

DO YOU NOT KNOW?
PART 4

Text: 1 Corinthians 6:9-20

July 29, 2012

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

Last time, we learned in vv. 9-10, how Paul takes up the theme of the kingdom of God and applies it to the problem of sexual immorality in the Corinthian church. The Corinthians were arrogantly opposed to sound teaching that accords with the gospel. They didn't know the centrality of the gospel and its ethical implications for the church. Therefore, Paul reminds them of a basic fact concerning the kingdom of God. Paul asks (rebukes) the Corinthians, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?"

I. THE UNRIGHTEOUS WILL NOT INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF GOD. VV. 9-11

In vv. 9-10, Paul issues a chilling warning. Paul warns that in the consummation of God's kingdom the serially unrighteous will not be there (Note: He says this twice in order to drive this point home). He then provides an illustrative list of serial, unrepentant sins that leads to exclusion from the kingdom of God. By directing the Corinthians forward to the consummation of God's kingdom, Paul is seeking to drive home this point: Since unrighteousness cannot inherit God's kingdom in the future it must not be tolerated now in the present. The ethics of the kingdom yet to come determine the morals of the kingdom that already now is.

The aim of Paul in vv. 9-10 was to humble the Corinthians (who were marked by arrogance/pride/self-will) by reminding them of their former condition (state of unrighteousness). This is the pedagogical function of the law, viz. to give us knowledge of our sin and misery in order to lead us to acknowledge the grace of God in Christ towards us. As John Calvin says, "For the greater the misery is acknowledged to be, from which we have escaped through the Lord's kindness, so much the more does the magnitude of His grace shine forth" (*1 Corinthians*, p. 211).

In v. 11, the magnitude of God's grace shines forth in a brilliant way. This brings us to two final questions regarding the kingdom of God.

LESSON:

- E. If the unrighteous cannot inherit the kingdom of God—and all are unrighteous—who can inherit the kingdom of God and how?

The good news is that Paul's warning from the law in vv. 9-10 is not the final word on the matter. In an amazing and swift change, he brings his first argument to a

climactic conclusion in v. 11 by reaffirming the Corinthians remarkable transformation and new status as citizens (saints) in God's kingdom. Paul writes, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

Paul contrasts their past with their present (i.e., "You once were...but now you are."). Formerly, Paul says some of the Corinthians—not all—prior to their conversion were once sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers and swindlers excluded from the kingdom of God. But now, having been granted life through Christ by the Holy Spirit they are new creations, citizens of God's kingdom (Note: The repeated "but" (ἀλλά) before each verb in the Greek of 6:11 adds emphasis to the Corinthians break with their past).

There are hardly more hope giving words in all of Scripture than 1 Corinthians 6:11 (1 Cor. 6:11 is reminiscent of Paul's words in Ephesians 2:1-4ff, "But God..."). Verse 11 is one of the most important theological statements in 1 Corinthians. In recounting the Corinthians' spiritual transformation, Paul lists three verbs. These three verbs show what it looks like for Christ to exercise His kingly power through the scepter of His preached Gospel and grant the unrighteous an inheritance in His kingdom. These three verbs vividly set forth the Lord's kindness and through them the magnitude of His grace shines forth.

There is great power, force and hope in these three verbs. All three verbs direct our attention to the gracious action of the triune God with respect to our inheritance in the kingdom of God. Now, let's take a closer look at how Paul describes the Corinthians' spiritual transformation.

1. "BUT YOU WERE WASHED" v. 11B

First, in describing their spiritual transformation Paul deals with the doctrine of regeneration. How can the unrighteous come to inherit the kingdom of God? Answer: regeneration.

Through the preaching of the gospel, the Corinthians received the gift of regeneration. God in His great wisdom has appointed the gospel to be the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul (see *Canons of Dort*, Article 17; cf. 1 Pet. 1:23). Regeneration is how a sinner enters (inherits) the kingdom of God and becomes a citizen of it. Jesus told Nicodemus that the supernatural rebirth is indispensable to seeing and entering the kingdom of God. He said, "³ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God..." "⁵ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God," (John 3:3, 5).

Regeneration highlights the fact that entrance into the kingdom of God is based solely on grace. In vv. 9-10, Paul reveals the unrighteousness of the Corinthians, which underscores their need for grace. Clearly the Corinthians possessed no merit.

They were excluded from the kingdom of God. They were, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:1, dead in trespasses and sins. How then can a person is spiritually dead and morally defiled inherit the kingdom of God? The glory of the gospel is that God in His great grace reaches down to the lowest depths of human need and meets all the requirements necessary to make an unrighteous sinner a citizen of His kingdom (see John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, p. 96).

