

DOES THE COMMISSION OF CERTAIN SINS
INVALIDATE THE GRACE OF GOD?
1 CORINTHIANS 6:9–11

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Introduction

The Apostle Paul in writing to the *believers* in Corinth addresses the issue of litigation in public courts in 1 Cor 6:1–6. After six verses of discourse in which he shames them for airing their personal legal matters in public, βιωτικὰ (*biotika*), he transitions subjects, as he has done so often in 1 Corinthians, going from courts to *wrongdoing* in vv. 7-8. Then in 1 Cor 6:9–11, Paul addresses yet another problem extant in the church at that time in Corinth—postsalvation sin. The citizens of Corinth were well known for their immoral behavior, and for some this lifestyle had continued beyond their conversion experience.¹ In 1 Cor 6:9–11, Paul clearly identifies ten activities that are incompatible with the perfect righteousness of God. Whether Paul had or had not devoted much effort to these topics during his first visit to Corinth, we do not know, but we know for certain his focus was on the dissemination of the Gospel of Christ: “For I did not determine to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).²

¹ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible: Expanded Edition, New American Standard Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995) 1815.

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the NASB.

Now, in this first recorded letter, Paul adds personal sin or carnality to the long list of issues requiring attention. In so doing Paul states rhetorically in the first sentence of v. 9, “or do you not know that *the* unrighteous shall not inherit the Kingdom of God,” and at the end of v. 10 concludes that “neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the Kingdom of God.”

The purpose of this paper is to clarify what Paul means in 1 Cor 6:9–10 when he says that the unrighteous shall not inherit the Kingdom of God. Is it possible that the commission of certain sins invalidate the grace of God in salvation? On the other hand, might Paul be teaching that carnality in time effects rewards in eternity?

While “Kingdom of God” is grammatically linked to the phrase in both verses, an in-depth study of the Kingdom of God is beyond the scope of his paper. Neither will the individual acts that make up the list be examined. The word ἄδικοι (*adikoi*) (or the singular ἄδικος [*adikos*]), an adjective used as a substantive translated “unjust” or “unrighteous,” at the beginning of v. 9 and the word κληρονομέω, (*kleronomeo*) translated “inherit” found in vv. 9 and 10 will be the major focus of the study. Also, a brief examination of the first phrase in v. 11 will be necessary because it is inextricably linked to the meaning of vv. 9–10. A textual evaluation will not be necessary for no significant variants were found according to the apparatus of the Nestle’s Text, Edition 27.

The Historical Setting

A brief historical orientation is vital in the approach to any book and passage. It is much easier to understand the reason Paul would need to address the Corinthians regarding these sins after having a familiarization of the sociological, economical, and religious factors that made up the environment of the city and therefore dominated the lifestyle of the first century inhabitants of Corinth.³ In fact, to truly understand the Book of First Corinthians, as much as if not more so than any other book of the NT, it is absolutely critical to have an appreciation for the historical setting of the city and its people.

This Greek city has a two-part history: the first part associated with the ancient period of Greek history, and the second part associated with the Roman world and Christianity. Corinth was destroyed in 149 BC by the Romans and rebuilt again by them in 46 BC.⁴ The city was built on an isthmus and, in both eras of its history, took on the normal, well-known characteristics of a port city; it was a melting pot of cultures and religions and a cauldron of immorality. However, Corinth was no ordinary Greek seaport after its reconstruction. Rome, hoping to establish a city in Greece that would be loyal to Rome, resettled the colony with Roman military veterans and freedmen.⁵ The location and its thriving commerce soon attracted Greek and slave, as well as

³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987) 1.

⁴ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament Edition* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1983) 505.

⁵ Thomas Charles Edwards, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903) xii.

Asian and Egyptian.⁶ The isthmus upon which Corinth was situated joined northern Greece to Peloponnesia and was very much a crossroads of commerce in the ancient world; into the city “flowed the wealth of East and West.”⁷ As a city built on the trades and businesses that make up a commercial center and with no long-standing aristocracy, customs, or heritage, is it any wonder that Paul finds it necessary to address the Corinthian assembly about Christian conduct? Certainly in Corinth were found all of the vices and worldly activity that one could possibly imagine, and beyond them as well.

Edwards refers to this when he says about Corinth: “Hither streamed the licentiousness that had been either the shame or the religion, or both, of the lands of its birth.”⁸ Furthermore, Robertson and Plummer state that there is enough evidence to show that the new city of Corinth deserved a very evil reputation.⁹ It is absolutely essential to realize that the citizens of Corinth and therefore the members of the assembly from that city were not cut from moral cloth. Paul knew this, as can be seen from the many passages in the Book of Corinthians that refer to any and all types of unrighteous activity. With this historical foundation to the book, the interpretation of the 1 Corinthian 6 passage can be approached.

⁶ Fee, *The First Epistle*, 2.

⁷ Edwards, *A Commentary*, xii.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *The International Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Scribner, 1916) vii.

