

1 CORINTHIANS 6:11A

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 6. In verses 1–8 Paul was focused on the sin of Christians taking each other to civil court. Instead of going before unbelieving judges, we need to find wise people in the church to help us resolve our disputes. That way we can have a good testimony before the world. But in verses 9–10 Paul zoomed out his camera to look at a variety of sins. There are a total of 10 sins listed in these two verses. The first half of the list is in verse 9, and it's focused on sexual sin. Paul started by referring to sexually immoral people in general. The Bible teaches clearly that all sexual activity outside of marriage is off limits. God requires us to make a long-term commitment to one person of the opposite gender before we enjoy the pleasures of sexual intimacy.

Then Paul mentioned idolaters, which is not a specific reference to sexual sin. But sexual immorality took place regularly at the pagan temples in Corinth, and so these two sins were closely connected. However, sexual intimacy itself can even become an idol if we're not careful. We should not let this good gift become more important to us than the giver of the gift. We need to make sure that we're submitting to God in every area of our lives, including our sexuality. And this point leads to the third type of sinner: adulterers. Adultery is a specific kind of sexual immorality that only married people can commit. I think Paul's point here is that if sexual intimacy becomes an idol for us, then sexual immorality will be the natural result, even if we're married. We need to be content with our spouse and find sexual satisfaction in that person alone.

Paul added two more types of sinners at the end of verse 9. They're combined in the Christian Standard Bible with the phrase "males who have sex with males." But this translation has a helpful footnote here that says, "Both passive and active participants in homosexual acts." This footnote is based on two key words in the Greek text. So the fourth type of sinner in this list is a passive participant in homosexual acts, and the fifth type of sinner is an active participant in homosexual acts. Paul was confronting both sides of the coin with regard to homosexual behavior by men. He certainly didn't approve of female homosexuality, as we can see in Romans 1:26–27. But in 1 Corinthians 6:9 his focus was on condemning male homosexuality because it was more prevalent at that time.

Then in verse 10 we have the second half of the list, which is focused mainly on stealing. The sixth type of sinner that Paul mentioned is thieves. The Greek word for thieves is also used in John 12:6, where it describes Judas Iscariot. In that verse John called him a thief and then said that "he was in charge of the money-bag and would steal part of what was put in it." So a thief is simply someone who steals another person's property, whether it's done by force or by secret. And we know from Scripture that stealing is

clearly wrong. In Ephesians 4:28 Paul said, “Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need.” So it’s not good enough to stop stealing and just be lazy. We need to be hard workers and make an honest living. And the reason isn’t that we can spend all the money we earn on ourselves. We need to be ready help people in need, especially fellow believers.

In 1 Corinthians 6:10 Paul listed a seventh type of sinner: greedy people. He moved from the behavior of stealing to the attitude behind that behavior. The desire for money is what leads people to steal. If we’re going to resist the temptation to steal and become a thief, we need to deal this sin at the root and get rid of greed in our hearts. Now this doesn’t mean that it’s inherently wrong to be wealthy. Being rich isn’t a sin; wanting to be rich is the problem. Having money isn’t wrong; it’s when we love money that we run into trouble. We need to learn to be content with what we have. After all, one day Jesus is going to take us to our heavenly home, and we won’t be able to take our money with us. That’s why we should be investing our money in things that will last for eternity.

Then Paul mentioned an eighth type of sinner: drunkards. Now drunkenness doesn’t seem to fit under the general theme of stealing. But greedy people often use the money they steal to get drunk. It feels good to get drunk, but we also lose control of our faculties when we get drunk. And that’s where the problem lies, because part of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control. So when we get drunk, we’re hindering the Spirit’s sanctifying work in our lives. Now this doesn’t mean that it’s a sin to drink wine in general. Scripture teaches that we can drink wine as long as we don’t get drunk. But I do think that it’s a good idea not to drink any alcoholic beverages at all. That’s because these beverages can be pretty addicting, and I don’t want to risk facing a strong temptation to get drunk. So I personally don’t drink any alcoholic beverages as a general rule. But you’re not sinning if you drink a little wine, as long as you don’t get drunk.

Then Paul listed a ninth type of sinner: verbally abusive people. The point here seems to be that drunkenness can easily lead to being verbally abusive. If we’re not in control of our body as a whole, then we won’t be in control of our speech. But even when we’re not drunk we need to be careful not to insult and ridicule others, especially when we’re insulted and ridiculed. We need to follow the example of Jesus in 1 Peter 2:23, which says that “when he was insulted, he did not insult in return.” But apparently the Corinthian believers were even insulting and ridiculing each other. Paul’s reference to verbal abuse in 1 Corinthians 6:10 seems to point back to chapters 1–4 and the divisions in the church. In chapter 3 and verse 3 Paul said that there was strife among them. They were arguing with each other about their spiritual leaders, and it’s not too hard to imagine them insulting and ridiculing each other during these arguments. But that’s not how we should treat our fellow believers or anyone else.

