

## **INTRODUCTION + BIBLE BACKGROUND: 1 Cor 6:9-11**

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### **Introduction:**

Paul’s discussion of sex and money in Corinth spans three full chapters, from the young man who “has his father’s wife” (5:1), defrauding one another in court (6:1–6, 8), to those insisting upon complete abstinence from sex (7:1ff). While there are pertinent elements in each, we cannot cover the entirety; however, this section more than most requires significant background development in which we can detail some of the pertinent elements in each chapter. These will be addressed in the opening section: Bible Background. Paul’s goal in these chapters is to apply one’s identity in Christ, what he has been elaborating for four chapters, to the Corinthian’s obsessions with personal fulfillment through sex and money. If we read these chapters in isolation, it’s easy to get the impression that Paul is stiff-necked about these topics— just a list of ‘don’ts.’ But if we understand these chapters in light of the previous concerning one’s identity in Christ, Paul’s focus is more clearly upon the Corinthian habit of placing sexual gratification and financial aspiration above Christ in terms of their personal identity. This is evident, for example, in that “[T]he unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (6:9) does not mean “will not be saved,” “cannot be saved,” or that one is otherwise immune to the grace and affection of God. Instead, it means that “One does not enjoy full possession of the kingdom here and now,”<sup>1</sup> a personal identity fully and completely grounded in Christ, which is detailed more precisely below.<sup>2</sup> The cross’ message about money and sex are both difficult to convey in contemporary culture, but sex more so than money. Accordingly, the Bible Background will emphasize the subject of sex and, at the close, tie the subjects of money and sex together over the three chapters. The sermon brief will address both money and sex evenly insofar as both are expressions of a desire for personal fulfillment in ‘things of the world’ rather than in Christ. Because the scope of subjects discussed is broad and contemporary cultural engagement with these topics is fraught, the applications are likewise broad but seek to ameliorate and amend emotionally charged engagement.

### **Bible Background:**

Paul’s remarks about sex in 1 Cor. 5–7 were more controversial in Corinth than they are in today’s modern world; though, to be sure, Paul’s discussion remains somewhat provocative in contemporary culture. Part of this is the Church’s fault in how we have conveyed the subject and how little we have understood it ourselves, whether in failing to rightly understand the sexual norms of the ancient world in light of our own, or through double-standards in the exceptions we provide to our own alleged sexual ethics.<sup>3</sup> While this is unfortunate, to say the least, it is not the only or most significant causal factor in producing the sexual norms of today, for contemporary culture since the time of Baby Boomers has advocated the virtues of ‘casual sex.’ This latter feature will be addressed farther along, but first we must actually understand the environment Paul is addressing if we are to make any sense of it in the modern world.

In the ancient world, a Roman male could have sex with both a man and a woman and yet not be considered “bi-sexual.”<sup>4</sup> This is because to ancient Greeks and Romans the gender of an

individual or one's sexual partner did not matter at all. What mattered to ancient Greco-Romans was whether one was the 'active' or 'passive' participant in a given sex-act.<sup>5</sup> The terms "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" designedly utilize the category of gender, a category into which one is placed whether or not one acts upon one's sexual inclinations. But the notion that gender alone is a decisive means of categorizing sexuality is foreign to ancient Greco-Roman culture. Some preferred only homosexual intercourse (Zeno of Citium) whereas others disparaged it (Cicero), but not on the basis of biological sex or gender. It was purely a matter of whether one was 'passive' or 'active' in the Greco-Roman mind, and a 'passive' male in Roman eyes is not an "impenetrable man."<sup>6</sup> For Romans, men could only be 'active' penetrators but not the 'passively' penetrated or they were "soft" (Gr., malikos), no different than a 'passive' woman is 'soft.'<sup>7</sup> In neither Greece nor Rome was same-sex intercourse denigrated or looked down upon. If anything, heterosexual relationships were prejudiced more strongly: In Plato's Symposium, for example, the legal expert (Pausanias) thinks that base sexual gratification comes from both women and boys, whereas "noble love" directs its attention exclusively to boys. Another character explains that humans were originally conjoined as either male-male, femalefemale, or male-female; according to him, gay men are simply returning to their male-male origin, gay women to their female-female origin, and heterosexuals to their male-female origin. This latter point is supposed to embarrass heterosexuals for their androgynous origin, evidenced by the fact that this same character (Aristophanes) uses this genealogy to deduce that homosexuals are the manliest of all given their male-male origin.<sup>8</sup> For Greeks, male-male sex was more 'manly,' whereas for Romans it was 'manly' only to penetrate, whether a woman, a boy, or a slave. This is because these people do not think of sex in terms of gender; they see sex exclusively in terms of 'active' and 'passive' roles in the sexual act.