Exegesis of ἄδικος

The Greek adjective ἄδικος (*adikos*) is defined by BDAG as “pertaining to acting in a way that is contrary to what is right.”¹⁰ BDAG continues with the definition as “unjust, crooked of persons, dishonest, untrustworthy.”¹¹ Moulton and Milligan present ἄδικος as being used to describe a possession that is unjust or invalid.¹² Abbott-Smith provides two definitions: “1. unjust, 2. unrighteous or wicked.”¹³

The lexicographers have provided a reasonably unified set of definitions, and it is easy to see why most translators use unjust or unrighteous as a translation for ἄδικος. Both translations will be used in this paper. Note that the lexical meaning of the adjective is specific in quality but general in category or identity. Even an adjective used as a substantive lacks the specificity of a noun. Therefore context becomes critical to determine its meaning. In order to select an interpretation, a brief examination of Paul’s use of the word is necessary. Generally, the lexical form of ἄδικος will be used.

¹⁰ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (“Based on Walter Bauer’s Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen [sic] Literatur, sixth edition, ed. Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, with Viktor Reichmann and on previous English editions by W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, and F.W. Danker.”; 3rd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 21.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, Issued Also in Eight Parts, 1914-1929. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 10. BGU *Ägyptische Urkunden aus den königlichen Museen zu Berlin: Griechische Urkunden* I.–VII. Berlin, 1895–1926.

¹³ G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner, 1936) 9.

Paul uses ἄδικος three times in the NT canon. In Rom 3:5, the just character of God is being contrasted to the unjust character of man, and ἄδικος is used in reference to God in a statement expecting a negative answer. “But if our unrighteousness (ἀδικία) demonstrates the righteousness (δικαιοσύνην) of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous (ἄδικος) is He?...May it never be! For otherwise how will God judge the world?” (Rom 3:5–6). Paul is inquiring as to God’s righteous qualifications to judge the unrighteous. The word ἄδικος in Rom 3:5 is used to refer to the quality of God’s righteousness, not His status or identity. The only other two times Paul uses ἄδικος are in 1 Cor 6:1, where we will see that it refers to identity, and in our passage 6:9, where it refers to quality. The use of ἄδικος in v. 1 will be examined as the passage in v. 9 is developed.

Now, in v. 9, Paul asks the question, “Or do you not know that *the* unrighteous [ἄδικος] shall not inherit the Kingdom of God?” The natural question that must be asked is: Does ἄδικος refer to believers or to unbelievers? Taken as a stand-alone substantive, there is no certain answer, for ἄδικος could refer to an unbeliever whose spiritual condition is unrighteous in the eyes of God or to the believer in carnality whose spiritual conduct is unrighteous in the eyes of God. The lexical meaning of the word while specific in quality (unrighteous) is general in category or identity (believer or unbeliever); it could be describing either. The answer to the question, to whom does ἄδικος refer, is found in the contextual use of the word. Grant Osborne

states: “In reality, words...have meaning only in context.”¹⁴ So, in v. 9, to whom does ἄδικος refer? Unbeliever or unrighteous believer?

As stated in the introduction, Paul has been addressing *believers* in the Book of First Corinthians, specifically the believers in the assembly in Corinth. Many of these believers had come from very unethical and immoral backgrounds, and many were ignorant of biblical truth (3:1–2). In the previous five chapters, Paul has been consistent in his reproof of and exhortation to cease various forms of misconduct including quarreling in the assembly (1:11; 3:3), boasting (1:29; 3:18; 4:7), and arrogance (3:6; 4:18). At the conclusion of chap. 4, Paul is so consumed by this subject that he asks if he should bring a rod of admonition when he comes.

In chap. 5, the assembly is ambivalent about incest within the congregation, and Paul must command that this situation be rectified. Their lack of concern was possibly because of the background from which many of them had come. In chap. 6, Paul resorts to using sarcasm (vv. 4–5) as a means of reprimanding these believers for wronging, defrauding one another, and dragging each other before civil courts. Later, in chap. 7, the issue is immorality, probably both fornication and adultery. In chap. 11, there is friction and drunkenness during the Lord’s Supper. This resentment and intoxication occurring during the most sacred moments of worship along with all the other sins is evidence that the believers at Corinth had a serious problem in Christian misconduct. This is not the rather benign misconduct about which many contemporary believers raise their eyebrows, but the type of outrageous activity that befits pagan soldiers, sailors, and longshoremen who made up a large portion of church in Corinth.

¹⁴ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral, A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991) 75.

Several exegetical reasons exist which lead to the conclusion that ἄδικος in 6:9 is a reference to these same unrighteous or carnal believers. Some scholars associate ἄδικος in 6:9 with ἄδικος in 6:1, but ἄδικος in 6:9 has a closer cognate in 6:8, ἀδικέω, and is a more direct relationship. Paul says literally in 6:8, “you all [believers] are doing wrong—ἀδικεῖτε,” and then in 6: 9 creates a direct link by literally calling them [you all] “wrong doers—ἄδικος.” Robertson and Plummer point this out by saying, “The word ἄδικοι is suggested by the previous ἀδικεῖτε and should be marked in translation: “Ye do wrong...wrong doers shall not inherit.”¹⁵ Edwards came to the same conclusion: “ἄδικοι connects these vv. (9–11) with the ἀδικεῖτε in v. 8.”¹⁶ The connection between vv. 8 and 9 is more appropriate than between vv. 1 and 9.

