

The Church— Made Up of Saints (Forgiven Sinners!)

Text: 1 Corinthians 6:9–11.

Someone has said, “The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for the display of saints.” In the church are people who have been guilty of every sin known to mankind. When a preacher stands in the pulpit, he may be looking at people who have committed adultery and fornication, who have been guilty of wife abuse or child molestation, who have robbed or murdered others, and who have spent time in jail—not to mention those who have succumbed to lust, covetousness, hate, and pride.

The church is not made up of perfect people; it is composed of people who have been made righteous by the blood of Christ. The difference between people in the church and people outside the church is not that those in the church are “saints” and those outside the church are “sinners”; it is simply that those inside the church are sinners saved by grace, while those outside the church are unsaved sinners.

In no New Testament passage is the relationship between members of the church and sinners better illustrated than in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

This passage teaches three significant truths about the church and sinners.

THE CHURCH IS MADE UP OF SINNERS (6:9–11a)

Paul’s Message to the Corinthian Church

In this context, Paul was teaching the Corinthian church to live righteously. This involved, for example, not going to law against one another (1 Corinthians 6:1–8) and not committing fornication (6:15–20).

To convince them that they ought to avoid the sins that were common in the city of Corinth, Paul said bluntly that those guilty of certain sins “will not inherit the kingdom of God.” “Inherit[ing] the kingdom of God” is the equivalent of going to heaven (compare Galatians 5:21; 2 Peter 1:11).

In verses 9 and 10, Paul named ten sins that will keep people out of heaven:

1. Fornication (sexual immorality; see the NIV)—a broad term covering a variety of sexual sins.
2. Idolatry—the worship of false gods.
3. Adultery—sexual relations with someone other than one’s spouse.
4. Effeminacy (homosexuality; see the RSV; male prostitution; NRSV; NIV)—a form of sexual perversion.
5. Homosexuality (sodomy; NRSV)—having sexual relations with someone of one’s own sex.
6. Thievery—robbing or stealing, taking something that belongs to someone else.
7. Covetousness (greed; RSV)—a strong desire for what belongs to another or a determination to obtain more and more

possessions. It is “the inordinate desire, or love, [for] money.”¹

8. Drunkenness.
9. Reviling (slander; NIV)—speaking against others.
10. Swindling (robbery; RSV)—taking from others by underhanded means.

Probably, Paul did not intend to say that these sins alone will keep people out of heaven. Rather, these ten are representative of all kinds of unrighteousness. Anyone participating in the sins common among the world will not “inherit the kingdom of God.”

Paul’s Message to Us

What should we realize from this list of sins?

1. *The practices listed are all sins.* They are sins because God has said that they are sins. If we believe the Bible, we must have the same view of these behaviors that God has of them.

With regard to homosexuality in particular, many believe that speaking of the practice of homosexuality as a sin is bigoted. They prefer to think of homosexuality as simply a sexual preference or an alternative lifestyle. Some even believe that homosexuals are “programmed” to follow that lifestyle—that, because of their genetic makeup, they cannot be anything other than homosexuals. However, if we believe the Bible, we cannot accept that view.

2. *These sins are equal in their eternal consequences.* The social, physical, and temporal consequences of some sins may be worse than others, but the ultimate consequences of all sins are the same. Some of the most immoral people in the world—immoral in the sense that they find nothing wrong with committing fornication, for instance—are among those most outraged by the sin of homosexuality. Those who practice fornication are no more likely to get to heaven than those who practice homosexuality.

3. *People who had been guilty of these sins comprised the membership of the church at Corinth.* Paul went on to make this shocking statement: “Such were some of you” (6:11a). He did not say, “Such

were all of you.” Not all of the members in Corinth had been guilty of the kinds of sins he listed.

Nevertheless, the church in Corinth included people who had been thieves, revilers, idolaters, adulterers, and homosexuals, and had committed other types of sins. We may have difficulty imagining that!

