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ONE

The Unrighteous Shall Not Inherit

Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test? (2 Cor. 13:5).

In the above-quoted verse of Scripture, we find a succinct definition of what a Christian is: He is a person in whom Christ lives. This, as other scriptures reveal, is not a physical but a spiritual indwelling.

If Christ lives within a person, Christ changes him. Obviously, according to Paul, it is possible—and advisable—to determine if Christ actually does live inside of us by means of self-examination. Each of us who professes to be a follower of Christ should heed Paul's admonition to the Corinthians, by examining ourselves to see if we are "in the faith."

Quite obviously, Paul also believed that it was very possible for church members to be self-deceived, thinking they believed when they really didn't. And what error could be greater? What presumption could have more serious consequences? If an unsaved person knows he's unsaved, at least there's a chance he'll acknowledge his state, repent, and turn to Christ. But the self-deceived person is blind to his need. He's smiling on the road to hell. Worse yet, he considers the peace and joy he feels to be evidence of his salvation, not realizing that they are only the fruit of his self-deception. In his case, unfortunately, ignorance *is* bliss, but only temporarily.

Transforming Grace

Ignorance was indeed the problem in the Corinthian church. Like so many in the church today, their understanding of the gospel was deficient. In their thinking, anyone who made a verbal confession of Christ was a true Christian, regardless of how he lived his life. Case in point: One of their members in good standing was living in sexual immorality with his stepmother. Nothing was being done to correct the matter.

Paul, however, needed no further facts before rendering judgment. He instructed them to excommunicate the man immediately, describing him as wicked: “Remove the wicked man from among yourselves” (1 Cor. 5:13).

Paul then offered the Corinthian Christians some important insight into the gospel: The grace that forgives also transforms. Thus, people who have *not* been transformed are *not* forgiven. They will not inherit God’s kingdom. They are all those who are unrighteous in their behavior, and Paul even went so far as to list several examples of the kinds of people God considers unrighteous. Notice he included fornicators in his list:

Do you not know that the unrighteous shall 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, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

Some of Paul’s modern readers have been puzzled over this particular passage. Why didn’t he instruct the Corinthian church to follow the three steps of church discipline given by Christ, that is, to first confront the wayward brother privately, then by means of a small group, and finally by the entire church, before excommunicating him?¹

¹ Some have suggested that the Corinthians had completed the first and second steps of proper church discipline, and that Paul was instructing them to take the final step. This is proven to be

The simple answer is that Christ's instructions apply only to dealing with a true Christian believer who has sinned. The immoral man at Corinth, however, had proven beyond all doubt that he was not a true believer in Jesus. He was a phony. His lifestyle betrayed his true character. He was living in fornication. Such persons, along with idolaters, the effeminate, homosexuals, thieves, the covetous, drunkards, revilers and swindlers, Paul categorically stated will not inherit God's kingdom. They demonstrate by their lifestyles that they do not possess saving faith in Christ; they are not regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Christ does not live in them; thus they don't belong to Him (see Rom. 8:9).

The Corinthians should have known better. Paul had previously written to them on this very subject, but they had apparently misunderstood him:

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any *so-called brother* if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one² (1 Cor. 5:9-11, emphasis added).

The immoral Corinthian church member was, according to Paul, not a true brother, but only a *so-called* brother. And failing to understand the inseparable

an incorrect interpretation, however, by Paul's words in 5:2, which describe how the Corinthians were treating the wicked man: "And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst." Rather than mourning over and confronting the sin of their fellow church member, they were proud of their toleration.

² If we are not supposed to eat with so-called brothers who are immoral, covetous, and so on, then we must have the right to judge those who are within the church in such matters. This Paul endorses; see 1 Cor. 5:12.

correlation between belief and behavior, the church to which he belonged failed to discern that his confession of faith was bogus.³

Spiritual Babes or Phony Believers?