Another reason to differentiate between ἄδικος in vv. 1 and 9 relates to sentence construction. Paul uses an article with the noun in v. 1, but the article is absent in v. 9. In v. 1, the use of the article specifically identifies the noun, while the anarthrous noun in v. 9 speaks more to its nature or quality. In v. 1, the article is specifically identifying the ἄδικος as the ones hearing the cases, the unbelieving judges, in contrast to the saints. Furthermore, the context, particularly v. 6, certainly identifies these judges as unbelievers. However, in v. 9, the absence of the article focuses the emphasis on the nature or quality of the unrighteous, the “wrong doers.”

The observation is made that:

... the phrase in v. 9 is **not the same** as “the wicked” in v. 1. In v. 1 the noun has the article, and it is definite, referring to a class. But in v. 9 it is without the article. The articular construction emphasizes **identity**; the anarthrous construction emphasizes **character**. Because the same word is used twice, once with the article (v. 1) and once

¹⁵ Robertson and Plummer, *Critical and Exegetical*, 118.

¹⁶ Edwards, *A Commentary*, 142.

without it (v. 9), it may be justifiable to press for this standard grammatical distinction here. If so, then the ἄδικοι of v. 9 are not “the wicked” of v. 1. They are not of that definite class of people who are non-Christians. Rather, as to their behavior traits they are behaving in an unrighteous manner or character. In other words, the use of “the wicked” in v. 1 signifies “being,” but the use of “wicked” in v. 9 signifies not being but “doing” and that was their problem.¹⁷

A further examination of the context reveals other evidence that the believer is in view in 6:9. The second person plural of οἶδα (*oida*), “to know,” reminds the reader that Paul is talking to the assembly, to believers. Paul has used the second-person plural throughout the book to indicate he is referring to the congregation as a whole. The second-person plural of πλανᾶω (*planao*) in v. 9, meaning “deceive,” again reinforces the fact that he is talking *to* believers. But is he talking *about* believers? Or is he simply listing the sins of unbelievers?

How are these believers to understand the imperative, “Do not be deceived?” Do not be deceived that unbelievers who were committing these sins would not inherit the kingdom? That certainly could not be a revelation. Is this a call to the Corinthian believers to evangelize or to consider missionary work? Who would be deceived that any unbeliever regardless of his sins might have even a remote possibility to inherit the kingdom? If there is one task Paul had accomplished in his first trip to Corinth it was a clear delineation of the Gospel.

However, it was very possible for the *believer* to be deceived that he could continue to live in carnality and not affect his inheritance in eternity. So Paul in listing these sins is talking about believers, not unbelievers. As will be further illustrated below, the unbeliever and God’s

¹⁷ Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings, A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing, 1993) 71.

kingdom have no possible connection. So, once more the contextual and grammatical evidence points to Paul talking *to* and *about* believers.

Paul did use a word that specified without doubt the unbelieving status of a person. In 6:6, the *noun* ἄπιστος (*apistos*) is a definite reference to the unbeliever. Paul uses it eleven times in 1 Corinthians when he is absolutely talking about unbelievers.¹⁸ So, it seems certain that if Paul was specifically designating a particular group of individuals who were not believers and who because of their unbelief were not going to inherit the kingdom, he would have selected for v. 9 the word ἄπιστος, translated “without faith or trust, unbelieving”; but he did not.¹⁹

Moreover, the simple fact that the topic that follows—inheritance—is indicative of an already established relationship. As Lang says, “Whenever inheriting is in question, the relationship of a child to a parent is taken implicitly for granted: ‘if children, then heirs’ is the universal rule.”²⁰ This principle is delineated in Rom 8:17. Lang goes on to explain, “It were wholly idle to tell an unregenerate man that he will not inherit the portion of God’s children. Of course he will not; and therefore the warning is powerless. The truth needed by such is that he will be forever the subject of the eternal wrath of God, which is already hanging over him, and is his just portion.”²¹

¹⁸ 1 Cor 6:6; 7:12,13,14 (two instances),15; 10:27; 14:22 (two instances), 23, 24.

¹⁹ Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, 47.

²⁰ G. H. Lang, *Firstborn Sons: Their Rights and Risks* (London: Samuel Roberts, 1936; reprint edition, Miami Springs, FL: Conley and Schoettle, 1984) 110.

²¹ Lang, *Firstborn Sons*, 110.