Some brethren, it seems, will welcome new members into the church as long as those new members appear to be righteous and, in most respects, just like us! However, that is not the way the Lord works. He came to save sinners (Luke 19:10). He ate with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 15:1, 2). He loves the lost—all the lost, those who are despised as well as those who are “not far from the kingdom” (see Mark 12:34). Consequently, in the New Testament church, everyone was welcome—no matter what kind of sinner he had been before!

Let us consider this analogy: How does one qualify to be admitted to a hospital? He is sick! Likewise, to get into the church of our Lord, the first requirement is that the person is spiritually sick! He is a sinner! Any sinner—regardless of the sins he or she has committed—is welcome in Christ’s church, the hospital for sinners!

SINNERS IN THE CHURCH HAVE BEEN SAVED (6:11b)

Paul’s Message to the Corinthian Church

After saying, “Such were some of you,” Paul added in an escalating expression of praise, “but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (v. 11b).

Basically, Paul stated the same idea in three ways. Why? For emphasis. Perhaps Paul was doing much the same thing that an excited child might do after winning a game; he might exclaim, “I won! I won! I won!” Paul was saying, “Your previous condition was terrible! You were lost, but now you are saved! You are saved! You are saved!”

While the idea is repeated, each of Paul’s three expressions has a different connotation. “But you were washed” explains what happened to the Christians’ sins. When they were washed, their sins were washed away by the blood of Christ.

¹James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Austin, Tex.: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1977), 88.

This washing occurred when the Corinthians were baptized, after believing (Acts 18:8). The idea of “washing” is used frequently in the New Testament with reference to water baptism (Acts 22:16; Ephesians 5:26; Titus 3:5).

“You were sanctified” means “you were set apart” especially for the service of God, or “you were made holy.” Having been cleansed from their sins, these people were set apart for God’s service; they became “saints” or “sanctified” ones (1 Corinthians 1:2).

“You were justified” means “you were made righteous,” or simply “you were made right” with God. Before they were saved, they had been God’s enemies, under His wrath and sentenced to death. Having been justified, they were reconciled with God and had God’s approval (Romans 5:1, 10).

What a remarkable change had taken place in the lives of these thieves and adulterers and homosexuals! They had been transformed; their condition had been changed! They were no longer lost; they were saved—washed, sanctified, and justified!

Paul’s Message to Us

We can rejoice that the sinners in the church at Corinth had been cleansed—but some may be asking, “What does the text mean for me today?”

If they could be saved, we can be saved! No matter what we have done, no matter how sinful we have been, we can be saved! If those who murdered Christ could be saved on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:23, 36–41), if Paul—after persecuting the church and recognizing himself as the “foremost” or “chief” (KJV) of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15)—could be saved, and if the thieves, idolaters, and homosexuals at Corinth could be saved, then we can be saved!

We can be saved as they were saved! Verse 11 of our text explains how a person can be washed, sanctified, and justified: This is possible only “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” To lay hold of these great blessings today, one must do exactly what the Corinthians—and everyone else who responded to the gospel in the first century—had to do. He or she must believe in Jesus (John 8:24); repent, or turn from his sins (Luke 13:3; Acts 17:30); confess his faith in Christ (Matthew 10:32; Romans

10:9, 10); and then be baptized, or immersed in water, for the forgiveness of his sins (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16; 1 Peter 3:21).

Do you need to be washed and sanctified and justified by the cleansing power of Christ’s blood through God’s grace? Let me urge you, therefore, to do what Ananias told Saul to do: “Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16). Recognize your lost condition, and make a decision to change it.

SINNERS IN THE CHURCH MUST STRIVE NOT TO SIN

Sin Should Be in the Past

Notice the tense of the verb in 6:11: “Such *were* some of you” (emphasis mine). “Were” is past tense. In other words, the adulterers were no longer committing adultery; the idolaters were no longer worshiping idols; the thieves were no longer stealing; and the homosexuals had quit practicing homosexuality!

