have a much shorter period of validity -- like 30, 60 or 90 days. Perhaps you can get a work visa for a year. Getting a visa to China can be complicated. But now, once you're in possession of a visa, it's good for 10 years.

Our citizenship in the sovereign realm of God is citizenship in a "country" that has no end, and all are invited to travel to it for an unlimited time period. And what's more, we're invited to become citizens! It's freely offered and there's nothing we need to do to qualify except to gratefully receive. It's an offer that will never be revoked.

Finally, this passport allows you access to all areas of the country. People who enjoy traveling abroad will tell you that some countries do not allow unfettered access to all areas of the country. Some restrictions may apply. Even a visa allowing access to the People's Republic of China does not grant you access to all areas of the country. There are parts of Yunnan province and Xinjiang province where tourists will be turned away.

But in the commonwealth of God, we can roam at will. We are free to go into areas of poverty and give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, shelter to the homeless and medical aid to the sick. We are free to build schools and hospitals, open clinics and food banks. We are welcomed in communities of faith.

We are free to speak truth to power, to march in protests, to worship in peace, to proclaim the coming of the sovereign realm of God. No restrictions.

It's a powerful passport that we carry as citizens of the Kingdom of God. But perhaps it needs to be renewed.

In a world where divisions seem to grow deeper every day, it's time for the church to renew the passport we've been given in Jesus Christ. It's time to be bold enough to break down walls of racial, ethnic, social and political division in the church so that we can demonstrate to the world what true citizens of the divine commonwealth look like. We must be willing to go and share life together with other citizens whom governments and pundits might see as aliens and strangers, but whom the people of God see as brothers and sisters, and fellow citizens of another world, a different age.

When I visited Egypt, I made the terrible mistake of leaving my passport in my hotel room. Our assistant tour guide was immediately sent by taxi to retrieve it, since it could be sold on the black market for thousands of dollars. Such a valuable passport! But not nearly as valuable as the passport of grace given by Christ. Let's be sure we never leave that one behind!

Pastor Keith

Children's Sermon

Bring to your conversation your passport and ask the children if they know what it is. Why do we have passports? What do they allow us to do? What kind of information is in the passport? Do we need a passport to go from one state to another in the United States? No. Do we need a passport to go to Canada or Mexico from the United States? Yes, we need a passport! Do we use passports to go to churches that are different from our own church? No, of course we don't need a passport to go to church. But what if we did have a passport from our church? What are some things we would take with us on our trip? Explain that you are not asking about things, although a Bible would be a good answer. Rather, what qualities would we take with us? Agree you would want to take kindness with you and generosity and goodwill. Just like the job of an ambassador to another country, you would be traveling as an ambassador from our church. Point out that, in fact, that is exactly what we are: ambassadors for God. Close with a prayer: "Dear God, we are thankful that no matter where we travel, you are with us. And help us to remember that no matter where we go, we go as your people, bringing peace and kindness to each person we meet. Amen."