

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

An Identity Worth Celebrating

- I. Don't Be Deceived — Incompatible Identities
- II. Who You Are — the Identity of the Inheritors
- III. What You Do — Repent, Rethink, Rethank, Rejoice

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, be with us in truth and love. Amen.

The Word of God for our meditation this Fourth Sunday after Pentecost is from 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

⁹Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? **Do not be deceived.** Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor males who have sex with males, ¹⁰nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor the verbally abusive, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹And some of you were those types of people. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (EHV)

This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It's a good question for the Fourth of July weekend: Is America still the "melting pot" it was so long described as? The idea used to be that given enough time, everyone in our country would, while adding their own unique flavors and tastes to the American mix, leave their old cultural identities behind and embrace a new identity and culture that belongs distinctly to the United States and uniquely to every American.

But in the last generation or two we have seen the rise of what some call "identity politics". This goes far beyond simply being proud of one's ethnic heritage and wanting to stay connected to it — it has to do with people claiming an identity, usually as some kind of social minority — sometimes self-defined — and then claiming that, that identity gives them some special position in society or the right to demand some special treatment. Whether we agree with it or not, most of us have seen this at work in our culture, and have also seen how certain groups have gone from being marginalized in society — perhaps even disapproved of — to demanding tolerance and then, having obtained tolerance, begun to demand that they be celebrated by everyone else.

Now, for Christians, identity does matter, but not in terms of pride or privilege. The Apostle Paul wants us to identify as Christians, as the people who bear Christ's name and in whom the Spirit has done his gracious work. So we can be and remain heirs of heaven, he wants us to be quite clear what is and what is not *An Identity Worth Celebrating*.

And Paul is quite seriously concerned for the Corinthian Christians he is writing to — and for us today, as well. When he warns, "**Do not be deceived**", the Greek word he uses has as its root meaning in the idea of *wandering*. So he is saying, "Don't let yourselves be lured into wandering off", and he's saying this because he knows all too well how dangerous things can and will be for all who wander from God's way.

It's a much bigger deal than making a mistake and getting lost somewhere. It's losing out on heaven, which means ending up in hell for eternity. So, the Holy Spirit, writing through Paul, is not kidding around here. This identity business matters in a big way. Because "the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God".

Now pretty much no one wants to think of him- or herself as “unrighteous”. So, Paul needs to get more specific about exactly what kind of people he’s talking about. He gets so specific that he makes a lot of people in the church very uncomfortable, because it closes the door on so much that they want to say “Christian freedom” allows them.

First, he lists the “sexually immoral”. Some in our society might find that term vague or even permissive, claiming that “morality is relative” so they get to redefine this however they want. But the word used here in the original Greek is an all-encompassing term for sexual sin and it's not in any way culturally determined. There is nothing relative here — Paul is referring to moral absolutes that are from God and that truly and eternally define what is and is not sexually moral.

One helpful way to keep straight the right from the wrong is to focus on the positive ideal God has given rather than on “what we shouldn’t do”. Sex and marriage are not separate things, but are intimately linked as a single gift, by God's design, from the very beginning. Therefore, any separation of the one from the other or taking it from its proper place in relation to the other is by definition corrupt, wrong, and immoral. Since sex belongs only in marriage between a man and a woman, any other use is a misuse, and nothing a redeemed child of God is going to want in his or her life.

Next in the list Paul mentions “idolaters”. It may seem kind of odd to have that sandwiched between the “sexually immoral” and “adulterers”, but it’s not really. Think back to the Old Testament — remember how sexual immorality and idolatry were so closely connected in the worship of Baal and other false gods? When the king of Moab was looking for a way to hurt the Israelites passing through on the way to the Promised Land, the prophet Balaam gave him an effective plan: they had their women use their sexuality to entice the men of Israel to worship idols and thus separated them from the Lord’s blessing.

We can’t really say that things are any different today. People may not be bowing down to idols but they still worship false gods connected with sensual pleasures, or worship gods of success, self-fulfillment, or material possessions. Confused people invest all their energy, and their very identities, in their desires and how they fulfill them — they have given their fear, love, and trust to something other than the Lord.

That connects clearly with the next two groups of unrighteous people who will not inherit the kingdom of God: “adulterers” and “males who have sex with males”. There’s really not much need for explanation here — both describe people who have clearly rejected God’s design and will for sex and marriage, and in both cases their sin is unequivocally condemned. These are not just rules that we came up with and can change as we see fit, and this is not just some old-fashioned or closed-minded idea we cling to that should be upgraded to something more progressive. It is our Lord and Creator himself who rejects these unrighteous people.