This radical change cannot be explained or attributed to any human resources or merit. It is by grace alone that we become members of the kingdom of God and partakers of its blessings. God's grace is further highlighted by the word "inherit." Paul uses the word "inherit" (κληρονομέω) twice in vv. 9-10. The word "inherit" shows that God's kingdom is an inheritance bestowed upon a son and therefore comes to us through the privilege of adoption (cf. Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, pp. 209-210). The kingdom of God is the inheritance of a son not the wage of a worker.

There are two aspects from which regeneration is to be understood: recreation and purification (cf. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, p. 100). Both recreation and purification constitute the total change that occurs in a sinner's heart when the Holy Spirit raises him from death to life and delivers him from the domain of darkness and transfers him to the kingdom of his beloved Son.

In recreation, the Holy Spirit, through the announcement of the gospel, sovereignly and graciously raises to life in Christ those who are spiritually dead (cf. Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith*, p. 1000). In Ephesians 2:4-5, Paul writes, "4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ..." In short, the Holy Spirit recreates in newness of life, as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (cf. 2 Cor. 4:6).

Regeneration also entails purification where the Holy Spirit purges away the defilement of our hearts. Paul most likely begins with this emphasis since in the context he is addressing sexual immorality, which is most defiling of body and spirit. Because nothing unrighteous or unclean will enter God's kingdom (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Rev. 21:27), it is necessary for the unrighteous to be spiritually cleansed in order to be made fit for entrance into God's kingdom.

The verb, "you were washed" stresses the removal of dirt and refers to the inward, spiritual cleansing of the filth of past sins (cf. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, p. 215). In describing the Corinthians' regeneration, Paul says they were washed (i.e., spiritually cleansed from the filth of their former sins listed in vv. 9-10.). In regeneration, the Holy Spirit graciously purges away the defilement of our hearts, which excludes us from His kingdom.

This is the point Jesus was making to Nicodemus when he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of

God.” The OT parallel of Jesus’ teaching, which connects “water” and “spirit,” comes from Ezekiel 36:25-26. Concerning the new covenant, Ezekiel prophesies, “²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

Some see in Paul’s words an allusion to baptism. Certainly, baptism serves as a sign and seal of regeneration, though it does not effect it. Paul is clear that salvation is based “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” However, if Paul does have baptism in mind, he is teaching believers how to make proper use of their baptism in their daily pursuit of sanctification. Baptism is a powerful, visible sign and seal (guarantee) that flashes like a neon sign: “All your filth and shame has been washed away!”

Assurance of being washed and made clean is particularly vital for those who are guilty of sexual sin or perhaps have been victims of sexual crimes. Sexual sins leave a person defiled and full of shame. Shame results from being unclean and naked before God, who is perfectly holy (see Ed Welch, *When People Are Big and God is Small*, p. 25). When Adam and Eve fell, they immediately were aware of their “nakedness” before God and so they attempted to hide their shame out fear (cf. Gen. 2:25 w/ 3:7-11). There is nothing more fearful for a sinner than to be fully exposed before a holy God in an unclean state. Shame also accompanies those who have been victimized and sinned against sexually. Ed Welch writes, “Shame from being sexually victimized is the best known example of victimization shame. Women who have been sexually violated can feel overwhelmed by what they perceive as the gaze of God and others” (*When People Are Big and God is Small*, pp. 26-27). Therefore, what both sexual sinners and the sexually victimized need is guidance in how to deal with their own sins, as well as their experience of being sinned against (Ibid, p. 27). Though not the total answer, the doctrine of regeneration—particularly the purification aspect—along with baptism is critical in helping people overcome the crippling affects of shame. The good news is—as signified and sealed in baptism—is that all who are recreated by the Spirit are also cleansed by the Spirit. Learning to properly use one’s baptism is a powerful weapon in the pursuit of holiness and the defeat of shame. For, as noted above, baptism flashes like a neon sign assuring us, “All your filth and shame has been washed away!”

So what is Paul’s point? Since the Corinthians have been washed they must not disgrace themselves with new defilements of sexual sins. Sexual sin leaves a person defiled. So what does God do in His kingdom? By grace, He washes us. He cleanses us from all manner of defilement and gives us a new nature that is pure and undefiled. In regeneration, the Holy Spirit purges away all our defilement and makes us clean and recreates us in newness of life so that we can obey and pursue holiness and purity of life. Going back to Ezekiel 36, in v. 27, God after having cleansed the sinner and recreated a new heart in him, says, “I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

Regeneration then is the basis of all change in heart and life. In the work of regeneration, God not only cleanses us from our defilement from sin (washing us and making us clean), he also addresses our slavery to sin (recreation/giving us a new heart). By giving us new hearts, the Holy Spirit changes our desire for evil into a desire for good. Regeneration is the root of all true obedience to God and His law. It is the basis for the pursuit of holiness and purity.