While the adjective ἄδικος can refer to unbelievers when used substantively, as it does in 6:1, it is not a requirement and, in fact, would not be the first duty of this word. Instead, ἄδικος in the anarthrous construction addresses the quality or character of that which is described, as in 6:9 where it describes the quality of the believer's as unrighteous, and does not attempt to discriminate between specific identity. Furthermore, the context regarding heirship leads the discussion directly into the main issue of inheritance, something certainly and exclusively reserved for the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Inheritance

To have a thorough understanding of the inheritance concept, the basic word group must be viewed lexically, beginning with the basic foundation of the concept—the heir, κληρονόμος (*kleronomos*). What is a κληρονόμος, an heir? BDAG defines κληρονόμος as “one who is designated as heir; one who receives something as a possession, a beneficiary.”²² In the second edition, BAGD says, “figuratively of a person who, as God’s son, receives something as a possession from him.”²³ “Thayer (antiquated but still effective) defines the noun κληρονόμος as “one who receives by lot, or an heir; in Messianic usage, one who receives his allotted possession by right of son-ship.”²⁴ Abbott-Smith defines κληρονόμος as “heir,” adding “of those who as sons of God inherit the *privileges* (italics added) of the Messianic Kingdom; a

²² BDAG, 548

²³ BAGD, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979) 435.

²⁴ Thayer, *Thayer's*, 349.

possessor.”²⁵ In all four lexicons, κληρονόμος is a person who has a relationship with someone else and by virtue of that relationship is a possessor or can expect possessions. New Webster’s Dictionary says an heir is “an inheritor; one who inherits, or is entitled to inherit; one who receives or is entitled to receive possessions.”²⁶

Believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are said to be heirs. Paul describes this process and relationship in several passages. He says we become heirs through justification: “that having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs (κληρονόμος) according to *the* hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:7). Paul tells us that this means “we are children of God and if children, heirs (κληρονόμος) also, heirs of God and fellow heirs of Christ” (Rom 8:16–17). Paul again explains: and “So then, you are no longer a slave, but a son. And if a son, also an heir (κληρονόμος) through God” (Gal 4:7). These verses tell us that we are heirs because of our relationship with God. Since we are heirs, and by virtue of the definition of the word, we have or can expect to have possessions and inherit the privileges of the kingdom. It is important to realize that being an heir, like being a son, is a fact in and of itself; the possessions and privileges are a result of being an heir.

The next word in the study is the noun κληρονομία (*kleronomia*)—inheritance. Again, if a person is an heir, it logically follows that there is an expectation of an inheritance. BDAG describes κληρονομία as “inheritance, a possession, property, something received as a

²⁵ Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, 249.

²⁶ *New Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language* (Delair Publishing, 1986) 447.

possession, specifically, salvation or a share in the Kingdom of Christ.”²⁷ Thayer defines inheritance as “property received or to be received by inheritance, what is given to one as a possession.”²⁸ He goes on to say “in the New Testament it denotes the eternal blessedness in the consummated kingdom of God and the share which an individual will have in that kingdom.”²⁹ Abbott-Smith says κληρονομία is an “inherited property; in general a possession, an inheritance; specifically, of the Messianic Kingdom and its blessings.”³⁰ Inheritance is a possession, something received as a share or an allotment. From these definitions, two categories of inheritance emerge: one category or condition being that of salvation, and a second category being that of blessings, of possessions and privileges.

Paul uses κληρονομία in five passages. A detailed examination of each passage is not necessary, for in three of the passages it is clear the reference is to salvation based *on the actions or character of God* (Gal 3:18; Eph 1:14,18). In the other two passages, the word is clearly referencing blessings or rewards for actions *on the part of the individual* (Eph 5:5; Col 3:24–25). These two final passages will be reviewed because of their close parallel to 1 Corinthians 6.

Eph 5:5 is a significant verse to this study because it associates the inheritance with the Kingdom of God, as in 1 Cor 6:9–11. “For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ and God” (Eph 5:5). In Ephesians, Paul is addressing believers and is commanding them to “be

²⁷ BDAG, 547.

²⁸ Thayer, *Thayer's*, 349.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, 249.

imitators of God.” In Eph 5:3, 4, and 5, he lists the carnal conduct that is prohibited among believers as it violates the righteous standards of God and causes the loss of inheritance. In the final passage, Col 3:23–24, Paul once more addresses believers and informs them that if they do their work as unto the Lord, they will receive a reward. “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than men. Knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance” (Col 3:23–24). The inheritance referred to here is not salvation but a reward for working heartily as unto the Lord.

Both passages are dealing with the *actions of the believer*; in Eph 5:5, the believers were *losing* their inheritance and in Col 3:23–24 *earning* it. Therefore, inheritance in these verses cannot refer to salvation. If it did refer to salvation, it would mean both a clear violation of the doctrine of eternal security and that there is a direct relationship between the works of man and salvation. Therefore, in these two passages inheritance refers to believer’s possessions in the Kingdom of Christ. While not Pauline, and space not permitting a detailed study, inheritance is used for possessions in Acts 5:5, 20:32, Heb 11:8, and 1 Pet 1:4. In summary, inheritance can be used to refer to salvation, but it is also extensively used for rewards.

Inheriting the Kingdom

Now that the groundwork has been laid with the nouns κληρονόμος and κληρονομία, the verb κληρονομέω (*kleponomeo*) will be examined. BDAG defines the verb “inherit, be an heir, acquire, obtain, come into possession.”³¹ Thayer defines it as “to receive the portion

³¹ BDAG, 547.

assigned to one, receive an allotted portion, receive as one's own or as a possession; to become partaker of, to obtain.”³² Abbott-Smith define κληρονομέω, “to receive by lot, to inherit, to possess oneself of, receive as one's own, to obtain.”³³

Paul links κληρονομέω five times in the NT with the kingdom. In the first instance in Galatians, Paul addresses the believer's struggle between walking in the Spirit and being tempted to follow the lust of the flesh or sin nature.