Paul ended his list of sinners in chapter 6 and verse 10 by referring to swindlers. The Greek word for swindlers is also used in Matthew 7 at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. In verse 15 Jesus said, “Be on your guard against false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravaging wolves.” There our word is translated “ravaging.” A ravaging wolf is one that is vicious and causes severe damage. And that’s what swindlers do in a financial sense. A swindler is basically a special kind of thief that normally uses dishonesty to defraud and cheat people. And they often do this to people they have some kind

of relationship with. Apparently the Corinthian believers were even swindling each other when they went to civil court together. I think that's why Paul saved this term for last. He wanted to remind them about his instructions earlier in this chapter and emphasize how important it was for them to handle their disputes internally.

So we need to watch out for all 10 of the sins that Paul listed here in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10. And he gave us a strong warning at the end of verse 10 to motivate us. He said that none of these types of sinners “will inherit God's kingdom.” He was warning us that if we practice any of these sins and don't repent, then we will be excluded from God's kingdom. Instead of reigning with Jesus when he comes back to set up his earthly kingdom, we will end up being punished in hell for all eternity. That's why Paul warned us in verse 9 not to be deceived. If we've made a profession of faith in Jesus, then it's easy for us in our pride to assume that we're saved and on our way to heaven. But if we're living in unrepentant sin, then our profession of faith may not be genuine. So we need to examine ourselves to see if we're in the faith. We need to make sure that we're living in regular and habitual obedience to God. And we know that God will help us to do that as we depend on him.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 6:11. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 11: “And some of you used to be like this. 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 started this verse with a brief sentence, and it's actually even shorter than what we see in the Christian Standard Bible. Here's a more literal translation: “And some were these.” The Greek word for these clearly refers back to the 10 different types of sinners in verses 9–10. That's why Paul started this sentence with the word “and.” He was showing that verse 11 flows right out of verses 9–10.

Now the Greek text does not have a second person pronoun in this short sentence. But every major conservative Bible translation that I looked at has the phrase “some of you,” not just the word “some.” And I think the reason all these translations include the pronoun is that it's implied by the context. The next sentence has a series of second person plural verbs, and so it's clear that Paul was talking about the Corinthian believers here. But notice that he used a past tense verb in this opening sentence. He wasn't saying that some of them were characterized by the sins of verses 9–10 at the time he wrote to them. His point was that some of them were previously characterized by those sins. As we see in the Christian Standard Bible, some of them used to be those types of sinners.

Now it's important to note that Paul didn't use the word “all” here. He didn't say that all of them used to be characterized by one or more of these sins. He just said that some of them were like that. Of course all of them had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, as Paul taught in Romans 3:23. That statement is true for every human being who has ever lived apart from Jesus. But the biblical doctrine of total depravity doesn't mean that people are as bad as they could be. It just means that sin has infected the whole person. Every part of our being has been affected by sin. And so everyone has sinned in various ways, but some people have never committed any of the sins mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10. The Jews, for example, would have tried to avoid all these sins. That's why Paul said that only some of them used to be these types of sinners.

But then Paul gave us another sentence in verse 11, and it starts with the word “but.” Some of them were previously characterized by these sins, but then something changed. Paul used three verbs here to describe what happened to them. They’re all in the Greek aorist tense, which usually indicates a simple past action. The first verb is the word “washed.” The Greek verb for washed is used only twice in the New Testament. The other place where it’s used is Acts 22:16. In this chapter Paul was sharing his testimony with a group of Jews. He was reflecting on the fact that God sent Ananias to help him regain his sight after he was blinded on the road to Damascus. But Ananias also challenged him to respond appropriately to this event. In verse 16 he said, “And now, why are you delaying? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.”

So in this verse there’s a strong connection between being baptized and washing away your sins. Actually, Ananias probably wasn’t saying that Paul would wash away his own sins. The Greek verb here is in the middle voice, which doesn’t have an exact equivalent in English. The active voice and the passive voice are pretty straightforward, but the middle voice is more elusive. There are actually several different ways to interpret the middle voice, and the one that makes the most sense here is permission. Ananias was encouraging Paul to allow his sins to be washed away. And at first glance it seems like this would happen what he got baptized. But baptism is just an outward picture of an inward reality. When we get baptized, the water doesn’t actually wash away our sins, because our sins are inside us. That’s why Paul added the phrase “calling on his name.” It’s not getting baptized but calling on the name of Jesus that removes our sins. Baptism is just a visual illustration of that spiritual truth.