Second, in describing their conversion Paul deals with the doctrine of definitive sanctification.

2. "BUT YOU WERE SANCTIFIED" v. 11c

Through the preaching of the gospel, the Corinthians received the gift of sanctification. As we learned previously (see *Do You Not Know*, Part 2), Paul does not have in mind the process of sanctification, which is commonly referred to as progressive sanctification (i.e., the process of gradual conformity into Christ-likeness). Rather, Paul is speaking of the doctrine of definitive sanctification (i.e., to be set apart). By God's gracious action (election, Eph. 1:4) the Corinthians had been set apart from their former sinful state in vv. 9-10 and made saints. This is how Paul begins his letter, "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints..." (1 Cor. 1:2).

In directing the Corinthians to their definitive sanctification, Paul is saying, "Because you were sanctified, you must not pollute yourselves again."

If regeneration is the basis of all change in heart and life, definitive sanctification is the purpose for this change. Once again, Paul is reminding the Corinthians that God had claimed them for His own and conferred upon them the status of saints. God had set them apart for Himself. He made them holy, suitable citizens for His kingdom. They were set apart to pursue holiness, which stands in stark contrast to their former sinful lifestyles (cf. vv. 9-10).

Paul is saying, "Because you have been set apart for holy rather than unholy purposes repent of your arrogant toleration of sexual immorality and pursue holiness as is fitting for saints."

Sexual sin leaves us polluted, set apart for unholy purposes. So what does God do in His kingdom? He sanctifies us. He sets us apart for holy purposes and use. It is precisely because the Corinthians are sanctified (definitive sanctification; set apart from the world for God) that Paul calls on the immoral Corinthians (and us!) to be holy (progressive sanctification; to fulfill the purpose for why they had been set apart). As we have seen, religion calls on people to become something they are not. Christianity, however, calls on people to be who they already are in Christ.

This brings us to the third aspect of Paul's description of the Corinthians gracious transformation.

3. “BUT YOU WERE JUSTIFIED” V. 11D

Through the preaching of the gospel, the Corinthians received the gift of justification. How can the unrighteous come to inherit the kingdom of God? The unrighteous Corinthians (vv. 9-10) were declared righteous by the King!

Justification is the chief article of Christian doctrine and life. Concerning the importance of justification, Martin Luther said, “This doctrine is the head and the cornerstone. It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves and defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour...” (Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says*, p. 704).

What then is justification? Justification is God the judge’s verdict that declares the unrighteous to be righteous even while they are inherently unrighteous. God’s verdict is true (not a legal fiction) and just (not unjust) because it is rendered on the basis of Christ’s perfect righteousness alone, which is imputed to sinners by grace through faith alone. Consequently, all whom God justifies are counted by God just-as-if-they-have-never-sinned and just-as-if-they-have-always-obeyed. Though formerly “unrighteous” God justifies the Corinthians so that they could now be counted “righteous” and inherit the kingdom from which they were formerly excluded.

Why does Paul remind the Corinthians of their justification? Sexual sin results in paralyzing guilt, regret and self-condemnation. Paul’s point is this: Since the Corinthians were justified they must not call down self-condemnation upon themselves. The doctrine of justification frees the believer from self-condemnation and paralyzing guilt and regret because in it we have a perfect foundation of righteousness.

We must not forget that because of the “already but not yet” aspect of the kingdom of God all believers are simultaneously justified and sinful (i.e., we are not perfect yet!). Though sin’s dominion has been overthrown, sin still indwells believers. Therefore, we will experience a continual struggle/tension, which Paul describes in Galatians 5:17, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

Because of this continual struggle—even though we are delivered from the dominion of sin—we continually fall short of the perfect righteousness God requires in His law. Since our faith is weak and imperfect it cannot serve as the ground of our justification. If it did, we would have an imperfect, uncertain and weak ground for confidence before God.

Sexual sin, particularly, leaves us paralyzed under crippling guilt and regret for our past or present failures. How easy it is in the midst of our struggles to forget that we are in a right standing with God. Mark this: the struggling believer is right with God;

but the serially unrepentant “professing” believer is excluded from the kingdom of God.

