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**“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”**

**(Matthew 7:21–23)**

## Introduction

Perhaps you have at some point in recent years received an email like the one below:

Dear Mr. Van Niekerk,

It is our pleasure to inform you that your name was randomly selected out of 12.1 million entries registered in the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program. The Diversity Immigrant Visa program is a United States congressionally-mandated lottery program for receiving a United States Permanent Resident Card. It is also known as the Green Card Lottery.

With the Diversity Visa (also known as Green Card) you will enjoy all the advantages and benefits of a U.S. permanent resident, including health and education benefits, and employment opportunities along with guidance in your new country, orientation sessions and programs to integrate into mainstream American society. Once received you can use it at any time you want to move in the United States or just travel. The visa must be renewed after ten years.

All Mr. Van Niekerk had to do was to EFT an amount of \$849 into a specified account by a certain date to secure his very own green card. He was now a proud citizen of the United States of America – land of the free and home of the brave! Or was he?

If Mr. Van Niekerk had been blessed with even average intellectual abilities, he would have been able to recognise this as a scam since, for two overriding reasons, if nothing else. First, he had not entered any such lottery. Second, the United States government could probably come up with a better email address than johnjohn1976@yahoo.com.

But if he had not realised the scam and bought a ticket to the USA, what would border control have said when he got there? Most likely, it would have been something to the effect of, “Mr. Van Niekerk, we require that you have a visa to enter our borders.” Mr. Van Niekerk might have objected by producing his green card, after which he would have spent

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a few hours in an interrogation room before, most likely, being placed on another long flight back to South Africa.

The fact is, to be welcomed as a citizen of a country, you *must* measure up. You *must* fulfil the criteria that country stipulates. Your own belief, no matter how sincere, or what paperwork you can produce to the contrary, simply will not do. You either belong in the land or you do not.

In the above situation, perhaps little harm was done by Mr Van Niekerk's self-deception. Yes, he was not welcome in the heavenly land of America, but apart from wasted time, money, and a broken heart, he was shipped off to the land where he, in fact, did hold citizenship. No lasting damage was done.

In this study, I'd like to draw your attention to a *far* more important matter of belonging – a *far* costlier citizenship, which you cannot afford to be without. This is a citizenship about which you cannot at all afford to be deceived

Our text contains what must be some of the most chilling words in all of Scripture. Perhaps they are not the most pleasant words to think about, but I trust that by taking the time to unpack them, we will benefit in ways which eternity alone will reveal.

These words were spoken by the Lord Jesus during his famous Sermon on the Mount. This sermon was delivered to the people of Israel fairly early on during his ministry. His teaching was absolutely revolutionary, because of his knowledge of the Scripture, his insight into the heart of the law, and his authority. Matthew 7:28–29 says that, “the crowds were astonished at his teaching for he was teaching them as one who had authority, not as their scribes.”

During this sermon, he spoke about topics such as the nature of true blessedness; the preserving nature of the church; the need for holiness in fulfilling the law; the heart of the law; hypocrisy; the Lord's Prayer; fasting; laying up treasure in heaven; freedom from anxiety; spiritual pride; the Father's love for his children; the golden rule; and a tree and its fruit. In our present text, he now addresses the matter of heavenly citizenship.

Remember that he was addressing Israelites here. The people of Israel laid great stock in their pedigree. They believed that their DNA made them a part of God's special people. Their confidence was in their physical descent from Abraham. They failed to realise that, just as God had chosen Isaac and not Ishmael, and Jacob and not Esau to be the bearer of the covenantal promises, so it was “not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring” (Romans 9:8). Indeed, did not John affirm this idea in his stinging rebuke to the Pharisees in Matthew 3:9: “And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.” There was nothing saving about fleshly

descent! The Israelites assumed that they were citizens of the kingdom, when in fact they were self-deceived.

It is bad enough to be deceived by someone else—by prosperity preachers, the doom-spraying charlatans of our day—but to have all the facts and deceive ourselves is a real travesty! Perhaps we ought to heed Christ's warning here and make certain that we do not make the same mistake that the Israelites were making.

Let's take a closer look at what Jesus said, under several headings.

## Heavenly Citizenship is More than Mere Words

Jesus begins, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 21).

What is this "kingdom of heaven"? The Jews had the idea that it was an earthly theocracy. Jewish supremacy in Israel under a perfect political Potentate who would lead them into true freedom from oppression and greatness, such as was experienced under David and Solomon. We know that this was not the case. The kingdom can refer to God's people on earth, and in a sense God's kingdom came with the spread of the gospel, but we also know that Jesus said clearly to Pontius Pilate at his trial: "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world" (John 18:36).

We also know from John 14:3 that Jesus is going to prepare a place for us in his Father's house and will come again to take us to himself. The kingdom spoken of here is the kingdom of heaven.

In other words, here in Matthew 7, Jesus is telling us very clearly that not everyone who calls themselves a Christian, not everyone who is a member of a local church, not even every person who preaches the gospel is necessarily a Christian!

In fact, who says, "Lord, Lord" to God? The answer is obvious: people who are praying. That is incredible: Even those who pray to God can do so and yet not be citizens of heaven! I don't even pray as often as I would like to; what does that say about me?

Citizenship in the heavenly kingdom is more than big talk!