Sure, it would be much more comfortable for us to make our own judgments about such things, and more pleasurable to simply follow where ever our urges might lead us, but there is no getting around what God himself says. **Do not be deceived.**

Paul goes on to mention also “thieves”, “the greedy”, “drunkards”, “the verbally abusive”, and “swindlers”. These don't need much explanation, but they are just as sinful and salvation-denying as the identities at the beginning of his list. His point is that all of these identities are incompatible with inheriting the kingdom of God.

Of course, people still try to assert the opposite. While it is certainly true that a Christian might *struggle* till the end of his or her life with a particular sin, one cannot *identify* with that sin and still be a member of God's family, no more than someone can be a "Christian idolater", "adulterous disciple of Jesus", "bank-robbing child of God", "Gospel terrorist", or "gangster for God". Or, for that matter, identities that might be more up your alley (or down in your gutter): "grace-driven grudge-holder", "disobedient child of the Heavenly Father", "Tax Cheater for Jesus". **Do not be deceived:** these are all oxymoronic logical impossibilities — and identities that are incompatible with inheriting the kingdom of God. <eos>

But here's the thing: **that's not you.** Those unrighteous identities Paul listed are what some of you *were*, but you are *not* that anymore. Now you have a new and an **infinitely better identity:** you are the ones who will inherit the kingdom of God — not because of who you were but despite it. Remember that your sin and guilt is as deep, as damning, and as death-deserving as was David's, as was the sinful woman's, and as is any of the unrighteous people we've just talked about, even though your specific sins might be very different.

But despite it all, God forgave you and forgave every sin. Not because you deserved it, but because he loved you. He sent his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to save you — to live and be and do everything that you could never do — to be perfect and to obey God's law perfectly. He came to earth so he could go to the cross, to suffer and die there, so that you would not have to suffer, so that you would not have to die, so you would not have to go to hell. Jesus was the atoning sacrifice for your and my and all the world's sins.

And because of that, through the gift of faith, worked by the Holy Spirit, you can now claim the blessings of a new identity in Christ. You don't just have the *label* "Christian"; you *are* a child of God and an heir of heaven.

How can you be sure? Paul heaps up the evidence that you are no longer what you once were: You were *washed*, meaning that you were made clean in the waters of baptism with the Word of God and you were cleansed from your sins, claimed as God's own, made pure and clean. He reminds you that you were *sanctified*, meaning you were made holy and set apart from the unrighteous and set apart for righteousness. And Paul says you were *justified*: declared not guilty of all the things you and God both know you are guilty of. This is what you are now in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. <eos>

With all this being true, what do we do?

We can use four "Rs" to remember what we'll do, because of who we now are.

First, **Repent** of your sins — like David (whose sins, we note, started as sexual sins and snowballed from there). Whether your sins are these listed in 1 Corinthians 6 or other things entirely, confess them to the Lord and leave them behind. Trust in the forgiveness Christ won for you on the cross and breathe a sigh of relief — you have been washed clean.

Then, **Rethink.** Change your way of thinking about these and other sinful things. Recognize that Christianity is and always has been *counter-cultural*. It's popular today to discount or discredit what Paul says about "unrighteous" people in these verses with the idea that he was simply reflecting the moral standards and expectations of his time — and that since things are different now, we don't have to listen to him. But that's neither faithful to Scripture nor historical.

Both Paul's condemnations here and his encouragements to purity would have been very much counter-cultural in his time and especially in the city of Corinth, which had a reputation for, frankly, perversion.

So, we want to follow his counsel and think like Christians, not the culture then or now. And the best way to do that is to spend time connected to the Means of Grace — the wonderful Word of God, the washing of baptism, and the forgiving feast of the Lord's Supper. These things are the Holy Spirit's great and gracious tools to keep us thinking right and to keep our identity straight.

Next, we **Rethank**. We thank God over and over again for everything he's done for us — forgiving our sins and calling us out of the darkness of our former lives and bringing us into his light. And we do this not just with words: We “love much” like the repentant and thankful woman who anointed Jesus' feet with perfume and wiped them with her hair.

And that leads us naturally to **Rejoice!** All this good news of our new and infinitely better identity in Christ is something to celebrate. It's a reason like nothing else to be joyful. This is why our worship, the liturgy, the content and nature of our psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs — the way we celebrate as Christians — is completely unlike the way the world celebrates. And this joy in who we are shows itself in every aspect of our lives — and moves us to do everything we do to the glory of God.

Because when we consider the fact of what we were and the wonder of what God in mercy has now made us, we see clearly how true it is: We have an identity worth celebrating. Alleluia. Amen. (*Please rise*)

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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