The reality is that because of our struggle with indwelling sin, we often forget the justifying grace of God in Christ toward us? Therefore, Paul reminds the Corinthians (and us!), “Do you not know that you have been justified?”

The truth of justification keeps us persevering in the midst of our continual struggle with sin. It serves as an anchor that keeps us grounded in our confidence before a holy God. So then, if regeneration is the basis of all change in heart and life and if definitive sanctification is the purpose for this change, justification is the motivation to continue pursuing a life of holiness.

God’s declaration of justified keeps us from becoming paralyzed with an accusing conscience for our constant failures. The Heidelberg Catechism Q. 60 beautifully captures this truth. The catechism asks:

“Q. How are you righteous before God?”

Here’s the answer:

“A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Although my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God’s commandments, have never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil, yet God, without any merit of my own, out of mere grace, imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ. He grants these to me as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me, if only I accept this gift with a believing heart.”

Every day we sin. And every day our conscience condemns us on this basis. Therefore, we must by faith bring the verdict of our conscience—guilty!—into line with the verdict of God’s declaration—justified! The gospel announces that all who are in Christ are no longer condemned, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). And so like Paul, we must continually remind ourselves—and our burdened consciences—that our sin is forgiven and that God has reckoned to us the perfect righteousness of Jesus. Until we believe by faith the gospel truth that we are dead to sin’s guilt and no longer condemned, we will not have the strength to persevere in the pursuit of holiness. Moreover, we will not trust Christ for the strength to subdue sin’s power in our life (cf. Jerry Bridges, *The Gospel for Real Life*, p. 178).

Only a self-conscious awareness of justification is the basis for persevering in the pursuit of holiness. Therefore, we must know this cardinal truth of our faith well. A kindergarten understanding of justification will not suffice sustaining one’s pursuit

of holiness. We must meditate on our justification often and pray over it until the Holy Spirit assures us of it in both our head and heart.

One important note concerning justification is necessary before moving on. The truth of justification is not a license to justify immoral behavior/sin. If it were, Paul would hardly use it in a context where he is exhorting believers to a faithful pursuit of holiness and purity! Justification is the fountain of all true obedience to God. Q. 64 of the Heidelberg Catechism addresses this misunderstanding of justification. Q. 64 asks, “Does this teaching not make people careless and wicked?” Here’s the answer: “No. It is impossible that those grafted into Christ by true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.”

Justification and good works never appear alone. Justification always produces good works. Yet, good works are the effect of justification not its cause. No man is justified because he is sanctified. Good works are always the fruits of faith never its cause. But, the point to be made here is that in order to pursue holiness and obedience, we have to learn to live in a continual state of conscious justification (cf. Jerry Bridges, *The Gospel for Real Life*, p. 110). We have to be assured of the truth of the gospel, which says that in our standing before God we are as righteous today as we will be in the consummation of God’s kingdom.

The gospel assures us that our right standing before God can never change because we have been given the imputed righteousness of Christ. So, in your daily struggles and failures with indwelling sin remember: God justifies us! He frees us from all condemnation. He reckons to us a perfect foundation for righteousness (Christ’s righteousness). A self-conscious awareness of justification is the basis for persevering in the pursuit of holiness. It frees us from self-condemnation and the crippling guilt that plagues our burden consciences. Therefore, we can for the first time in our lives be empowered to pursue a life of obedience without the paralyzing effects of our past or present sins and failures.

Before closing, note how Paul establishes all of these gospel truths—regeneration, sanctification, justification—in the doctrine of the Trinity. He gives to us a “God-centered Gospel” (cf. Michael Horton, *The God-centered Gospel*, <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/god-centered-gospel>). Paul writes that God has effected salvation “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (v. 11e). Everything that God does comes from the Father in the Son through the Spirit.

Here, Paul emphasizes that the saving work of Christ is the *procuring (purchase) cause* of our salvation (see Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, p. 212). Regeneration, sanctification and justification come to us through His life, death and resurrection. However, so long as Christ remains outside of us He is of no benefit to us. Christ must not only be given for us; He must also be given to us (cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.) Therefore, the internal work of the Holy Spirit is the *effectual cause* of our salvation.

Christ accomplished the work of salvation *for us* (the gospel is Christ's work *for us*) and the Holy Spirit applies the work of Christ *in us* through the announcement of Christ in the gospel. Christ is the source of all blessings to us; and the Holy Spirit communicates Christ and all of His blessings to us. In v. 11, Paul is emphasizing the total spiritual transformation made possible through Christ's work *for us* and effected by the Holy Spirit's work *in us*, all of which originates from the sovereign, loving plan of God the Father.

