

Citizens of Heaven

How do we identify ourselves? Do we consider ourselves to be Men of Kent / Kentish Men? English? British? European? A citizen of planet Earth?

Do these titles come with qualifications?

Apparently, to be a “Man of Kent” or “Maid of Kent”, you have to come from east of the river Medway and to be a “Kentish Man” or “Kentish Maid”, you have to come from west of the river Medway. As I was born in Gillingham, I must be a Maid of Kent!

To become a British Citizen if you were not born in Britain, you have to take a “Life in the UK” test, which includes topics on

- The values and principles of the UK
- Traditions and culture from around the UK
- The events and people that have shaped the UK's history
- The government and the law

Do these titles come with responsibilities?

When English football supporters travel abroad to watch the national team play, they are representatives of the whole country. Unfortunately, they do not always represent us in a way in which we would like!

As a citizen of planet Earth, we should feel a responsibility to keep it unpolluted, spare the animals that live here from extinction and not over-use its resources but how many of us are actively seeking to do those things?

Romans 8 vv 5 – 13:

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you. Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

Philippians 2 vv 18 – 20a:

As I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven.

As Christians, the only identity we should be concerned with is that of being a citizen of heaven. The only qualification for this is to acknowledge and accept that Christ died in our place for the sins we hadn't even committed yet. It does, however, come with its own responsibilities! We should have our “minds set on what the Spirit desires” and live according to the Spirit. But what are those things and how do we do it? Let's look firstly at what we shouldn't be doing:

Galatians 5 vv 15, 19 – 21, 26:

If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Throughout our lives we will face constant temptations from the devil, other people and through our own weaknesses. We are called to be different, even if it makes us unpopular. For example, just because everyone else in our friendship group starts drinking alcohol and tries smoking at the age of 15, it doesn't mean that we have to. Just because all the other Mums at the school gate gossip every day about what someone is wearing or whose marriage is in trouble, it doesn't mean that we should join in. Just because other people think it's "interesting" to go to a fortune teller who reads tarot cards, we don't have to be interested. Just because someone disagrees with us or upsets us, we should try to sort it out and not fly off the handle.

The best way to know what we should be doing is to look to Jesus.

John 1 vv 10 – 11:

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

Jesus addressed the situations he came across on a daily basis from a heavenly perspective; he did not hide in a cave until it was safe to come out because all the unrighteous people had gone away and then float around on a cloud, showering everywhere with spiritual cleaning solution. **The blind received sight, the lame walked, those who had leprosy were cleansed, the deaf could hear, the dead were raised, and the good news was proclaimed to the poor [Matt 11 v 5]. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with Him and His disciples [Matt 9 v 10].** Jesus paid the temple tax like everyone else did [Matt 17 vv 24-27].

John 15 v 19:

If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

Being "in the world" but not "of the world" has a dual meaning. Because we are in the world, we need to be aware of the situations that surround us and take an interest where appropriate. Opportunities can be missed to tell others about Jesus if we don't have non-Christian friends. If we don't know what the political parties stand for, we can't make an informed decision who to vote for. If we have no idea what is being reported in the newspapers or on the TV news, we don't know what to pray about. It is pointless locking ourselves away and refusing to watch, listen to, or talk to anyone or anything that isn't Christian. We are in the world whether we like it or not! It's how we choose to react to the things in the world that demonstrates that we are not of the world.

Hebrews 2 vv 14, 15, 17, 18 and 4 vv 15 – 16:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just

as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Probably the best thing about being a citizen of heaven and not *of the world* is knowing that we are only *in the world* for a very short time, in the grand scheme of things. Although the trials that we face in our lives seem massive and sometimes insurmountable when they are happening to us, compared with eternity, that time is fleeting. The thing that must keep us going through the hard times is the knowledge that this world is temporary and our heavenly home is eternal.

A lady called Jeanette Henderson shared a story on UCB radio of two brothers walking through fresh snow. They challenged each other to walk in the straightest line possible. When they got to their finish line and looked back, one boy’s footprints weaved from side to side in a seemingly uncontrolled manner. “I don’t understand it,” he said, “I was looking straight down at my feet the whole way.” The other boy’s footprints were in a near perfect line. “What did you do?” He was asked. “It was easy,” he replied, “I just focused on the light coming from the kitchen window and headed straight for home.”

By looking “down” and focusing all our attention on what is happening now, we lose direction, stray from the path or just end up taking the long way around. After God freed the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt with the help of Moses, they spent 40 years wandering in the desert; a journey that should have taken them as little as 11 days, because they did not believe God’s promises to them. All they had to do was to trust and obey but they didn’t. Their fears and failings prevented them from entering the Promised Land. This truth hasn’t changed.

By looking “up” and focusing on God, we are led in the best way possible through what’s happening around us, to our final destination. We’re not taken out of the situation or made to hover 6 feet above it and our troubles don’t all miraculously part before us like the Red Sea for Moses but we will be directed through without being pulled under.

Like with quicksand, the more you struggle in it the faster you will sink. If you just relax, your body will float in it. If you step into quicksand, it won’t suck you down. However, your movements will cause you to dig yourself deeper into it. Quicksand is actually solid ground that has been liquefied and the ordinary sand becomes agitated, meaning it can no longer support weight. To overcome quicksand, the best thing to do is to make slow movements and bring yourself to the surface, then just lie back. [Source: How Stuff Works website]

2 Corinthians 5 vv 1 – 7:

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now the One who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. For we live by faith, not by sight.

When I went on holiday back to New Hampshire where I’d been twice before, I felt like I’d “come home”. There were familiar sights and smells, I knew where the supermarket was without having to use the Sat Nav, I didn’t feel under pressure to be anyone apart from me and the phone was not constantly ringing with demands on my time. On my return to the real world, I realised I’d had a taste of what it must be like to be a citizen of heaven. For the rest of the year, I will long to return to New Hampshire because I like being there so much. For the rest of our lives after we accept Jesus, our souls will yearn to be with Him because that’s when we will be home. In the meantime, we must continue to live *in* this world, remembering we are not *of* it.