But I say, keep on walking by means of *the* Spirit and you will by no means fulfill *the* lust of the flesh. For the flesh is lusting against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh, for these things are opposed to one another with the result that you do not what things you desire. If you are being led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. But the works of the flesh are manifest which are fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, disputes, divisions, heresies, envying, drunkenness, carousing and similar kinds of things which I forewarn you just as I told you previously that those who practice these things shall not inherit God's kingdom. (Gal 5:16–21, author's translation)

Paul is teaching by the use of contrasts. He has just recited the production of the sin nature, and in the next verse he will list the fruit of the Spirit. Paul is addressing believers and teaching conceptually how believers fall into sin. He says the soul of the believer is a battleground between the filling of God the Holy Spirit, “walking by means of the Spirit,” and the sin nature, “the lust of the flesh.” If the believer gives into the lust of the sin nature, he will sin. If the believer remains in carnality, he will develop a pattern, life-style, practice, (πράσσω, *prasso*) of sin. Paul gives examples of the type of sins the believer can commit and then warns the Galatians that these patterns of sin destroy the believer's inheritance in God's eternal kingdom. The

³² Thayer, *Thayer's*, 348.

³³ Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, 248.

context of these verses refers to believers and does not support an inference to unbelievers or telling believers that they would lose their salvation if they committed these sins. The implication would then be that salvation is the result of avoiding such sins, and this is not a position that Paul or any other writer of Scripture supports.

In his next use of κληρονομέω in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul teaches resurrection from the dead, answering the questions: “How are the dead raised and with what kind of body do they come?” (15:35). He also refers to Christ’s millennial reign³⁴ and the subjection of Christ’s enemies during that reign, the last being death (vv. 24–26). Once more he addresses members of the assembly who already possess salvation. So when he says, “Now I say this, brothers, namely that flesh and blood is not able to inherit *the* Kingdom of God, neither does the corruptible inherit the incorruptible” (1 Cor 15:50), Paul is not talking about *entering* the kingdom, but *receiving*, taking into possession all the rights, privileges, and rewards in the kingdom that believers have accrued during their Christian lives. In the Millennial Kingdom, there will be flesh and blood, corruptible/ perishable, but they will not rule and reign with Christ nor possess the blessings that resurrected believers in incorruptible bodies possess. Accordingly, “there is a difference between being a resident of the kingdom and inheriting it. Clearly human beings in mortal bodies do live in the kingdom, but they are not heirs of that kingdom, a privilege which only those in resurrection bodies can share.”³⁵

³⁴ Walvoord and Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 544.

³⁵ Dillow, *Servant Kings*, 78.

Note that βασιλεία (*basileia*), “Kingdom,” is anarthrous, placing emphasis on the essence, nature, or quality of the kingdom.³⁶ Paul is not simply identifying the Millennial Kingdom or the eternal state beyond, but emphasizing the special conditions of that kingdom and the quality and nature of the inheritance. In light of these comments, the phrase “corruptible inherit the incorruptible” cannot mean entrance or salvation, but must refer to believers in resurrection bodies receiving all the glorious eternal possessions of the kingdom.

Finally, with the evidence presented, the passage on which this study is based can be examined.

Or do you not know that *the* unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, not revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. And such things as these, some of you were; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:9–11)

It has been established that ἄδικος refers to the unrighteous believers, albeit the position will be restated again in a presentation of opposing views below. However, the more important determination at hand is the meaning or interpretation of the verb κληρονομέω, “to inherit,” particularly as it relates to the Kingdom of God. First, to inherit one must be an heir: one who has a relationship with another and by reason of that relationship is entitled to receive something. Next, an inheritance is a possession, something received as a share or allotment. Finally, as seen in a review of the lexical definitions, κληρονομέω means “to receive a portion, an allotment, to

³⁶ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 224.

come into possession.” Believers are heirs of God and fellow heirs of Christ. As heirs, believers have an eternal inheritance.

While inheritance can refer to salvation, this is never the case where the actions of man are used as a condition for that inheritance. When the noun κληρονομία refers to salvation, the context addresses the *actions of God* (Gal 3:18; Eph 1:14, 18); when it refers to the possessions of the believer in the kingdom, the context addresses the *actions or conduct of the believer* (Eph 5:5; Col 3:23–24). In Gal 5:16–21 and 1 Cor 15:50, Paul uses the verb κληρονομέω to describe taking possession of or receiving a portion, share, or allotment *after* arrival in the kingdom, not entrance into the kingdom. This usage of κληρονομέω is consistent with 1 Cor 6:9–10. Paul is addressing *believers*, admonishing them regarding sinful activities the result of which will significantly affect their experience once in the kingdom. They are heirs; they have an inheritance. But as *unrighteous* heirs, they are in danger of losing their inheritance. Paul does not say they are in danger of losing their *heirship*—losing their salvation, but of losing some or all of the blessings and privileges that accompany or are promised to the believer.

