

# 1 CORINTHIANS 6:12

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 6. We're in the second major section of this letter, which covers chapters 5–6. In chapters 1–4 the focus is on church unity, but here Paul shifted his attention to church purity. In chapter 5 Paul started this section by rebuking the Corinthian believers for tolerating a man who was committing incest with his stepmother. Paul told them that they needed to remove this man from the church both for his good and for their good as well. This action would keep the church pure and hopefully motivate the man to repent. Then in the beginning of chapter 6 Paul dealt with the sin of Christians taking each other to civil court. Instead of taking their disputes before the unrighteous, they should have found a wise believer to serve as an arbitrator. So in chapter 5 the Corinthians were not judging the man who committed incest, and in chapter 6 they were not serving as judges for their fellow believers when they had disputes with each other.

Now at the end of chapter 5 Paul took some time to expand beyond the sin of sexual immorality. In verses 10–11 he gave us two lists of sins, and here in chapter 6 he did the same thing. He gave us a list of 10 different sins in verses 9–10. In all three of these lists he started by talking about sexually immoral people in general, and then in the third list he mentioned idolaters. These two sins are connected because both of them took place at the pagan temples in Corinth. The next sin in this list is adultery, which is a special kind of sexual immorality that only married people can commit. Then Paul finished verse 9 by referring to “males who have sex with males.” And the footnote in the Christian Standard Bible shows us that he was talking about “both passive and active participants in homosexual acts.” He was confronting both sides of the coin with regard to male homosexuality.

So in verse 9 the half of the list is focused primarily on sexual sin. Then in verse 10 we have the second half of the list, which is focused mainly on stealing. We can see that theme right away at the beginning of the verse, where Paul mentioned thieves. Then he moved from the behavior of stealing to the attitude behind that behavior: greed. The desire for money is what leads people to steal. And when people steal, they often use the stolen money to get drunk. That's the next type of sin that Paul addressed here. Then he mentioned verbally abusive people because drunkenness can easily lead to sinful speech. Finally, Paul ended his list by referring to swindlers. A swindler is basically a special kind of thief that normally uses dishonesty to defraud and cheat people. And that's apparently what the Corinthian believers were doing to each other when they went to civil court together.

But Paul's point in listing these 10 different types of sinners was to warn us that none of them “will inherit God's kingdom.” 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. Now in verse 11 Paul said that some of the Corinthian believers were previously characterized by those sins. But then something changed, and Paul used three verbs to describe what happened to them. The first one is that they were washed. Now it sounds like Paul was talking about baptism here, but more likely he was referring to the inward reality that the outward picture of baptism is pointing to. 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 and completely forgiven.

Then with the second verb Paul said that we were sanctified. This word basically means "to set apart for a special purpose." And normally it has the nuance of being set apart to be holy and separate from sin. So when God saved us and took away our sins, we were sanctified and made holy through the death of Jesus. Now we tend to think of sanctification as something that happens throughout our Christian lives. We call it progressive sanctification because we slowly become more holy over a long period of time. But there's another kind of sanctification taught in Scripture, and it's called positional sanctification. 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 when God declared us to be perfectly holy in his sight. That's what Paul was talking about here in verse 11.

Finally, Paul said with the third verb that we were justified. This word usually means "to declare someone righteous." It refers to a legal declaration from God that our sins are forgiven and that Christ's righteousness belongs to us. And Romans 3:28 says that we're "justified by faith apart from the works of the law." So salvation is a free gift from God that we receive by trusting in Jesus alone. And when we received that gift, God declared us to be righteous. Instead of seeing us as sinners, he sees the perfect righteousness of Jesus. 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 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. The gift of salvation is truly amazing and wonderful! But we shouldn't focus so much on the gift that we forget about the giver of that gift. The reason our salvation is such an incredible gift is that it's from the triune God. In the end of verse 11 we can see that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit all played a part in our salvation. Paul said that we were washed, sanctified, and justified "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

So the primary agent of our salvation is the Lord Jesus Christ. Matthew 1:21 shows us very clearly that the name "Jesus" is connected to the theme of salvation. It says that Jesus would "save his people from their sins." But Jesus didn't just come to be our Savior. He came to be our Lord as well, and that's why Paul put the word "Lord" right before the word "Jesus" in 1 Corinthians 6:11. The Greek word for Lord just stresses the idea of authority. It shows that Jesus is in charge and that we must submit to him. We can't receive him as our Savior without also recognizing him as our Lord. But Paul didn't just refer to Jesus as Lord in this verse. He used the phrase "Lord Jesus Christ." Now we tend to think of the word "Christ" as

the last name of Jesus, but in reality it's just another title like the word "Lord." It means "anointed one," just like the word "Messiah."