So when Paul talked about being washed in 1 Corinthians 6:11, he wasn’t referring to baptism. After all, there’s no mention of baptism in the context here. Instead he was talking about the time of our conversion when we repented of our sins and put our faith in Jesus. At that moment our sins were washed away figuratively. We all know what it’s like to be nice and clean after taking a shower. I don’t know about you, but after I work outside for a while during the summer, I get all hot and sweaty. And the first thing I want to do when I get inside is take a cold shower. It always feels good when I finish that shower and don’t smell so terrible anymore! And that’s what happens spiritually when our sins are washed away. It was as though our sins were like dirt, but then we took a shower and got all our sins washed away. That’s a wonderful picture of what happened when we were forgiven!

But in the spiritual realm we don’t wash ourselves. We’re like toddlers who aren’t old enough to take a shower by ourselves. Instead we need our parents to give us a bath. And that reality is reflected by the passive voice in the Christian Standard Bible and every other major conservative translation. These translations don’t say that we washed ourselves but that we were washed. Someone else washed us, and obviously that person was God according to the end of the verse. But in the original Greek the verb here is actually in the middle voice, just like we saw in Acts 22:16. The next two verbs are in the passive voice, and I think that’s why Bible translators use the passive voice for the first verb as well. But it’s really in the middle voice, and once again I think Paul intended the nuance of permission. He was saying that we allowed our sins to be washed away by God when we were saved. Psalm 103:12 says that he removed our sins from us as far as the east is from the west. What a wonderful blessing it is to be forgiven and to know that we’re no longer under God’s judgment!

Now let's look at the second verb in 1 Corinthians 6:11. First Paul said that we were washed, and then he said that we were sanctified. The Greek word for sanctified is used 28 times in the New Testament, and it basically means to set apart for a special purpose. It's used in John 10:36, where Jesus referred to himself as "the one the Father set apart and sent into the world." The Father set apart the Son for the purpose of sending him into the world to die for our sins. So in this case the Greek word for sanctified does not carry the nuance of holiness. After all, Jesus was just as holy before he came to earth as he was when he was on earth. But on many occasions this word does have the nuance of holiness. In Hebrews 10:10 the writer said that "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all time." Then in verse 11 there's a contrast between Jesus and the Old Testament sacrifices that could not take away sins. In other words, when we were sanctified through the death of Jesus, our sins were taken away, and we were made holy.

Now this concept of sanctification is confusing for many Christians. Many of us were taught that sanctification is not a reference to conversion but to spiritual growth. Perhaps you learned that justification is what happens to us at the moment of salvation, sanctification is what happens during our Christian lives on earth, and glorification is what happens when Jesus returns and we become perfect. And that's good, sound theology. This kind of sanctification is called progressive sanctification because it progresses slowly over a long period of time. It's taught in John 17, where Jesus was praying for his disciples. In verse 17 he said, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." So even though the disciples were already believers, they still needed to be sanctified. In other words, they needed to grow spiritually. And the way that we're sanctified is through the Word of God. As we study the Bible and apply it to our lives, we will progress in our sanctification and become more holy.

But there's another kind of sanctification taught in Scripture, and it's called positional sanctification. Theologians call it positional sanctification because it's not pointing to our behavior but our position before God. It doesn't describe what happens during our present lives as Christians but what happened in the past when we were saved. It doesn't refer to a long period of time but to a single moment. So the idea here is that when we were converted, there's a sense in which we became perfectly holy in God's sight. He no longer sees our sin because he has forgiven us. Now of course we do still sin, and that's where progressive sanctification comes into play. Progressive sanctification is simply the process by which our practice slowly begins to match our position before God. With positional sanctification God declares us holy, and with progressive sanctification we grow in holiness.

So in 1 Corinthians 6:11 we know that Paul was talking about positional sanctification, because he used a verb in the past tense. And we've already seen him use this verb to refer to positional sanctification. The Greek word for sanctified appears nine times in Paul's letters, and four of them are in 1 Corinthians. We're looking at the second one here, and the first one is found back in chapter 1 and verse 2. In that verse Paul said that he was writing "to the church of God at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus." So in that verse Paul said that the Corinthian believers had already been sanctified, and he was saying the same thing here in chapter 6 and verse 11. He even used the passive voice in both places. In other words, we didn't sanctify ourselves; the end of verse 11 clearly says that God is the one who did it. He made us holy in his sight through the death of Jesus on the cross.