## Heavenly Citizenship is More than Works

Verse 22 says, "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'"

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What “day” was Jesus speaking of? He was talking of “that day” – that day of days – of which John speaks in Revelation 20, and of which Paul speaks in Romans 2:16: the day of judgement; the day when the offer of forgiveness will come to an end, and those who have not kissed the Son will see his anger kindled and will perish in the way.

On that great judgement day, many will appeal to their mighty works and glorious ministries. They will bring all their ostentatious efforts to impress God but will be turned away!

In 1 Corinthians 13, that great passage on love, Paul says that even if he could speak in the tongues of men and angels, even if he had prophetic powers and understanding of mysteries, even if he had faith to move mountains, but lacked love, he would be nothing. He would have no value. Hebrews 6 speaks about the same thing. In fact, Hebrews 6 says that it is even possible to have an amazingly effective ministry, and even to do miraculous works, to know doctrine and be able to argue the finer points of theology better than Calvin himself, and yet not be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven!

## Warning to Illegal Immigrants

Verse 23 contains a warning to illegal immigrants – like Mr. Van Niekerk and his fake green card. The assessment of the King for those who do not belong in the kingdom, when they present all this superficial and irrelevant information to him as evidence of heavenly citizenship is: “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me you workers of lawlessness.’”

“I never knew you.” Could you bear to hear those words from Almighty God? Can you, in your wildest dreams, imagine a more shocking assessment? Teenager who has grown up in this church, can you imagine hearing such an assessment? How terrible for someone who believed that they belong in the kingdom of heaven to hear, “I never knew you; depart from me you workers of lawlessness.”

To hear those words would be truly horrifying, knowing that the time for reconciliation with the King is over. The time for getting a green card has passed! The self-deception has run its course, and the verdict is final. “Depart from me.” Where would you go? To what kingdom do you belong?

Scripture is clear: Those who are not children of God are the children of the devil – sons of perdition. Their kingdom will be hell.

## Marks of a True Patriot

Thankfully, Jesus also gives the marks of a true patriot. They are those who do “the will of my Father who is in heaven” (v. 21).

To find out, when all along you had convinced yourself that you are a citizen of heaven, that you are in fact a citizen of hell, would be literally soul-destroying, but the good news is that it is not too late. “That day” has not yet come, and the offer for citizenship still remains.

Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

Perhaps you wonder how that is good news. Not only do I know that I cannot *do* the will of the Father going forward, but I know that I have a lifetime behind me of *not* doing the will of the Father! I have broken his law as described by Christ in this Sermon on the Mount at every turn. Indeed, perhaps you have even taken the name of the Lord in vain for years by claiming to be a citizen of heaven when in fact you have never known, or been known by, the King.

Yes, it *is* good news! It is good news because, although you may have failed at every point, and may not measure up, Jesus said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me to accomplish his work” (John 4:34). He said on the cross, “It is finished! (John 19:30), meaning his obedience to the Father, his accomplishment of the Father’s will here on earth was complete and perfect. The Father affirmed that it indeed was finished by raising Christ from the dead since it was not possible for him to be held by the grave, and now he offers to stand in your place, and take your punishment. He offers to give you his righteousness. He offers you the green card of heaven!

Will you take him at his word? Will you admit that you don’t measure up. You are the criminal, the illegal immigrant in the kingdom, the wolf in sheep’s clothing. You have been living a lie, believing that you are worthy, all the while being unworthy.

Will you stop trying to get into the kingdom on your own merit, and agree with God? Repent and believe, as the Bible says. Repent. Confess your sins before a holy God and change your mind. Resolve, in the power of the Spirit, to forsake sin, and cling to righteousness. Believe that Jesus died for you—in your place—so that you can belong.

There are those in the church—I would go so far as to say that many churches are *filled* with those—who think they are citizens of the kingdom but are not. I am desperate to help them see that fact. But the last thing I want is to discourage the fainthearted. The last thing I want to do is to quench the smouldering wick or break the bruised reed.

# Citizens of the Kingdom

Matthew 7:21–23

Anton Beetge

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So true, but doubting, believer, how do you know whether you have citizenship in the heavenly kingdom? What, indeed, is the mark of a true patriot? A patriot is “the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

Are you doing God’s will? Not perfectly, of course. The temptation to sin is still there, and we still stumble and fall, but are you living a life characterised by obedience? Is it your fervent desire to do the will of God? Are you seeking first the kingdom of God? Scripture tells us that God commands all men everywhere to repent. Are you repenting? The issue is not the prayer you said that moved you to tears when you were 19. Quite often, that is the thing self-deceived people will point to in order to prove their salvation. The issue is not whether you felt a certain conviction at some point in the past. The issue, is are you repenting now? Are you believing now? Are you trusting Christ for the forgiveness of your sins now?

We often say that the gospel is not simply for the unbeliever. It’s not the ABCs of the Christian life; the gospel is the A to Z of the Christian life. We don’t get beyond the gospel for this simple fact: Those who are saved persevere right to the very end.

The apostle Paul says we ought to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith. Do you love God? Does your love look like obedience? The only way we can obey is if we truly are citizens of heaven, because the King gives us his Holy Spirit, our guide, who enables us to rise above our fallen nature and become who we are in Christ.

So, friend, as the customs officer approaches, the time is coming to prove that you belong. What evidence will you put forward?

AMEN