This matters massively for understanding Paul's instruction: Paul has two words for same-sex sexual partners but he doesn't use the phrase "same-sex" or the word "gay." He called it "men who bed other men," and "men who bed other men passively/softly/as a woman" (1 Cor. 6:9). Paul quoted the Greek translation of the Old Testament often as it was the biblical literature used by both Jews and Christians living outside Israel (e.g., in Corinth). In the Greek translation of Leviticus 18:22, the passage about a man not lying with another man as one does with a woman, it reads like this: "A man (arsen) shall not lay (koitas) with another man (arsen)." It is plain as day where Paul got the compound word arsenokoitas and it's plain as day what it means; it's a word that combines two terms from the very text his audience was reading.<sup>9</sup> That is the first term Paul uses, which refers to the 'active' participant; the second is malikos, which refers to the 'passive' participant. <sup>10</sup> This means that Paul highlighted both aspects of the sex-act as it was understood in his day—the passive participant and the active. In other words, Paul specifically highlights what in his time was regarded as two different forms of same-sex practice (active and passive) in the ancient world and says they are both forbidden. Had Paul simply left it as arsenokoitas, one could simply respond, "He didn't say malikoi, so as long as we don't do as Rome does, we're fine." Paul specifies both aspects of the Greco-Roman view of same-sex sex acts and forbids them both equally. If it was just prostitution Paul sought to forbid then he'd leave it at that since he did in fact already address prostitution (porneia) in the same verse (1 Cor. 6:9).<sup>11</sup> That he places malikoi in the same list he places porneia requires that his use is not synonymous; likewise, that he places malikoi next to arsenokoitas tells his audience (and us)

the exact aspect he's highlighting. Accordingly, the attempts to obscure these features is not taken seriously by any of the published scholars on these subjects.

Our English word (“homosexual”) doesn’t differentiate between whether or not one man dresses up as a woman, or whether one is active or passive, which is why “homosexuals,” the standard translation, is a poor translation.<sup>12</sup> Paul uses two distinct terms that both refer to “homosexuality” —arsenokoitas and malikos, respectively—which was the most natural way of referring to male-male sex in his time. This is acknowledged even in scholarship that is critical of the Christian prohibition against same-sex marriage.<sup>13</sup> However, this is not the only section of this passage that has been maligned and misused to the Church’s detriment, for Paul’s opening rebuke, “[T]he unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God” is often taken to mean that persons engaged in same-sex activity or who experience same-sex attraction are reprobate persons forever disinherited from Christ’s grace, as though “Such were some of you... but you were justified in... Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 6:11) is true of 1st c. Corinthians only rather than for all of us. In brief, the connection Paul draws is between the significance of the human body and total person (i.e., personhood/identity) in light of our future resurrection rather than anything to do with one’s status of salvation (vv. 12–20). “Inheriting” the kingdom of God is a blessing of salvation, but it is not identical to salvation, much less is Paul’s list a statement of what God’s grace does not apply to. It is, instead, the assertion that one who has placed such things above Christ does not have complete access to their full identity in Christ here and now. This is treated in context and in detail below:

### **A simple way to Tie all Three Chapters (1 Cor 5-7) Together**

#### *The Greco-Roman view of Sex and Money: 1 Cor. 5*

Greco-Romans were promiscuous and licentious with their bodies, but they regarded money as sacred.

