

Three Kingdom Warnings
1 Corinthians 6, Galatians 5, Ephesians 5

Turn 1 Corinthians 6. This is a message I don't want to give, and you don't want to receive. It is a warning to people in the church who are not living in God's ways, and it's a strong warning. But it's one of the things the Bible does regularly, and it needs to happen in all churches. To my knowledge no one here needs this now, and that's why it's a good time to say these things.

In different places, the Bible names the things we will not do because we're God's people. And often in these lists, the Bible also tells us the consequences of sinning these ways. God's people need this. Together, as a congregation, we need to name the sins we have decided to avoid.

That doesn't mean we never do these things. All of us will be strongly pulled by some of these, and sometimes we stumble and fail. Still, though, it is good for the congregation together to name the things the Lord calls us to flee. This is what it means to expose the works of darkness.

Paul has several sin lists like this, but three of them stand out because they share a warning that is unusual for Paul: the people who do these things "will not inherit the kingdom of God." And these three sin lists are all given to churches about people in the church. People in Paul's churches needed to hear these warnings, and look to themselves.

So I will read the three lists. Let's be ready to say, "I could go down that path." Something here will make us uncomfortable.

Warning One - 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Don't you know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Don't be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor soft ones nor male-bedders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

Just before this in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul blasted them for swindling and cheating each other, and then taking each other to the world's court. So "thieves," "greedy," and "swindlers" would be front and center in this list.

Warning Two - Galatians 5:19-21

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

The problem in Galatia was that those believers were biting and devouring one another (5:15), they were conceited, provoking and envying one another (5:26). So this list leans toward relationship problems: hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, factions and so on.

Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit right after this, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, . . . self-control.” The Spirit corrects this congregational disaster. The fruits of the Spirit are mostly relationship habits, the flavour of life together in the congregation that the Spirit produces, opposite of the conflict that the flesh produces.

Warning Three - Ephesians 5:5-7

For of this you can be sure: No sexually immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on the disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.

The context in Ephesians does not draw attention to any of the particular sins. The emphasis here is more on not being deceived with empty words, on taking the warning to mean it says.

Will not inherit the kingdom of God.

What sets these three lists apart is the distinct “inherit the kingdom of God” language. Eternal life is at stake here. People who do these things will not enter into eternal life. That raises questions which we don’t need to answer. We let it stand as God has said it.

These Warnings are to Churches.

In each case, Paul wants the people in the church to be careful. He’s not talking about those outside the church. He’s making sure no one inside the church is living as if they were outside the church. In Corinth and Galatia, it was getting very close for some.

Everyone should beware. There are things in these lists that make me nervous. I assume just about everyone is a little uncomfortable by something listed here. This is not Paul being harsh or judgmental. This is God the Father warning his children not to play near the freeway, don’t play near the cliff, don’t play near that raging river. For your own good, get out of there. Flee.

I’ve used maps in backcountry camping trips, hiking or canoeing. A good map points out the dangerous spots and tells you how to be careful in those places. God is mapping out the spiritual world for us, because he loves us. These warnings are one way he keeps us on the right path.

Churches Won't Believe It – An Old Problem

Every list tells us that Paul had trouble getting his own churches to believe him. To Corinth he writes that they will not inherit the kingdom, and then he says “don't be deceived,” then at the end Paul writes it again: they will not inherit the kingdom of God.

In the Galatians list, Paul writes, “I warn you, as I did before.” This is Paul's first letter to these people, which means that his first warning was part of gospel preaching. He warned his new Galatian converts this way when he first let them to Christ, and now he repeats it in writing.

Ephesians 5 is the most emphatic. He begins with, “of this you can be sure.” Then, after saying that such people will not inherit the kingdom, he still adds: *“Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on the disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.”*

Do you understand that 2000 years ago, Paul had trouble persuading churches that these warnings were real? Those people were *not* sure, they *were* being deceived with empty words. To two of these churches he says, “don't be deceived.” Back then, people in the church were telling them that these warnings were not true, it was not really like that.

People don't believe these now, either, but that's nothing new. What do you think will happen to individuals when they stand before God at the End, when they lived in these ways because the leaders said it is okay? What will God say to those leaders? Let's not be partners with that.

It's a Warning not a Condemnation

In Corinth and Galatia, people in the church were clearly doing these things. Paul warned them openly, but he did not tell them that they were lost. He told them where their behaviour leads, and left it at that.

Struggling with sin is common, it is often a part of Christian life, and it is discouraging. But that's not what these warnings are about. We get in trouble when we no longer try to flee from sin, we rather give ourselves permission to make this a regular part of our lives. That's a scary place to be, keep fighting the fight.

Who talks about “Inheriting the Kingdom of God”?

Paul does not typically talk about salvation that way. In the New Testament, who uses language like that? Jesus does. This is how Jesus spoke about salvation. Jesus has a list of sins very much like this in Mark 7. He does not use “inheriting the kingdom” language in Mark 7, but the list begins with sexual immorality, just like all of Paul's lists, and has several of the same words.

The followers of Jesus have probably learned from Jesus himself to warn believers in this way, and these early disciples, the eleven or maybe others, passed that on to Paul. “Inheriting the kingdom” makes it sound like these warnings began with Jesus himself. Paul passes this on because it is what Jesus taught his followers and what Jesus wants said to all his followers.

Four Sins Worth Noting

1 Sexual immorality. This is the opener to every list. It is probably not the worst sin, but it is the starting point. It has always been important to God that we live out our sexuality in his ways. God made us with lively sexual desires, that’s good, he’s glad he made us like that. God also gave us clear guidelines about what we will do with this, and his ways are also very good.