Realizing the far-reaching effects of such lack of discernment by the church, Paul had good reason to question, not only the salvation of one immoral Corinthian church member, but the salvation of others within the same church. There was strife, factions and jealousy (see 1 Cor. 1:10-12; 3:1-4). For those who have just been born again, these can be indications of spiritual babyhood, due primarily to lack of knowledge of God's will. Until now, the Corinthians had only been fed the milk of God's Word (see 1 Cor. 3:2). So Paul informed them how their selfishness displeased God, expecting that they, now enlightened to the truth, would repent.

Persisting in these same sins after enlightenment, however, is a different story. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul included jealousy and strife in a list quite similar to his Corinthian catalog, sins which, if practiced, are evidence that a person, like the practicing adulterer or fornicator, will not inherit God's kingdom:

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, *enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger,*

³ Many modern commentators make the same mistake as the Corinthians, maintaining that the immoral man was a true Christian, thus completely missing Paul's point in this passage. Yet there are at least five indications that Paul considered the immoral Corinthian man to be unsaved: (1) Paul called him a "so-called brother" (5:11); (2) Paul called him a "wicked man" (5:13); (3) Paul did not follow Christ's instructions for disciplining a brother who had sinned, indicating that he didn't believe the man was a brother; (4) Paul turned the immoral man over to Satan "that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (5:5), indicating that, if the man continued in his present state, his spirit would not be saved. However, by excommunicating him, there would be hope that he would repent and be saved once he recognized that the church didn't accept his testimony of faith; and (5) Paul clearly stated that fornicators and adulterers would not inherit God's kingdom (6:9-10). It is crystal clear.

disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19-21, emphasis added).

Clearly, what may mark one person as a babe in Christ can mark another person as unsaved. The difference between the two is time and knowledge. God expects that His true children will obey Him once they know what He expects. Those who profess to be His children yet persist in the practice of lawlessness even after enlightenment are deceived. People who have been truly born again yearn to be holy; they “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt. 5:6). God is at work within them to complete the good work He began in their lives (see Phil. 1:6; 2:13). Thus, if our faith is not resulting in our sanctification (increasing holiness), let us not think our faith is resulting in our justification (being declared guiltless before God) either. There is no such thing as justification that is not followed by sanctification. For this reason Scripture says, “Pursue...the sanctification *without which no one will see the Lord*” (Heb. 12:14, emphasis added). Heaven is not for the unholy.

Is this Not Salvation by Works?

When Paul warns us that those who practice unrighteousness will not inherit God’s kingdom, is he not contradicting his own teaching that salvation is purely by God’s grace, received through faith? Is salvation earned by not practicing certain sins?

No, as we will clearly discover as we study more closely what Paul taught, those who truly receive by faith God’s gracious gift of salvation are transformed by His Holy Spirit. Because of His wonderful work in their lives, they become holy and continue to grow holier. They are born again, and the power of sin is broken over their lives. Christ lives in them. They become new creations. No longer are their lives characterized by the practice of sin. Certainly, true believers sometimes still do sin, but they no longer *practice* it. As the apostle John wrote:

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness....No one who is born of God *practices sin*, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God (1 John 1:8-9; 3:9, emphasis added).

The salvation that comes through Jesus Christ not only provides forgiveness *of* sin, it provides deliverance *from* sin. A growing holiness is the result of receiving the free gift of salvation. Note carefully the words that follow Paul's most well-known affirmation of the freeness of salvation:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them* (Eph. 2:8-10, emphasis added).

Salvation is not a result of our good works; good works, however, are a result of our salvation.

God's Purpose in Salvation

God's purpose in saving us was not just to give us a legal stamp of forgiveness that nullifies our list of sins. His purpose was to make us holy, obedient people, conformed to the image of Christ. He gives not only an imputed legal righteousness, but re-creates us to experience a real and practical righteousness. One cannot be received exclusive of the other. In fact, the apostle John tells us who has truly received imputed legal righteousness: those who practice a lifestyle of *practical* righteousness:

Little children, let no one deceive you; *the one who practices righteousness is righteous*, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this

purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:7-8, emphasis added).

Sin is the work of the devil. The salvation Jesus offers destroys Satan's works in our lives.