(Note on 5:1, “his father’s wife” does not mean “his mother.” Paul would have used those terms if that’s what he meant. It could refer to a step-mother or a woman recently divorced from his father.)

#### *The Prudish view of Sex: 1 Cor. 7*

The other camp of Greco-Romans saw sex as dirty and low because of the native GrecoRoman views regarding the human body. This camp had written to Paul that, “It is good/better for a man not to touch a woman” (7:1).

(Note on 7:1, “Now concerning the things about which you wrote” confirms explicitly that the Corinthians had previously written to Paul. This is important for accurately rendering our passage, for several verses contain citations from this Corinthian letter to Paul and Paul does not at every place tell us he is citing their letter. In Greek it is easier to spot, but they will be identified and explained below.)

#### *The Christian view of Sex and Money: 1 Cor. 6:9–20*

The first and second generations of Christians were promiscuous and licentious with their money, sharing their resources widely, but they regarded the human body as sacred. The Epistle to Diognetus is an early Christian document (c. 130 A.D.) attempting to explain Christian norms to pagan Greco-Romans, and this contrast surfaces in its content. E.g., “We share our table with all, but our bed with only one.”<sup>14</sup> This is the opposite of Greco-Roman norms, who shared their tables only with like-minded persons of the same social strata, but their bodies and beds with whomever and whatever they pleased, not least sex-slaves.

### **Differentiating Poor Messages on This Passages**

A great many sermons have been delivered on this passage that basically run, “Look at this list of awful people; you’re not going to heaven if you do these things.” The kingdom of God is equated with heaven and the list of habitual sins is equated with an entrance exam.<sup>15</sup> Hence, if you fail the entrance exam you’re not going to heaven. But the kingdom of God is not heaven, it is the world remade by God starting here and now. This passage is not about heaven, much less about ‘getting in’ to heaven. And just as important, Jesus’ salvation is not about escaping the world, it is God’s work to renew and restore the world—starting with us. This is also why the passage begins with the term “inherit,” i.e., one doesn’t ‘earn’ an inheritance. An inheritance goes to the heirs because of the relationship they bear to the Person whose life and death have left them with certain gifts. This passage concerns one’s access to the blessings of salvation, not salvation itself, and the need to be transformed through Christ to enjoy full access to those blessings here and now. God is preparing a world in which sex, money, and power are used in completely beneficial and wholistic ways—ways that do not lead to psychological and emotional breakdown, spiritual and social breakdowns. Ways of using these facets of human life that weave us together into complete balance and wholeness rather than ruin us or break us apart. But if we are habitually engaged in the activities Paul highlights, then we are militating against this project.

### **vv. 9–10**

Because of our social setting we immediately notice the term “homosexuality / homosexuals” and we immediately notice “adultery.” But there is a wide range of items in Paul’s list that do not catch our attention as readily: greedy (materialistic), revilers (a gossip), and the term translated “swindlers”<sup>16</sup> which refers to corrupt business practices (extortioners), including slave-trading and slave-dealing. Aside from lexicons, we know what these terms refer to directly and indirectly because Paul uses a variant of the same vice-list in 1 Tim. 1:10: “[T]he sexually immoral [porneia], homosexuals [arsenokoitas], slave traders [andrapodistais<sup>17</sup>], liars, perjurers...” The term translated “slave traders” in 1 Tim. 1:10 refers both to kidnapping a free person to sell into slavery and to slave-dealing in general. But the important point is that these vice-lists mirror one another: The term in our passage, “swindlers,” refers to extortionate practices generally—e.g., compulsion, coercion, use of force—which includes kidnapping for the purposes of slaving and slave-dealing generally. But this is not how we have ever heard this passage preached: “The gossips will not inherit the kingdom of God,” “The slave-traders and liars will not inherit the kingdom of God.” These vice-lists, 1 Cor. 6:9–10 and 1 Tim. 1:10, mirror one another because the practices that define them often operate hand-in-hand: A person extorted into slavery in the ancient world doesn’t just work a normal day, they were

