

# UNRAVELING A CONFUSING VERSE

## ANOTHER LOOK AT “INHERITING THE KINGDOM OF GOD”

by Dennis Rokser

**W**e find in Paul’s writings three verses related to inheriting the kingdom of God that have caused much difference of interpretation among bible teachers and those who read the Scriptures.

*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 homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.*** (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

*For this you know, that **no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.*** (Eph. 5:5)

*idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, **that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*** (Galatians 5:20-21)

Depending on what theological eyeglasses you might have on, you may interpret these same verses in a variety of ways.

If you are Roman Catholic, you may read these verses to be saying that you must avoid these sins in order to be saved and go to Heaven—salvation by faith plus works. (Read Ephesians 2:8-9.)

If you are Arminian in conviction, you may interpret these verses to be teaching that if you practice these sins, that you will lose your salvation—salvation by faith and works requiring a holy life. (Read John 10:27-30.)

If you are a Lordship Salvationist Calvinist, you may interpret these verses to be explaining that a person who claims to be saved but has this kind of lifestyle was never really born again—salvation by faith followed by a lifestyle of godly works as a ultimate necessity to go to Heaven. (Read 2 Peter 2:7-8; 1 Cor.3:1-4.)

If you believe in Free Grace, you may interpret these verses to be teaching that believers who live unrighteously will enter the Kingdom of God but not “inherit” the reward of reigning with Christ in the Kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

**Depending on what theological eyeglasses you might have on, you may interpret these same verses in a variety of ways.**

But could there be another explanation that is exegetically sound and is consistent with the context and content of these passages, along with the balance of the Scriptures? I would like to propose to you an interpretation of these passages that has been held by grace-oriented dispensational expositors of the past but seems to be shelved by many in the present. Let’s examine afresh each of

these passages.

*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 homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.*** (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

Our first exegetical clue to properly interpreting this passage is the word “*unrighteous*.” It is critical to note that Paul uses this exact Greek word in

<sup>1</sup> This view is espoused in “The Reign of the Servant Kings” by Joseph C. Dillow, (Schoettle Publishing Company, Incorporated; 2nd edition (December 1992)

referring to the *unsaved* in stark contrast to believers earlier in this same chapter:

*Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law **before the unrighteous, and not before the saints?*** (1 Cor. 6:1)

*But brother goes to law **against brother, and that before unbelievers!*** (1 Cor. 6:6)

The “unrighteous” in this context are not “saints” nor are they “brothers” but “unbelievers.”

Secondly, verse 9 begins with the personal address of “*you*” which is referring to these believers whom Paul has previously described as...

*1 Corinthians 1:2 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who **are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints**, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours ...*

*And I, **brethren**, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to **carnal**, as to babes **in Christ**.* (1 Corinthians 3:1)

Paul recognizes the Corinthians as genuine believers in Christ in spite of their carnality and fleshly lifestyles that he confronts them about throughout this epistle. Can one be carnal and yet a genuine believer in Christ? Paul certainly declared it!!!

Thus, verses 9-11 are not referring to believers who are living unrighteously and will lose out on the reward of “*inherit[ing] the kingdom of God*” as some have supposed. The “unrighteous” in this context refers to the unsaved unbelievers whom God still sees in their sins (fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, sodomites, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, extortioners) having never been totally forgiven by God. This verse is **not** saying that if you ever commit one of these sins you cannot be saved or that you are not saved; otherwise, WHO COULD BE SAVED? Not even the Corinthians, for “*such were some of you*” (6:11). Nor is this teaching that if you ever have a pattern of sins in your life as a

believer you lose your salvation (Arminian view) as all sin was fully paid for at Calvary (Hebrews 10:12) and totally forgiven when one believes in Christ alone (Col.2:13). Nor is this passage stating that you never really possessed salvation (LS Calvinistic view) if you have committed any of these sins or a pattern of them, for the Corinthians were guilty of these very sins (ongoing fornication 1 Cor.5:1-5; drunkenness, even in church 1 Cor. 11:21) yet were still viewed as “saints.” Also, if the LS Calvinist view is correct, it leaves one in a terrible quandary wondering how many sins constitute a pattern? How many times must you fornicate before you are a fornicator? Usually the answer would be ONCE.