Now in the Old Testament there were three types of people who were anointed: prophets, priests, and kings. And the Israelites were looking for a special individual who fulfill all three of these roles. We can see that Jesus is the supreme prophet because he always speaks God's words. In John 12:50 he said, "I speak just as the Father has told me." But Jesus is also the supreme priest because he offered himself as the perfect sacrifice once for all. Hebrews 10:10 says that "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all time." And one day he will return and reign as the supreme king on the earth. Revelation 19:16 calls him the "King of kings and Lord of lords." He's worthy to save us as our Messiah because he's the ultimate prophet, priest, and king.

So in 1 Corinthians 6:11 the primary agent of our salvation is "the Lord Jesus Christ." But Paul also mentioned a secondary agent: "the Spirit of our God." Now we know from earlier in this letter that the Spirit is God. In 1 Corinthians 3:16 Paul asked, "Don't you yourselves know that you are God's temple and that the Spirit of God lives in you?" The temple was designed to be the dwelling place for God's visible presence. But after Jesus died and rose again, God began to live in his people. That's why Paul said that the Corinthian believers were God's temple. But instead of saying that God lived in them, Paul said that the Spirit of God lived in them. This substitution strongly implies that the Spirit is God.

But if the Spirit is God, then how can the Spirit be of God? The answer is found in the doctrine of the Trinity. Scripture teaches clearly that there is one God in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. We see them mentioned side by side as equals in a variety of passages. For example, in Matthew 28:19 Jesus told his followers to "make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." So when Paul said that the Spirit is of God in 1 Corinthians 6:11, he wasn't using the word "God" to refer to the Spirit. Instead he was probably talking about God the Father. And most likely his point was that God the Spirit was sent by God the Father. After all, Jesus said in John 14:26 that the Father would send the Holy Spirit in his name. And in John 15:26 Jesus said that the Spirit of truth proceeds from the Father.

Now we know the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are equal in essence, because they're all God. But they have different functions within the Godhead. The Father leads, and both the Son and the Spirit submit to him. Their role in our salvation was planned and directed by God the Father. He was the movie director behind the scenes making sure that the Son and the Spirit were in the right places doing the right things at the right times. But the Father is not just the sovereign God who's in control of the universe. He's also a personal God who loves his children. That's why Paul referred to him as "our God" in 1 Corinthians 6:11. The Father made us part of his family when he saved us through the work of the Son and the Spirit. We belong to him, and now we can cast our cares on him at any time, because we know that he cares for us.

Now let's move on to verse 12 and cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "Everything is permissible for me," but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me," but I will not be mastered by anything." I don't know about you, but when I read this verse, my first thought is

to ask, “Where did that come from?” This verse just seems to come out of nowhere. It’s not easy to figure out how it flows from what Paul was just saying. But the trick is to keep reading. In verse 13 Paul said that “the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord.” Then in verses 15–16 Paul made two references to a prostitute. Finally, in verse 18 he commanded us to “flee sexual immorality.” So it’s obvious that Paul was dealing with the sin of sexual immorality at the end of chapter 6. As he finished this second major section in the letter, he returned to the same theme that he covered at the beginning of this section in chapter 5.

So now we can see why sexual sin was so prominent in Paul’s list of sins in chapter 6 and verses 9–10. He was not finished dealing with this sin yet. Apparently it wasn’t just the man committing incest who was indulging in sexual sin. Some of the other Corinthian believers were struggling with this sin as well. Now Paul was certainly assuming the best about them. He just said in verse 11 that they were washed, sanctified, and justified by the triune God. He thought that they were genuine believers. But as Christians we can’t reach perfection in this life. We still face ongoing temptation to sin, and sometimes we give in to that temptation. So we need to bring our practice into conformity with our position. God has blessed us with positional sanctification, and now we need to advance in our progressive sanctification.

But in verse 12 Paul made some statements that are not easy to interpret. So let’s take a closer look at this verse. We can start by observing that there are two sentences here, and each one has two parts. The first part in each sentence is exactly the same, and then it’s followed by a contrast. So Paul made the same observation twice and then used the word “but” to contradict it in two different ways. And what he said in this observation was that “everything is permissible for me.” The Greek word for permissible is used 35 times in the New Testament. Paul wrote five of these occurrences, and four of them are in this letter. We have two of them in this verse and then two more in chapter 10 and verse 23. And usually this word just refers to what is lawful or legal. In fact, many translations have the word “lawful” here, like the English Standard Version and the Legacy Standard Bible.