also forced into sex-slavery. 18 The slave-dealers who kidnapped them weren't just motivated by greed, they also lied about what they had done, "She's wasn't free, I bought her in a Macedonian market." Much like today, exploitation of a person for money or for work often includes sexual exploitation (e.g., Harvey Weinstein, Jeffrey Epstein). The culture of Corinth was deeply rooted in financial, sexual, and personal exploitation, which was on display for all to see in its most pronounced Temple: The Acrocorinth. We will turn to this shortly but it is important to summarize and clarify: The vice-list includes the items it does because they often operate together in the most wicked of human practices. That doesn't mean that only the collection of items is forbidden—each of them is individually forbidden, as well. Whether one person is extorting or coercing another to do such things, or whether one is voluntarily electing to participate such things, both are forbidden.

### *The Acrocorinth: 19*

The Acrocorinth was a massive, monolithic rock overlooking the ancient city of Corinth. The Corinthians dedicated it to the goddess Aphrodite, which housed over 1,000 sex-slaves that would descend the mountain every night, including pre-teen boys and girls, coerced and extorted into satisfying of sexual appetites of native Corinthians. These activities were so well known in the ancient world that the noun "Corinth" became a verb: "to Corinthianize" was to live licentiously, promiscuously, having sex with whomever in whatever circumstances one wished.

That these cultural customs require both financial exploitation, extortion, and sexual exploitation in order to operate is the reason why they all make Paul's vice-list. However, there were also members of Paul's church who participated in these activities both prior to faith and some voluntarily even after their commitment to faith in Christ. Paul forbids the corrupt practices collectively, but he also forbids individual participation in any one of them isolated from the others. He doesn't allow habitual greed or gossip any more than he allows habitual extortion or sexual promiscuity.

### **v. 11**

**"Such were some of you"** means that the Corinthians were not tossed away from God's grace simply for their involvement in these activities. They, too, "were washed... sanctified... justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." The list of items uses abstract nouns which is customarily chosen for the purposes of identifying habitual practice. Another means by which we know the list refers to habitual activities is that these people, the same ones who had participated in such practices, were also saved by God's grace. That they had done such things, whether in the past or currently (which is what Paul is addressing, i.e., current engagement), did not preclude them from God's grace and there would be no reason to list them if they were once-or-twice occasions exclusively in the past. As intense a view the contemporary Church takes of these items, we must remember that Paul refers to the Corinthians as "brothers" in Christ more often than any other letter (42x). Collectively this tells us that these Christians were not tossed out simply for participating in such activities a handful of times; however, because such practices were habitual, Paul rebuked their actions and called them to re-establish the message of the cross as their first and foremost. That is Paul's focus;

these things ought not characterize one's identity in Christ. But if they are done habitually, one ought to question the place of Christ in their personal lives. In other words, this is not about slipping once or twice, this is about placing such desires and aspirations so far above one's identity in Christ that they have become habitual, second nature, or integral to one's understanding of one's own identity.

### **Overcoming the Divide in Christ:**

One poorly informed side will tell you that same-sex relationships are not really discussed in Scripture; Another poorly informed side will tell you that gay people go to hell simply for being gay. Neither is true, neither is supported in Scripture, not least because straight people don't go to heaven simply for being straight. These are both a failure to understand your identity in Christ; it all comes down to the priority of Christ in your life—is He the first priority in defining your identity, or something less than first? If Christ is first, everything else is secondary; And if Christ is first, then He will call all of us to forgive and release all of the secondary to Him. Scripture does forbid same-sex relationships and Scripture does welcome gay people into the family of God, whether currently engaged in a relationship or not. Scripture upholds both the correction/guidance and the acceptance, whether or not the contemporary Church does the same.