A second observation to note is that these Corinthian “*saints*” (6:1) “*were washed*” (from their sins), “*were sanctified*” (set apart unto God), and “*were justified*” (declared righteous) “*in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God*” (6:11). It is interesting to observe that all three verbs (“*washed*,” “*sanctified*,” “*justified*”) indicate a completed action in these believers’ pasts (aorist tense, at the moment of salvation)—not a progressive process, which was now a fact of reality for them (indicative mood) and not a hopeful possibility. The emphasis in these verses is on the Christian’s position in Christ and possessions by God’s grace, not on his daily walk. For if Paul was stating that the “*unrighteous*” were actually genuine believers who were living unrighteously and therefore would “not inherit the kingdom of God” as a reward for godly living in time as some Free Grace expositors teach, his contrast in verse 11 misses the mark. Would not the appropriate contrast to unrighteous behavior among believers be **conditional** requirements such as “but you are spiritual, faithful, and godly and are on your way to

**A third exegetical clue that must be discovered and discerned is that in contrast to the “unrighteous” (adikoi) who “will not” inherit the Kingdom of God, these believers had been “justified” (adikaioo) or “declared righteous” in the courtroom of Heaven.**

inheriting the kingdom of heaven as a reward for your perseverance”? But instead Paul contrasts the **unbelievers’ position** before God (“unrighteous”) **followed by their practice** (“fornicators, idolaters, etc) with the **believers’ position** before God (“*washed*,” “*sanctified*,” “*justified*”) **followed** by an appeal to their **practice** to become consistent with their position in Christ (6:18-20).

A third exegetical clue that must be discovered and discerned is that in contrast to the “*unrighteous*” (adikoi) who “*will not*” inherit the Kingdom of God, these believers had been “*justified*” (adikaioo) or “*declared righteous*” in the courtroom of Heaven. Paul appears to use an inclusio here that completes the circle of thought from the unsaved or “*unrighteous*” (vs.9) to these believers who were “*justified.*” This further confirms that the contrast Paul is establishing is between a believer in Christ versus an unbeliever.

Therefore, in light of their position and blessings in Christ, God then appeals for these Christians to live a holy life befitting their identity with Jesus Christ.

*Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. (1 Corinthians 6:18)*

The implication of this imperative for these believers to “*flee sexual immorality*” is that some were either still involved in sexual sin or at least could potentially be. In fact, 1 Corinthians 5:1 indicates that the reality of ongoing sexual immorality was a definite problem in this Christian assembly.

*It is actually reported that **there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife!** (1 Corinthians 5:1)*

No wonder Paul goes on to appeal to these believers in Christ that,

*Or do you not know that **your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit** who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? **For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.** (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)*

It is imperative to note that even these believers who were “*justified*” before God in their position

before God and were “*doing wrong*” (vs. 8 - adikeo – doing unrighteously) in their practice were exhorted as those whose bodies were “*the temple of the Holy Spirit.*” Paul kept clear justification and sanctification issues, and so must you!!!

This interpretation of 1 Corinthians 6 is further reinforced when comparing this passage of Scripture with other related Scriptures. For the same author, Paul, addressing the same issue (practical sanctification), using the same phraseology (“inherit the kingdom of God”), and making the same appeal for holy living (in light of your position in Christ and in contrast to the unsaved), addresses these same matters in Ephesians 5 and Galatians 5.

**This is important to note as most New Testament passages address the believer's inheritance as a gift of God's grace lavished upon all believers in Christ (Colossians 1:12), while a few verses communicate that certain faithful believers can receive “the reward of the inheritance”...**

*Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty*

*words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them. (Ephesians 5:1-7)*

This passage is addressed to these Ephesian believers (1:1) who had been previously informed earlier in this epistle that they were **all** “*blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ*” (1:3) which **included an “inheritance” in Christ.**

*In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will. (Ephesians 1:11)*

Just three verses later, Paul explains that the guarantee of this inheritance that **all** believers possess is the sealing of the Holy Spirit.

*In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with **the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance** until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.* (Ephesians 1:13-14)

So it should not surprise us that four verses later in Ephesians 1 we observe the apostle Paul praying for these believers and asking God that,

*the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; **that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.*** (Ephesians 1:18)

This was not a prayer for select saints who were especially godly in their walk but for **all** believers in Christ who had **all** obtained an inheritance by God's grace when they were born again.

This is important to note as most New Testament passages address the believer's inheritance as a *gift* of God's grace lavished upon *all* believers in Christ (Colossians 1:12), while only a few verses communicate that *certain* faithful believers can receive "*the reward of the inheritance*" which is given over and above the gift of the inheritance.

To illustrate this difference between a gift and a reward, let's imagine for a moment a rich father who has three sons. Upon the father's death, his last will and testament is read out loud in the sons' presence. It reveals that this gracious father bequeathed to **ALL** his sons a great but equal inheritance that they receive as a **GIFT** merely because of the Father's generosity and their birth into his family. But in addition to the **GIFT**, this same father gave as a **REWARD** certain additional blessings to **ONE** of his sons who faithfully served

him night and day for many years while he was in poor health before he died.