Let’s look at a few examples of how this word is used in the Gospel of Matthew. It’s used nine times in this book, which is more than it’s found in any other book. Look at what we read about Jesus in chapter 12 and verses 9–12: “Moving on from there, he entered their synagogue. There he saw a man who had a shriveled hand, and in order to accuse him they asked him, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’ He replied to them, ‘Who among you, if he had a sheep that fell into a pit on the Sabbath, wouldn’t take hold of it and lift it out? A person is worth far more than a sheep; so it is lawful to do what is good on the Sabbath.’” So our Greek word is used twice in this passage, and it’s translated with the word “lawful” each time. The religious leaders didn’t think that it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath because healing people involved work in their mind. But Jesus gave them the right interpretation of the Sabbath law. He said that it was lawful to do what is good on the Sabbath.

Now let’s look at Matthew 14. Look at what Matthew reported to us in verses 3–4: “For Herod had arrested John, chained him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, since John had been telling him, ‘It’s not lawful for you to have her.’” So John the Baptist told Herod that it was not lawful for him to marry his brother’s wife. Then in Matthew 22 we have an interesting story about

how the religious leaders tried to trap Jesus. In verse 17 they asked him, “Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” Jesus answered by essentially saying “yes,” but he gave a very balanced statement. In verse 21 he said, “Give, then, to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Now of course it was absolutely legal under Roman law to pay taxes to Caesar. In fact, it would have been illegal not to pay taxes! It was also legal under Roman law to marry your brother’s ex-wife or to work on the Sabbath day. In all three examples that we looked at, we’re talking about whether something was legal under God’s law in the Old Testament. And clearly some things were not lawful in God’s sight. So it’s definitely shocking to see Paul’s repeated statement in 1 Corinthians 6:12. He said twice that everything was permissible or lawful for him. And yet Paul condemned a great many actions and attitudes as sin. In just Romans 12 he said not to be conformed to this age, not to curse, not to be proud, not to repay anyone evil for evil, not to avenge ourselves, and not to be conquered by evil. And that’s only one chapter from one of his 13 letters!

So there’s really no possible way that Paul would have told the Corinthian believers that everything was permissible or lawful for him. After all, we just saw that Paul listed 10 different types of sins in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10. Sometimes there are obvious exceptions when we use the word “everything,” but there are so many exceptions here that the term is basically meaningless. So Bible scholars have solved this problem by proposing a clever solution. They have suggested that Paul was actually quoting a flawed statement that the Corinthians believers made and then responding to it. That’s why many Bible translations put quotation marks around this repeated statement in verse 12. These translations include the Christian Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, the NET Bible, the New International Version, and the New Living Translation.

But it’s interesting that some Bible translations don’t use quotation marks here. These translations include the Legacy Standard Bible, the New American Standard Bible, and the New King James Version. And I really don’t understand why they chose not to include quotation marks. Now I suppose people who haven’t been trained in biblical Greek might look at the original text and notice that there aren’t any quotation marks. But the reason for this is that there were no quotation marks in ancient Greek! The only way to detect a quotation in biblical Greek is by looking at the context. Often there’s a phrase like “Scripture says” to introduce the quotation, but not always. Sometimes we just have to follow the writer’s train of thought and deduce from more subtle indicators that he was giving us a quotation. And that’s what we’re doing here.

But how did the Corinthian believers come up with this statement? Some Bible scholars think that they were taking Paul’s theology of Christian freedom and running wild with it. In 2 Corinthians 3:17 he said that “the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” In Galatians 2:4 he said that “some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus in order to enslave us.” In Galatians 5:1 he said that “for freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm then and don’t submit again to a yoke of slavery.” But in each of these passages Paul was talking about freedom from the law of Moses. In Galatians 5 Paul went on to talk about getting circumcised and trying to be justified by

the law. In verse 13 he said, “For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don’t use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love.”

So Paul certainly stressed that we’re not obligated to obey the law of Moses. In Romans 6:14 he said that we “are not under the law but under grace.” But this doesn’t mean that we’re not under any kind of law. Paul warned us in Galatians 5:13 not to use our freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. So there are still many sins that we need to avoid. Now we’re under the law of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 9:21 Paul said, “I am not without God’s law but under the law of Christ.” In Galatians 6:2 he said, “Carry one another’s burdens; in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” The law of Christ consists of the commands that he gave directly to his followers as well as the commands that he gave through his apostles as they led the early church and wrote Scripture.