When we recognize the importance of the human body, honoring God by honoring our bodies rather than being distracted by cultural divides, followers of Jesus accomplish some remarkable things. Paul's instruction about significance of the human body is what motivated Christians to invent the hospital,<sup>20</sup> because the human body matters. This wasn't a one-off occasion, for Christians also invented the practice of nursing in order to improve the standards of care in the very hospitals they invented!<sup>21</sup> This is the kinds of impact our faith has had, and this is the kind of thing we can accomplish when we abide by the message of the cross and do not allow ourselves to be torn apart by cultural divides.

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris, "Inherit, as often in the New Testament, is not used in the strict sense, but with the meaning 'enter into full possession of,'" in 1 Corinthians, TDNT Vol. 7 (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2008), p. 118, emphasis original. The vast majority of NT exegetical scholars—e.g., Richard Hays, N. T. Wright, Anthony Thiselton—provide the same account as Morris. However, I have used Morris to make this point because his credentials are as thorough as any conservative evangelical would like them to be—e.g., Professorship at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Morris is himself a conservative evangelical, so this is not a 'liberal' account or revisionist retelling. This is simply what the words and phrases mean in context.

<sup>2</sup> Someone who continuously chases after such actions has good reason to question their relationship to Christ, and indeed ought to do so if such things are perpetual habits, but this does not entail that one is not saved or otherwise disinherited from God. What it does entail, in each and every case, is that one who habitually acts in accordance with Paul's vice-list is placing personal fulfillment above one's identity in Christ and, therefore, one does not fully possess and participate in the freedom and joy of their new life in Christ here and now.

3 Rampant divorce, premarital sex, and/or sexual infidelity receive far less attention and/or rebuke than same-sex attraction and couplings. This is particularly egregious given that heterosexual sins are addressed seven-times-more-often in the Bible as a whole than any other non-heterosexual sin. Furthermore, this entails that there is no bias against same-sex attracted persons, for it is heterosexual sin that is far more often called to account. Our practice in church should mirror the biblical precedent, but unfortunately, we have it reversed.

4 Eva Cantarella, *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*, 2nd Ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). In her preface to the second edition, under the section “Modern Terminology and Ancient Sexual Behavior,” Cantarella explains, “This has long been a controversial issue. Some of the reviewers of the first edition... noted, for instance, that I had made extensive use of the terms ‘homosexuality’ and ‘heterosexuality’—terms that the Greeks and Romans would not even have understood... [But] I sought to use these terms to describe sexual behavior rather than a consistent sexual preference. The choice of the (again modern) term ‘bisexuality’ in the title was intended to underline this,” pp. vii–viii.

5 Thomas K. Hubbard (ed.), *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). “Ancient Romans lived in a cultural environment in which married men could enjoy sexual relations with their male slaves without fear of criticism from their peers; in which adultery generally aroused more concern than pederasty; in which men notorious for their womanizing might be called effeminate, while a man whose masculinity had been impugned could cite as proof of his manhood the fact that he had engaged in sexual relations with his accuser’s sons... These scenarios highlight some of the obvious differences between ancient and modern ideologies of masculine sexual behavior,” p. 3.

6 Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity*, 2nd Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

7 *Ibid.*, “Roman assumptions about masculine identity rested, as we will see, on a binary opposition: men, the penetrators, as opposed to everyone else, the penetrated. The penetrated other included women, boys, and slaves; adult Roman men who displayed a desire to be penetrated were consequently labeled deviants and anomalies,” p. 7, emphasis original.

8 Plato, *Symposium*, 191e–192a.

9 The reason there is an “o” between them is that grammatically there needs to be a vowel to separate the two consonants of a compound word, identical to our use of hyphens in compounds like “long-term.”