In the same way, the Scriptures set forth that **ALL** believers in Christ have received the gracious blessings of God's **INHERITANCE** merely because they are God's children through being born again.

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has **begotten us again** to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, **to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*** (1 Peter 1:3-5)

On the other hand, there will be **SOME** believers who will receive a **REWARD** for their faithful service to Jesus Christ.

**But let's be clear that the reason these unbelievers have NO INHERITANCE is not because they have committed these sins individually or as a pattern, but because while Jesus Christ died for their sins, they have never trusted in Him alone in order to be justified and forgiven.**

*And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive **the reward of the inheritance**; for you serve the Lord Christ.* (Colossians 3:23-24)

In light of the previous context and usage of "*inheritance*" in Ephesians (1:11, 1:14, 1:18), it stands to reason that Paul is designating that those who have **NO** "*inheritance in the kingdom of God and Christ*" are **UNBELIEVERS**, especially since Paul so dogmatically states that "**NO fornicator... has ANY INHERITANCE**" (Eph. 5:5) while previously explaining that **ALL BELIEVERS** have an

inheritance by God's grace. But let's be clear that the reason these unbelievers have **NO INHERITANCE** is not because they have committed these sins individually or as a pattern, but because while Jesus Christ died for their sins, they have never trusted in Him alone in order to be justified and forgiven.

*Being **justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a***

*propitiation through faith in his blood...*  
(Romans 3:24 -25a)

*To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.* (Acts 10:43)

To further support this interpretative conclusion that this passage is referring to *unbelievers*, there are several other exegetical clues that we need to observe. Paul goes on to state,

*Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.*  
(Ephesians 5:6)

The “you” of verse 5 is referring to all the believers in Christ at Ephesus, not just a select few. This stands in contrast to the phrase “*sons of disobedience*” who will experience God’s “*wrath.*” These terms would be understood by the Ephesian believers in light of Paul’s previous usage of this phrase in this same epistle when he described their previous UNREGENERATE CONDITION before they were saved by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ (2:8).

*And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.* (Ephesians 2:1-3)

Ephesians 5:6 is not referring to disobedient Christians who would experience the wrath of God due to their carnality, as some suppose. What a ludicrous thought in light of Christ’s work, God’s grace, and the believer’s position and possessions in Christ; for even God’s discipline is done out of love, not wrath (Hebrews 12:6-8). Instead, Ephesians 5:6 refers to the UNSAVED who die

UNFORGIVEN because of their rejection of Jesus Christ as Savior!

Another significant exegetical clue supporting this interpretation is the **striking contrast** in verses 6 and 7 between THEM (the unsaved) and YOU (believers).

*Let no one deceive you [not just some believers but **all** the believers at Ephesus] with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the **sons of disobedience** [the unsaved]. Therefore do not be partakers with **them** [the unsaved].*

To hammer one more nail in the interpretative coffin of Ephesians 5: 1-7, the following verse states,

*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.* (5:8)

“You” is in the plural and is referring again to all the believers in Christ at Ephesus. Furthermore, Paul’s targeted audience is “you” (vs.8 – all believers) and is again set in contrast to the “them” (unsaved) of verse 7. This is NOT contrasting obedient believers with disobedient believers, as some claim, but is contrasting the children of God with the children of wrath.

Once again we see the logic of grace. The appeal to godly Christian living by God’s grace is based upon what Christ has done for us (Ephesians 4:32 – 5:7) and the believer’s position in Him (5:8).

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Thus, Christians are exhorted to live consistent with and commensurate to their new identity and destiny in Christ with a walk that should be distinctly different from the unsaved around them whose destiny is not the “kingdom of God.”

A third passage of Scripture that echoes the same train of thought with similar wording is found in Galatians 5:

*I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that **those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.** But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. (Gal.5:16-26)*

Once again we observe the apostle Paul exhorting believers to live in a manner consistent with their blessings and position in Christ in glaring contrast to the unsaved world around them.

In Galatians, Paul is defending the Gospel and teachings of grace in declaring that the Law cannot justify the sinner (2:16) nor sanctify the saint (2:20, 3:1-5). Both spiritual blessings are all by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not through some form of legalism which is to be avoided at all cost. But Paul then shifts in Galatians 5 to address another imbalance that can plague believers and

occurs when grace is misunderstood or abused—namely the opposite ditch of license.

Thus, believers are exhorted to walk by faith in Christ (2:20) in/by means of the Holy Spirit with the result being they shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh in the midst of a very real spiritual battle daily fought within them (5:16-17). And “if” all believers have the Holy Spirit to lead them and enable them to live a holy life under grace (and they do—“if” is in the first class condition assuming a reality), they are not under the Law in any way as a means of sanctification in their daily walk (5:18).