In each instance we find that, in order to inherit the kingdom, there must be some work done or certain character traits, such as immorality, must be absent from our lives. The fact that such conditions are necessary suggests that the term is not to be equated with entering the kingdom which is available to all freely on the basis of faith alone, but with something in addition to entering.³⁷

Opposing Views

Over the years, there have been several standard views regarding what is being taught by Paul in 1 Cor 6:9-11: unbelievers losing their opportunity for salvation, believers losing their

³⁷ Dillow, *Servant Kings*, 75.

salvation (with some variations), and believers losing their rewards in eternity. Essentially the debate comes down to the interpretation of the words “unrighteous” (ἄδικος) and “to inherit” (κληρονομέω). Since a lexical and contextual study of these words has been accomplished, the principle grounds of the first two views will be discussed next.

Fee identifies ἄδικος as unbelievers in 1 Cor 6: 9: “Likewise, with the word ἄδικοι, Paul ties these words of warning to the ‘wrongdoing’ of vv. 7–8 and at the same time ties both to v. 1.”³⁸ This is a remarkably illogical linkage. How is it possible for the ἄδικος in v. 9 to be linked simultaneously to the wrong doing of vv. 7–8, which we have seen is believer’s conduct, and to the judges in v. 1 who are unbelievers? It can’t, and to do so is simply *not* consistent. The word “ἄδικος” in v. 9 can be linked to one or the other, but not to both. As we have seen, the unrighteous, ἄδικός, in v. 9 is more appropriately linked or tied to the cognate ἀδικέω in v. 8. The context reinforces this; Paul is addressing believers. Furthermore, ἄδικος is not a word used exclusively for unbelievers. Identifying ἄδικος as unbelievers and linking vv. 1, 7–8, and 9 assumes that the unbelieving judges in v. 1 are guilty of this list of “wrongdoing.” Why make this assumption when the members of the assembly in Corinth were on record in this epistle for such activity? If either of the two parties deserves the benefit of the doubt, it would be the judges. No, the ἄδικος in v. 9 are not unbelievers, but believers who are unrighteous before God.

³⁸ Fee, *The First Epistle*, 242.

Lenski implies that inherit means to enter into or remain.³⁹ Gromacki infers that inherit means to enter.⁴⁰ Lang defines κληρονομέω as to receive an inheritance, but then states it is used to denote participation.⁴¹ Hodge says that the believer's inheritance is the kingdom and all immoral shall be excluded.⁴² Fee does not address κληρονομέω, but equates it to “eschatological consummation.”⁴³

In all of these references, the word “to inherit” is reduced to mean “enter,” making it synonymous to entering heaven for eternity. However, this definition is not supported by lexical study. Even if the definitions of the lexicons are viewed loosely and broadly, it yet remains a difficult stretch to interpret a verb to mean “enter into” when its basic translation means “to receive or possess.” Zane Hodges made a similar point when he said, “To many of the Lord's people, when one speaks of inheriting the kingdom, one is only talking about ‘getting into it.’ Why should inherit equal enter? Purely on the grounds of ordinary usage, ‘entering a house’ or even ‘living there’ are not the same as ‘inheriting a house.’”⁴⁴

For this opposing view to be accepted, entering the kingdom must therefore be equated with salvation. Furthermore, it means salvation would then be conditioned on works—something

³⁹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1937) 247.

⁴⁰ Robert G. Gromacki, *Called to be Saints-An Exposition of 1 Corinthians* (Ann Arbor, MI: Cushing-Malloy, 1977) 78.

⁴¹ John Peter Lang, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 125.

⁴² Charles Hodge, *1 and 2 Corinthians and Ephesians* (Wilmington: Sovereign Grace Publishing, 1972) 62.

⁴³ Fee, *The First Epistle*, 242.

⁴⁴ Zane Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse, A Study on Eternal Rewards* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1987).

man can do other than simple faith alone in Christ alone. The works in this passage would be avoiding the sins listed. However, Scripture simply does not support salvation by works. Scripture does support that “in every usage of the verb ‘to inherit’ except one, 1 Cor 15:50, the action implies some work of obedience necessary to obtain the inheritance.”⁴⁵

Moreover, it is relatively simple to review the list of sins in several of these passages and identify biblical or present day believers who committed such deeds. The members of the assembly in Corinth, as represented in the Book of 1 Corinthians, themselves were testimonies to many of these sins (cf. 2 Cor 12:19–21). David is famous for his acts of coveting, adultery, conspiracy to murder, and murder. Solomon lived in adultery and practiced idolatry. Saul was known for his fits of rage, jealousy, and murder. Does it then follow that these heroes of the faith have not entered heaven? Absolutely not!

To accept this opposing view—to inherit is to enter into—means the doctrine of eternal security is placed at risk. If it is true that anyone involved in divisions, envying, disputes and coveting will not enter the kingdom of God, whose salvation will ever be confirmed?