10 It is true that adjectivally *malikos/malikoi* means “soft,” as [gaychurch\[dot\]org](http://gaychurch.org) and other lay organizations will argue, but it’s not true that that is its usage. This is like arguing that the crass terms for human genitalia just refer to reproductive organs, but any teenager knows that when those words are used of persons, they mean something quite different. Boys and young men who dressed up like women in order to illicit sex-work from other men were called ‘soft men’ (*malikoi*) in the ancient Roman world, which is why the word is plural; Paul is not talking about “thieves, swindlers, and softs,” he’s using the Roman label for the ‘passive’ male participant in same-sex sex-acts. Further details in Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, pp. 3–27.

11 One can find uninformed argument online suggesting that Paul only refers to “prostitution” by these two terms, but the reason no scholar buys this is because there are separate words in Greek for prostitution: *porneia*, the word from which we derive “pornography,” or *hetaera*, which is closer to what we mean by an “escort.”

12 The term “homosexual” doesn’t detail the information Paul is addressing, which is why it’s a poor translation just to render it plural— “homosexuals” —as most translations do. Paul’s terms specify both the active and the passive aspects of same-sex intercourse as Greco-Roman culture understood it, but to render it accurately would be confusing to most English readers. To incorporate the ‘active’ / ‘passive’ view of sex he’s addressing into our classification of gender that Greco-Romans didn’t use, the translation would read more like, “... or the male-enacting part of same-sex, or the female-enacting part of samesex.” Consequently, most translations prefer the plural “homosexuals,” though this does not clarify Paul’s use well and is in part responsible for the prolonged debate around what these terms actually mean and whether they can be fairly translated as modern translations take them.

13 Brent Pickett, “Homosexuality,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia Online* (2015), who concedes that “condemnation” of homosexuality is “marginal” in the Gospels—i.e., indirect but no less present—and an “intermittent focus in the rest of the New Testament,” i.e., indisputably present. Pickett is neither a historian nor a scholar of any field relating either to the ancient world or to biblical studies. His doctoral credential is in Political Science, which explains why several of his characterizations are inaccurate. However, as bad as some of his

characterizations are, his position would not pass peer-review if he had denied that the Gospels, the NT epistles, or the early Christians and Jews held a unified position forbidding same-sex marriage. Pickett's article does not address the OT or Second Temple Judaism, so naturally he can offer no other explanation than the NT Gospels and, in his view, the "animosity" of Augustine.

14 Ep. Diog., 5.

15 "Paul here is not describing the qualifications required for an entrance exam. He is comparing habituated actions which by definition can find no place in God's reign for the welfare of all, with those qualities in accordance with which Christian believers need to be transformed if they are to have any confidence they belong to God's new creation in Christ," in Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians NIGTC* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 438–9:

16 ἄρπαγες, Strong's 727.

17 ἀνδραποδισταῖς, Strong's 405.

18 E.g., the Acrocorinth discussed below, cf. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, n. 6.

19 [https://www.google.com/search?scas\\_esv=d8934033fdc41234&rlz=1C5CHFA\\_enUS971US971&sxsrf=ACQVn09PsvsnwE8OAmMYw82iegCDeBu7SA:1708045948578&q=the+acrocorinth&tbm=isch&source=lnms&sa=&ved=2ahUKewjQl5mA166EAxV\\_m2oFHeTCAAUQ0pQJegQIDhAB&biw=1258&bih=780&dpr=2#imgsrc=cZZjv0M611iHSM](https://www.google.com/search?scas_esv=d8934033fdc41234&rlz=1C5CHFA_enUS971US971&sxsrf=ACQVn09PsvsnwE8OAmMYw82iegCDeBu7SA:1708045948578&q=the+acrocorinth&tbm=isch&source=lnms&sa=&ved=2ahUKewjQl5mA166EAxV_m2oFHeTCAAUQ0pQJegQIDhAB&biw=1258&bih=780&dpr=2#imgsrc=cZZjv0M611iHSM)

20 <https://biblemesh.com/blog/the-christian-origins-of-hospitals/>

21 <https://onlineprograms.sacredheart.edu/resources/article/the-origins-and-meaning-of-nursing/>