Of course we will have all kinds of pulls and temptations in wrong directions. That is assumed. Sexual immorality is not about what attracts us, or how often it attracts us, it’s about how we behave. Sexual intimacy belongs in life-long man-woman marriage. That’s how we live out God’s image and likeness. By living in God’s ways, we imitate God’s faithfulness to his people, including God’s own long wait for his own Wedding.

2 “Male-bedders” in 1 Corinthians. Male-bedders is a literal translation, someone who takes males to bed. It is one kind of sexual immorality, as is adultery. It’s talking about gay male relationships. This is not a worse sin, but I mention it because it’s controversial in the church.

Paul uses “male-bedder” here and in 1 Timothy 1, and it never occurs in any Greek writing at all before Paul. Paul invents this new word. Later Christian writing used this word to mean a homosexual, but some want to say that since it is new, we don’t know what it means when Paul uses it. That does not work.

The Jews had a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, since many Jews in New Testament times spoke Greek but not Hebrew. We went through the sexual rules of Leviticus 18, about incest and other sins. In Hebrew, the line about same sex relations says, “you will not lie with a male as with a woman.” The Greek translation said, “you will not sleep with a male as in the bed of a woman.” The word “male” here instead of “man” is unusual, but the Hebrew OT does that, and the Greek OT follows that.

When we say two people are sleeping together, we mean what they do when they *don’t* sleep, right? We don’t care about the sleeping, we mean that these two people have sexual relations with each other. The Greek OT is doing something like that with Leviticus: “you will not sleep with a male as in the bed of a woman.”

So when Paul writes about “male-bedders,” a word not used before, it is pretty clear that he’s pulling this out of Leviticus 18 in his Greek Old Testament. Most of the New Testament writers use the Greek Old Testament, Paul certainly does, he quoted it to end the previous chapter.

I apologize for a technical discussion that most of you don't care about. Much ink has been spilled about that word, and I needed to say a bit.

It's Paul's short hand for Leviticus 18:22. And all the way through Leviticus 18, Moses assumes sexual relations between consenting adults. That's what we're talking about.

3 Troublemakers. People who cause conflict. We're talking here about people in the church who are noted for poor relationships. They injure others. They are regularly angry at someone, and others are regularly upset with them.

We are all in conflict with others sometimes, but we mean those with a list of people they've offended. A variation a person who causes divisions. People in the church are getting along, and then they are *not* getting along, and the problem regularly goes back to the same person.

Both in Corinth and in Galatia, Paul warned them about not inheriting the kingdom specifically because the unloving way church people kept treating each other. Troublemaker have some notion of what's right that gives them permission to be rude and obnoxious to other believers. We may *not* repeatedly ignore the new command: to love each other as Christ loved us. Make no mistake: troublemakers like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

4. Greed. Two of these lists mention "greed." Galatians does not, but Galatians does mention "envy." Our Lord's list in Mark 7 includes greed. There are two more reasons to give "greed" special mention.

One is that in the last part of 1 Corinthians 5, twice Paul mentions "greed" right beside "sexual immorality" as a reason not to have fellowship with so-called believers. Consistently pursuing more is as good a reason to put a person out of the church as sexual promiscuity. Why? Because such people will not inherit the kingdom of God, period.

The other reason to give greed special mention is that it is the only sin outside of actual idol worship that the New Testament calls "idolatry." The Ephesians 5 list tells us that a greedy person is an idolater, and Paul writes the same thing in Colossians 3. Greed is idolatry. Jesus said, "you cannot serve God and mammon," which is pretty close to calling greed "idolatry."

This one scares the daylight out of me, because our whole economy is built on you and me wanting the one more thing that I don't have yet. The answer to greed is contentment.

A good income is not a problem to God at all. Enjoy what you have, and share what you have, and give God thanks. Enjoy it thankfully and share it – that's just right. Paul talks to prosperous believers like this at the end of 1 Timothy 6, check it out. The problem is not always wanting more. Wanting is temptation. There's no end of temptation. The problem is pursuing more. The plans and choices of greedy people show that they are always after more. That way of living violently opposes the Spirit's life in us. The greedy will not inherit the kingdom.

Is This Salvation by Works not Grace?

One list is in Galatians, and one in Ephesians, and both letters teach clearly that we are saved by God's grace not by the works of Moses' law. But the grace that saves us also changes us. Faith always includes repentance, the choice to live in God's ways. Without that it never was faith.

Grace changes us. Not always quickly, and sometimes children of the kingdom need stern warnings like this to shape up. I have been confronted about my sin. It is not fun. But it was God saying to me, you're too near the freeway, you're too near the cliff, get out of there.

There is much room in the kingdom to struggle with sin. But let's not carry on because it's not really sin, or because I can just get forgiven. These lists were made to warn, to frighten wayward believers.

These lists are a kindness to leaders.

These lists tell me when to get worried about something, and when to relax. Don't divide the church or clobber it over things that don't appear on lists like this. On the other hand, people who are greedy, people who cause divisions and conflict, people who are sexually immoral – these are things that leaders shall guard again.

I have preached this sermon at least twice before, the first time nearly 20 years ago. I preach this when to my knowledge none of this is happening. Unless there is some big dark thing going on that I've not heard about, none of you should be worried. If I thought someone was in this danger, I would first come to you privately.

In these Scriptures God maps out one part of the spiritual world in which we live. God warns us about dangerous places, because he loves us. He's working to keep us on the right path. Amen.

PRAYER: God, we don't enjoy reading Scriptures like this. On the other hand it's clear that you think we need this once in a while. May none of us believe the accuser's lies. We know he would like to trouble good people with this, and cause fear that is not from you. There's already too much of that, so don't let this make it worse. And finally, O God, Peter said that Christ came to bless each of us by turning us from our evil ways. If we have evil ways, may Christ bless each of us by turning our hearts back to you. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.