To accept this view also severely challenges the doctrine of unlimited atonement. If anyone committing these sins is barred from the Kingdom of God, a limitation has just been placed on the saving grace of God. To accept this view means the thief on the cross was beyond the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The thief was a criminal being executed for his crime, and his life of stealing was interrupted only by incarceration. To accept this view means that, today, a jailhouse or prison ministry would be useless since a large majority of the criminal

⁴⁵ Dillow, *Servant Kings*, 91.

population would be prohibited from entering the kingdom. Accepting this view means the evangelist presenting a salvation message to an audience of strangers would certainly be justified in announcing that anyone guilty of committing the sins on the list of 1 Cor 6:9–10 should simply depart through any available door, as these sinners would have no possible chance of salvation.

This view also has the subtle but certain tendency to develop a lordship salvation mentality. “Once a person begins to think that he must persevere in the faith in order to enter the kingdom, he then believes that eternal salvation is conditioned upon his works, not on his faith in Christ only.”⁴⁶

Finally, the context in 1 Cor 6:9–11 certainly requires an interpretation of the passage that reflects Paul exhorting the believers in the assembly at Corinth to cease their carnal conduct or arrive in the kingdom with no eternal rewards. These Corinthians had already been informed in 1 Cor 3:12 that their works accomplished in the power of the flesh, “wood, grass and stubble,” would be burned up. Now, Paul was making an additional revelation: the believer who persisted in carnality would lose some if not all of his eternal rewards.

A more recent view 1 Cor 6:9–11 tries to find common ground amongst the views. But in trying to run a middle road, it fails to address the basic interpretation of the passage. This view states that Paul “listed vices in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 that describe unbelievers in order to exhort believers to live godly lives.”⁴⁷ However, while also suffering the problems of identifying

⁴⁶ Robert N. Wilkins, “Christians Who Lose Their Legacy: Galatians 5:21,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* Autumn (1991) 29.

⁴⁷ Rene A. Lopez, “Does the Vice List in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 Describe Believers or Unbelievers?” *BSac* 164 (2007) 64.

ἄδικος as unbelievers, this position fails to address the question of the meaning the phrase “inherit the kingdom.” It only says that Paul was teaching that believers should live godly lives by not committing the sins of unbelievers (as if this list of sins could only be associated with unbelievers). However, for the sake of argument, let’s say a believer perchance commits fornication or adultery, possibly steals or covets, maybe gets drunk and becomes rowdy and abusive, or regrettably cheats someone in business. Now what? Is that person not really saved? Will that person lose his salvation? Is this a case of loss of rewards? That part of the interpretation is not addressed.

And Such Things Some of You Were!

After addressing the issues in vv. 9 and 10, there is one final problem that must be resolved: the interpretation of v. 11, particularly the first phrase, “And such (these things) were some of you (plural).” In this phrase, there are two groups of people: “some” and “you all.” “Some” (τινες) is a minority: some, not all or even most. The larger group, “you all” is the whole from which “some” came (past tense). The question is: To whom does “some” refer, and to whom does “you all” refer? Theologians generally interpret this phrase in two different ways: the some as a smaller group of believers in a larger group of unbelievers, or the some as a smaller group of believers in a larger group of believers.

The first view, which is generally accepted by those who champion the “enter the kingdom” view, sees the “some” who once committed “such things” (the sins in vv. 9–10) but no longer practice “such things” as believers, a minority in a larger group, of unbelievers, “you all.” “Some” of the assembly is saved and will enter the kingdom, but the larger portion of the

assembly is unsaved, still committing these sins and will not enter the kingdom. Because these “some” no longer sin in this way, they will enter the kingdom. Again, this view fits with the interpretation that the warning in vv. 9–10 is directed at unbelievers and if they sin in this manner they will not enter the kingdom. Yet this view is fallacious, as it has been proven that ἄδικος does not refer to unbelievers, but to unrighteous believers, and κληρονομέω does not refer to salvation, but to receiving possessions.

Another problem with this view is that if the larger group refers to unbelievers, the second person plural “you” or “you all” inherent in the verb εἰμί (*eimi*) in the first phrase—“and such were some of you”—is not the same as the second person plural—“you all”—inherent in the verbs in the remaining part of the verse—“but *you all* were washed, but *you all* were sanctified, but *you all* were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11, author’s translation). However, throughout the Book of Corinthians, Paul has used the second-person plural to refer to the entire assembly of believers. Each chapter is full of examples.⁴⁸ Consistency requires that all of the second person plurals of 6:11 refer to the assembly—believers—as they do throughout this section of the epistle, and not as unbelievers as this first view holds.