Now certainly these New Testament commands are rooted in the Old Testament, and so there’s overlap between the law of Moses and the law of Christ. For example, homosexuality is condemned in both the Old and New Testaments. And nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament. But we don’t have to obey the Sabbath day command anymore according to Colossians 2:16. And Jesus declared all foods clean in Mark 7:19, so we’re not under the food laws anymore. We also don’t have to offer animal sacrifices anymore because Jesus offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice for sin. So we don’t need the training wheels on our bike like the Israelites had. But we still need to keep the two main tires on our bike if we’re going to ride the Christian life and be pleasing to God.

And apparently the Corinthian believers did not maintain this important balance. All the wheels had come off their bike so to speak. They thought that since they weren’t under the law of Moses, they could live however they pleased and do whatever they wanted. And most likely they were being influenced by false teaching that what we do with our body doesn’t matter. Paul dealt more specifically with that issue in the rest of 1 Corinthians 6. But here in verse 12 he offered two preliminary responses to this misunderstanding of Christian freedom. His first response was that “not everything is beneficial.” The Greek word for beneficial is used 15 times in the New Testament. Paul wrote five of them, and they’re all found in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. In this verse we’re seeing the first of three occurrences in 1 Corinthians. We’re going to see it again in chapter 12 and verse 7, where Paul said that “a manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good.” There our Greek word is translated “common good.” It just refers to what is beneficial or profitable.

But in that verse Paul was not talking about what is beneficial for the individual. Instead he was saying that God gives us spiritual gifts so that we can benefit others. And I think he was teaching something similar in chapter 6 and verse 12. He was saying that not everything we could do is beneficial to others. And this is a very helpful way to think about our actions and our attitudes. There are many things we could do that would make us feel good and bring us pleasure. But we need to follow Paul’s instructions in Philippians 2:3. He said there that we should “do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves.” In 1 Corinthians 16:14 Paul said that we should “do everything in love,” and in chapter 13 and verse 5 he said that love “is not self-seeking.” We need to do what’s best for people around us.

Now some people would argue that as long as two people both want to do something, then we shouldn't call it sin. That's a common argument against the view that all homosexual behavior is sin or that going to a prostitute is wrong. These people argue that as long as you have two consenting adults, they can do whatever they want in private. But this is a misunderstanding of what it means for something to be beneficial. The fact that something brings two people pleasure doesn't mean that it's beneficial. We need to define what is beneficial based on God's Word instead of our feelings. If we're committing sin with another person, then we're basically bringing divine judgment on that person! And of course the situation is equally bad for us. But it's too easy for us not to care about the consequences of sin for ourselves. However, if we realize that our sin with others brings consequences on them as well, then we should have some extra motivation to avoid that sin.

But what about sins that we commit all by ourselves? Well, Paul's second response in 1 Corinthians 6:12 is helpful in this regard. He said, "I will not be mastered by anything." Paul used an emphatic first person singular pronoun here to shift the focus from others to himself. He didn't want to be mastered by sin. We used to be slaves of sin before we got saved, and we should not return to that slavery. Now the Greek word for mastered is used only four times in the New Testament. It's used twice in 1 Corinthians 7:4 and once in Luke 22:25. In Luke 22:25 it's translated with the word "authority" in the Christian Standard Bible, and that's a good translation because this Greek verb comes from the same root as the Greek noun for authority.

Now we certainly don't want to be under the authority of sin like we used to be, but I think Paul may have been thinking about something more specific here. In just a few verses later in 1 Corinthians 7:4, he used this same Greek word to say that a wife has the right over her husband's body and that a husband has the right over his wife's body. In other words, when we get married we're basically telling our spouse that our body no longer belongs to us. Our body belongs to our spouse, and so we should make ourselves available for sexual intimacy whenever our spouse desires it. But if we have sexual relations with someone who's not our spouse, then we're basically giving that person authority over our body instead. We're under the mastery of that person, at least whenever we indulge in sin with that person. And so the freedom that we think we have is not really freedom after all. We're slaves of the person we're sinning with, and ultimately we're acting like we're slaves of sin.

But true Christian freedom doesn't mean that we can do whatever we want. It means that we're slaves of God and therefore slaves of righteousness. That's what Paul taught in Romans 6:16–22. We can do whatever we want as long as we're staying within the circle of God's will for our lives as revealed in Scripture. We should not be mastered by anything or anyone except the Lord. Even if we're married, we should understand that our spouse's authority over our body has limits. God is our ultimate master, and so we can't do anything for our spouse that would displease the Lord. Sometimes we have to choose between submitting to God and submitting to human authorities, and Peter showed us the right approach in Acts 5:29. He said that "we must obey God rather than people." So let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to live in obedience to him.