REFLECTION:

As we reflect on Paul's teaching regarding the spiritual transformation of the Corinthians, let us remember:

1. PAUL'S WORDS ARE FILLED WITH HOPE FOR SINNERS.

In a given moment, Paul says God, through the announcement of the gospel, cleansed the Corinthians from their former defilement, set them apart for His holy purposes and declared them righteous in His sight. In short, He made them citizens of the kingdom of God. The good news of the kingdom is that He can do the same for you today, if only you accept this gift with a believing heart

2. ALL WHO ARE TRANSFORMED BY THE GOSPEL ARE EXPECTED TO LIVE OUT THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE GOSPEL.

The gospel brings about a whole new sexual ethic in God's kingdom. All three of the saving actions by God that Paul mentions demonstrate the purpose for which God graciously reconciles us to Himself by the free forgiveness of our sins. The gospel is intended to drive us to pursue and aim at purity, to persevere in true holiness, and to forsake and despise our former state of unrighteousness.

Regeneration is the basis of all change. Definitive sanctification is the purpose for all change. And, justification is the motivation to preserve in the pursuit of change. Paul is reminding the Corinthians (and us!) that they are to live differently than the world precisely because God in Christ and by the Holy Spirit has cleansed them from the defilement of their past sins, set them apart from their former sins to belong to Him and has already forgiven them and given them a right standing with Himself.

Simply put, Paul is exhorting the Galatians on the basis of the gospel to become what they already are in Christ.

"You were once unrighteous but now, by the grace of God, you are righteous. You were once excluded from the kingdom of God (vv. 9-10). But now you are citizens of God's kingdom. However, your problem is that you don't understand who you are. You don't know that you are an inheritor of the kingdom of God. You don't know that you are a people of the Spirit. Instead, you are arrogantly tolerating sexual immorality among you as if you are still

excluded from God's kingdom. But, you are now a citizen of God's kingdom. You are a new creation. You are a saint in God's kingdom. Therefore, stop unjustly suing one another in pagan courts and stop tolerating gross sexual immorality. These vices characterized your prior life. But, this is no longer who you are. Therefore, live like a citizen of God's kingdom since this is who you now are."

Paul then reminds the Corinthians of their spiritual transformation in order to deter them from reverting back to their former state from which they were delivered. He is exhorting the Corinthians (and us!) to change their behavior by reminding them that they do indeed inherit the kingdom of God because of the gracious work of Christ and the Holy Spirit (v. 11).

3. THE GOSPEL IS NOT A LICENSE TO INDULGE IN THE SINS OF UNRIGHTEOUSNESS.

Clearly the gospel of the kingdom doesn't lead to moral laxity or a laissez faire attitude toward sin. The gospel does not lead to arrogant toleration of unrighteousness precisely because God is not in the business of whitewashing sins but of transforming sinners (see Garland, *1 Corinthians*, p. 215). The gospel brings about a complete transformation of individuals, which issues in a whole new sexual ethic. The previous vice list warns that the serially unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God. But, Paul says, that is what some of you were. Now, in Christ, you are something totally different.

The gospel grants regeneration. As a result, all who are new creations in Christ possess a Spirit-induced desire to follow and live by the ethics of God's kingdom. The citizens of the kingdom of God do not dismiss the King's laws. Rather, they take seriously the warnings of His law and by faith obey His laws and live out the implications of the gospel.

4. THE GOSPEL IS THE MINISTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

We must not lose sight of Paul's emphasis upon the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. The coming of the Holy Spirit into the world signifies the coming of God's kingdom—the presence of the future. The presence of the Holy Spirit signifies that the realities of the consummated kingdom are already at work now in the present age.

The Holy Spirit is the author of faith and the agent of regeneration, sanctification and justification. Yet how often do we ignore the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit because of overreactions to the excesses of others. Gordon Fee writes, "The Spirit belongs to the creed and to our theology; but He is all too often left there, so that His genuinely transforming and empowering work is often left until the Eschaton, rather experienced in the present" (*1 Corinthians*, p. 248).

Apart from the working of the Spirit, the gospel would fall upon deaf ears. Therefore, we must pray for and expect by faith the transforming and empowering work of the Holy Spirit in our midst. We must not forget that the gospel is the ministry of the Holy Spirit and that we are the people of the Spirit. He is the one who alone brings about the spiritual transformation of the unrighteous through the announcement of the gospel.

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