It is important to recognize the fact that anyone—not just the “moral” or “respectable” person—is eligible to enter the church, Christ’s hospital for sinners. Sinners, whoever they are and whatever they have done, are welcome to enter the kingdom of God, the church of our Lord, the fold of safety.

Equally important is the truth that we must repent when we enter that fold of safety—that is, we must determine to stop committing the sins we engaged in while we were in the world. Whatever our sin, repentance means that we must quit doing it!

The Church Should Be A Support Group

Perhaps, rather than comparing the church to a hospital, we should liken it to a rehabilitation center or a mutual support group. “Twelve-step groups” like Alcoholics Anonymous offer advice, encouragement, and accountability for people who are trying to change their lives. We all are part of this support group, trying to help one another overcome a common problem. We all have weaknesses; we are all tempted to sin. However, together, we can keep from slipping back into the sinful lifestyles we formerly practiced.

This perception of the church emphasizes both benefits and requirements. When we see ourselves as helping one another, none of us can feel superior to anyone else. While one Christian may struggle with covetousness or greed, another may battle immorality. Still another may be trying to overcome lying or anger. We are all trying to be more like Jesus, trying to conquer fleshly desires and take on the divine nature. We are all sinners saved by grace.

We must truly be striving to put off the old man, to quit the sin we were guilty of before we became Christians. Christ accepts sinners, but He does not tolerate sin! Just as there is a danger of thinking that—because of God’s wrath—one can sin so much he cannot be saved, there also is a danger of thinking that—because of God’s grace—one can keep on sinning and God will always forgive. God will forgive, but you must repent! Repentance involves change. We must do our best to stop sinning and obey the will of God!

CONCLUSION

Where do you stand with regard to the church, Christ’s hospital for sinners? Are you in the church? Maybe you have been reluctant to become a member of the church because you feel inferior. You may think you are too sinful, not

good enough to be a Christian. You may be afraid you would not be welcomed into the church. Perhaps, when you attend the worship services, you think, “I just don’t belong here.” If so, I have news for you. You do belong in the church, and the church is a place where you can have a sense of belonging. To enter the church, you need to be washed and sanctified and justified.

Perhaps you have entered this hospital, but you continue to live as you always did. If this is the case, you need to turn your life around. You can return to Christ by repenting of your sin (Acts 8:22), confessing it (1 John 1:9), and praying to God for forgiveness (Acts 8:22; James 5:16). You can help the church be what it ought to be, and the church can help you to become what God wants you to be!

Coy Roper

VERSIONS OF THE BIBLE USED IN THIS STUDY

KJV — King James Version

NASB — New American Standard Bible,
updated edition

NIV — New International Version

NKJV — New King James Version

NRSV — New Revised Standard Version

RSV — Revised Standard Version

GLORIFYING GOD

“For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:20).

Inasmuch as they had been redeemed by Jesus Christ, Paul exhorted the Christians at Corinth that they should with their bodies glorify Him. They were to live so as to honor Him, and not through fornication defile the temple of God by making it one with a harlot. We should so use the body as to please and do the service of God. To glorify God is to exalt and honor Him as worthy of the highest praise and most faithful service. Our only and supreme desire should be to know the will of God that we may do it. For we show forth His praise by obedience to His law. “The heavens declare the glory of God” in obedience to the law of creation, and much more do men glorify Him by willing obedience to “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.” This being so, what a profanation it is when we take this body, which is built to be His temple, and put it to uses which it would be blasphemous to associate with God! Let us rather find our joy in realizing the ideal set before us, in keeping ourselves pure as a temple of God and in glorifying Him in our bodies.¹

¹Adapted from David Lipscomb, *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles*, vol. 2, *First Corinthians*, ed. J. W. Shepherd (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1935; reprint, 1960), 94.