Now let's look at the third and final verb in verse 11. The first thing he said is that we were washed, and the second thing he said is that we were sanctified. Finally, he said that we were justified. The Greek word for justified is used 39 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 27 of them. He only used it twice in this letter, and this is the second occurrence. We already saw this verb back in chapter 4 and verse 4, where Paul said, "I am not conscious of anything against myself, but I am not justified by this. It is the Lord who judges me." In this verse the word "justified" means "to demonstrate someone to be righteous." Paul was saying that he could not show himself to be righteous simply by having a clean conscience. Our conscience is not perfect; sometimes it doesn't alert us about our sin. Only God's evaluation is perfect and takes into account every thought and deed.

We also see the word "justified" used this way in Luke 10. In this passage someone asked Jesus what he needed to do to receive eternal life. Jesus told him to love God with his whole being and his neighbor as himself. But of course no one can do that perfectly. Jesus was testing the man to see if he would admit that he was a sinner and plead for mercy. But instead verse 29 says that he was "wanting to justify himself." And so "he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" He was trying to lower the standard of righteousness so that he wouldn't need to admit his sin. He was hoping that his behavior would be good enough for him to get eternal life. And so the word "justify" means that he trying to demonstrate his righteousness. He was trying to prove that his behavior was right and good.

But normally the Greek word for justified means "to declare someone righteous." It usually refers to a legal declaration from God that our sins are forgiven and that Christ's righteousness belongs to us. And that's how Paul often used this word in his letters. It's especially common in Galatians and Romans; he used it 8 times in Galatians and 15 times in Romans. Listen to some key passages in these two letters that have this word. In Galatians 3:11 Paul wrote, "Now it is clear that no one is justified before God by the law, because the righteous will live by faith." In Romans 3:20 Paul said that "no one will be justified in his sight by the works of the law, because the knowledge of sin comes through the law." Then in verse 24 Paul said that people "are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." In verse 28 Paul wrote, "We conclude that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law."

So in these passages we learn some important truths about the doctrine of justification. Paul defended very strongly the fact that God did not declare us to be righteous in his sight because of any good deeds that we have done. Instead he declared us to be righteous because of his grace through our faith. This is why the Protestant Reformation was so important. Roman Catholics have believed for centuries that we're justified by grace and works. But 500 years ago the Reformers argued from Scripture that we're not justified by works but by grace through faith. They even had some Latin phrases to stress the importance of this truth. They used the phrase *sola gratia*, which means "grace alone." And they also used the phrase *sola fide*, which means "faith alone." Salvation is a gift of God's grace that we receive through faith.

Let me give you an illustration. Let's fast forward five months to December 24. You're gathered together with your family, and you're getting ready to open all the presents. You open a card from a close relative and see a \$50 gift card to your favorite restaurant. Now you didn't do any work to receive that gift card. You just accepted the gift. I suppose you had to open an envelope, so the illustration's not perfect. But you

didn't do anything to earn that gift card! And it's the same thing with our justification. We didn't do any work to be declared righteous. God already did all the work through Jesus. We just received his gift of grace by faith. Instead of depending on ourselves, we depended on Jesus. We turned away from our sins and trusted in him alone to save us.

So when God declared us to be righteous, he no longer sees us as sinners. Instead he sees the perfect righteousness of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 1:30 Paul said that we "are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom from God for us—our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption." And in Philippians 3:9 Paul said that we don't have a righteousness of our own, "but one that is through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God based on faith." So Jesus took our sin on himself when he died on the cross, but he also gave us his perfect righteousness. That's a pretty good trade for us, isn't it? That would be like getting a huge diamond in exchange for a peanut. And that illustration doesn't even do the situation justice, because you can at least eat a peanut! Plus the biggest diamond in the world doesn't compare to the amazing gift of God's righteousness.

So Paul was reminding the Corinthian believers in 1 Corinthians 6:11 that they used to be habitual sinners. Some of them were even characterized by the sins listed in verses 9–10. But God washed away their sins, made them holy in his sight, and declared them to be righteous. And Paul emphasized this contrast by using the Greek word for but three times here, not just once. He used it before each verb, as we can see in more literal translations like the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. And so we need to respond to God's gift of salvation with gratitude. But we also need to bring our practice into conformity with our position. The Corinthian believers were still struggling with sin to various degrees, and we face the same struggle today. So let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to have victory over sin and live in obedience to him.