One further aspect of this first view that is overlooked is the inconsistency of its position in even understanding the “some” to be believers. Paul says “some” were (imperfect indicative meaning continuous action in past time, not just a one-time occurrence) guilty of “these things.” This means that at some time in their lives, this “some” was guilty of continuously committing

⁴⁸ 1 Cor 1:5, 10; 2:1, 5; 3:2–3, 16; 4:8; 6:2–4, 8; 12:31; 14:1; 16:13–14.

the list of sin in vv. 9-10 and therefore fall under the prohibition of not “inheriting the kingdom.” Said another way, if “these things” *are* the sins which are enumerated in vv. :9–10, sins which *supposedly* believers cannot commit, then logically “some” cannot enter the Kingdom of God if entering the Kingdom of God refers to salvation (which of course it does not). With the logic of the first view, it follows that “some” must be unrighteous, ergo, unbelievers (because while sinning in this manner, they could not be saved or “enter the kingdom”). It would be more consistent for those who hold this view to take “some” as unbelievers. This does not occur because those holding this first view say that these “some” are no longer guilty of “these things,” and are now qualified to enter the Kingdom. This creates a more difficult doctrinal position. This infers that Christ did not come to save the truly unrighteous, but the reasonably righteous people who have cleaned up their lives by human works so that now they are ‘righteous’ enough to be saved.

The second position views the “some” as a minority of believers in the larger assembly of believers, “you all.” The minority of believers, “some,” have put the immorality behind them, but the majority of the assembly of believers, “you all,” have not. If interpreted in this manner, the second person plurals work well in every case. In the opening phrase, “some” are the few changed believers in the larger “you” plural, unchanged believers, of εἰμὶ. In the remaining portion of the verse, the “you” plurals are all the believers, members of the assembly, who have yet to stop swimming in the cesspool of Corinthian culture. In vv. 15–20, Paul again admonishes the assembly for consorting with temple prostitutes. In these closing verses of chap. 6, he drills them with no less than eleven second-person plurals. The strong contrasting conjunction delivers this exhortation with force; “some” have changed their ways, *but you all* were washed, *but you all* were sanctified, *but you all* were justified.” Now, the questions being implied by Paul are:

“Why have only “some” of you changed your lives? Why have you *all* not changed your lives? Why are only “some” of you going to “inherit the kingdom?” Some believers will receive their inheritance, but the majority, all the unrighteous believers whom Paul has admonished in this epistle, will arrive in heaven and not receive any of their inheritance.

Summary

In summary, the ἄδικος in 6:9 does not refer to unbelievers. Paul had a more appropriate and distinct word, ἄπιστος, for that status. The ἄδικος in 6:9 is linked to the wrongdoing, ἀδικεῖτε, of 6:8. The context is unquestionably addressing believers. Understanding this fact removes the misdirection of immediately assuming the paragraph is referring to unbelievers. Only believers are heirs of God (Rom 8:16–17), and as heirs, believers can expect an inheritance. In this study, we have seen that the inheritance can be either salvation (Eph1:14) or rewards (Col 3:23–24). In the three passages that Paul uses the phrase “inherit the Kingdom of God” (Gal 5:16–21; 1 Cor 6:9–10; 15:50) the context refers to believers. Galatians 5:16–21 and 1 Cor 6:9–10 make the inheritance contingent on believers’ conduct, which in these passages doctrinally eliminates salvation as inheritance. First Corinthians 15:50 speaks of believers receiving their inheritance after arriving in the kingdom. Therefore, when Paul uses the phrase “the unrighteous shall not inherit the Kingdom of God,” he is addressing believers whose conduct violates the righteousness of God. These “children of God” are not in danger of losing heirship in God’s family, but they are placing in peril the possessions, privileges, and rewards God has planned for them in eternity.

Conclusion

If the reader of 1 Corinthians misses the actual historical, social situation in Corinth at the time of this writing, the full impact of the epistle cannot be comprehended. The casual student of this book does not realize that the list of sins in 6:9–10 was a daily occurrence for many of the assembly in Corinth. Paul had walked the streets of this port city and knew his audience. In many of the verses of every chapter, he addresses a sin on that list.

Too often Christians have a severe myopia regarding sin. Many have a false presupposition that “there are certain sins a believer cannot commit.” These sins fall mostly in the category of licentiousness, but can extend to others such as murder, rape, drug addiction, and drunkenness. These Christians hold to this position even though there are over 6000 years replete with evidence of believers accumulating just such transgressions, many recorded in Scripture and, if honestly acknowledged, many occurring frequently in most churches today. In an attempt to explain how a fellow believer could possibly commit such sins, they resort to, “well, he just wasn’t saved in the first place.” David was saved, though he was guilty of coveting, adultery, conspiracy, and murder; Solomon was saved though he committed adultery and practiced idolatry; Moses was saved yet guilty of anger and murder. The list goes on.

The Corinthians knew full well the situation Paul was addressing. This was the sinful activity in their lives that had continued unabated for many of them even after converting to Christianity. They needed the doctrinal teaching to warn them that while they would pass from time to eternity at death, they would arrive in heaven and not receive their inheritance—no gold, silver or precious metals—because they continued to spend too much time in carnality, in defrauding, injuring, strife, fornication, adultery, homosexuality, idolatry, jealousy, drunkenness

and anger. The Corinthians believers could *not* lose their salvation by the commission of certain sins that would invalidate the grace of God, but they could lose their eternal rewards. Paul exhorted them to change their way of life so that they would certainly receive all the wonderful eternal blessings that God is waiting to provide.