However, by virtue of the reality that believers in Christ still possess a sin nature and may choose to yield to it with its passions and temptations instead of walking in the Spirit, Paul reminds these believers that they are capable of fulfilling the lusts of the flesh and producing the works of the flesh in their lives (5:19-21). To live in license would betray their real identity (in Christ), real authority (Jesus Christ), real destiny (the kingdom of God), and real power source for living (the Holy Spirit), and would cause them to live like “those ... who will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

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This verse is not teaching that if a believer ever commits these sins or has a pattern of these sins that he loses his salvation (Arminian view), or that he was never saved (Calvinistic view), for the Scriptures set forth several examples of believers who committed these very sins (it does happen) and how they lost their testimony, fellowship with God, joy, etc.

but NEVER THEIR SALVATION!!! (John 10:27-30; Romans 8:31-39) In fact, if you are honest with yourself, you know that too often you have committed such mental attitude sins as jealousy and envy (mentioned in Gal. 5:19-21), let alone the more overt sins also mentioned in this list of the works of the flesh.

But notice again, like 1 Corinthians 6 and Ephesians 5, the stark contrast between the “YOU” in reference to **all** the Galatian **BELIEVERS** and the “**THOSE**” of the **UNSAVED** who “*will not inherit the kingdom of God.*”

*But if you [all the Galatian believers] are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you [all the Galatian believers] beforehand, just as I also told you [all the Galatian believers] in time past, that those [the unsaved] who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (5:18-21)*

In addition, when you compare 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and Ephesians 5:1-8 and their usage of “*will not inherit the kingdom of God,*” there is no reason to assume that Paul has a different referent in mind than UNBELIEVERS who remain unforgiven and whom God still sees as spiritually dead in their sins.

Lastly, Paul’s grace logic and flow of thought remains similar here to 1 Corinthians 6 and Ephesians 5 as he sets forth how believers are to walk distinctly different than the unregenerate around them with the fruit of the Spirit manifested in their lives (5:22-23) based upon their position in Christ (5:24). Thus, Paul commands believers to walk consistent with and commensurate to their new identity and destiny in Christ by exhorting them,

*If we live in the Spirit [positionally], let us also walk in the Spirit [practically]. (Galatians 5:25)*

Again the “*if*” is in the first class condition assuming the reality that these believers are alive spiritually by means of the Spirit and now are to walk by means of the very same Holy Spirit. Through His divine enablement, every child of God can have victory over the flesh and manifest the fruit of the Spirit apart from a law-oriented, legalistic orientation to daily living.

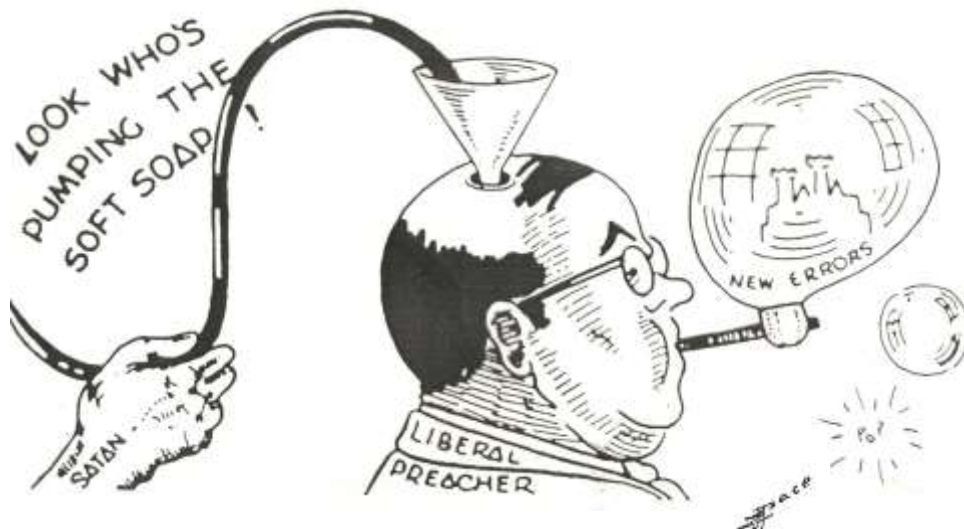
Once again we have underscored the importance of basking in the riches of God’s amazing grace and our identity in Christ as a basis for godly living through divine enablement for the glory of God. We need not threaten believers in Christ with some kind of millennial exclusion or protestant purgatory to motivate and appeal to them to live according to their high calling of God in Christ.

*I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called. (Ephesians 4:1)*

*For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. (2 Corinthians 5:14-15) ■*

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## TRUTH AT A GLANCE



**Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. (Colossians 2:8)**