James on Works

Of course, before we can receive the salvation that forgives and delivers us from sin, we must realize our need for it. Tragically, many church members consider themselves Christians simply because they've prayed a "sinner's prayer" or acknowledged certain theological facts. They think they possess a salvation that has provided forgiveness, but that provides very little, if any, transformation in their lives. Yet it doesn't bother them because they know that salvation is by grace and not works. In their minds, works are unimportant and optional.

Yet the Bible states that it is impossible to have a saving faith that doesn't produce works. The apostle James wrote that a faith void of works is useless, dead, and cannot save:

What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? *Can that faith save him?....*Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself....But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? (James 2:14, 17, 20, emphasis added).

Thus, the true test of our faith is our behavior. And that is why Paul warns us, admonishing us to examine our lives to determine if our faith and salvation are bogus. Again, our works don't earn us salvation; our works prove that we possess true saving faith and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Let us, then, heed Paul's admonition to examine ourselves using his own God-given tests. Determining where we stand is the first step. If we discover that we fail the test of experiencing true salvation, then there is hope that we can and will receive it.

An Initial Self-Exam

Consider these three scriptures (two of which we've already examined), in which Paul lists specific sinful practices that characterize those who will not inherit God's kingdom:

Do you not know that the unrighteous shall 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*, nor *revilers*, nor *swindlers*, shall inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10, emphasis added).

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: *immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these*, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19-21, emphasis added).

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

From these three passages of Scripture, we can compile a list of sins, which, if practiced, are sure evidence that a person has not been regenerated. They can be classed in five categories, the first being sexual sins: fornication, adultery, immorality, impurity, sensuality, effeminacy, and homosexuality. The second are sins of larceny: greed/coveting, thievery, and swindling. The third are sins of intemperance: drunkenness, carousing and reviling. The fourth are sins of

hatred: enmity, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions and envying. The fifth are sins of false religion: idolatry and sorcery.

Notice, however, that Paul's lists are by no means exhaustive. He states in general that *all* unrighteous people will not inherit God's kingdom (see 1 Cor. 6:9). At the end of his list of sins in Galatians 5, Paul adds, "and things like these" (Gal. 5:21). We also note that neither murderers nor liars are mentioned in any of Paul's lists, but this doesn't exempt them. John wrote, "No murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:15), and, "All liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone" (Rev. 21:8).

Although it is certainly possible for a born-again person to reluctantly and temporarily stumble into one or more of these various sins, no true believer will *practice* these sins. His life is characterized by righteousness, not unrighteousness, because he has submitted to the Lord from his heart, and his spirit has been re-created by the Holy Spirit.

An Objection Answered

It has been proposed by some recent authors that when Paul warned practicing sinners that they would "not inherit the kingdom of God," he was not speaking of eternal salvation. "Not inheriting the kingdom of God" is interpreted as being either (1) the forfeiture of certain earthly blessings or (2) the loss of certain heavenly "bonuses," perks that more holy Christians will automatically enjoy.

Those who want us to believe that Paul was referring only to earthly blessings point out that Paul was speaking about the "kingdom of God," and not the "kingdom of heaven." Thus, they conclude that he was not talking about getting into heaven, but about walking in the full blessing of God's kingdom now on earth.

A study of the phrase, "the kingdom of God," however, as it was used by Jesus, reveals that it is synonymous with the phrase "kingdom of heaven." Only Matthew quotes Jesus as using the phrase "kingdom of heaven," probably in deference to his Jewish readership, whereas Mark and Luke quote Jesus using the phrase "kingdom of God" in parallel passages (compare, for example,

Matthew 13:11 with Mark 4:11 and Luke 8:10). The kingdom of God is the same as the kingdom of heaven.

Some who subscribe to the theory that Paul was referring only to heavenly bonuses point out that he didn't warn about not *entering* God's kingdom, but rather, warned about not *inheriting* it, claiming there is a difference between the two. Unholy Christians will *enter* God's kingdom, but not *inherit* it! They'll supposedly miss out on some heavenly rewards.

Is this the true meaning of what Paul wanted to convey? Or did he mean that practicing sinners will not *enter* heaven?

Quite obviously, for a number of good reasons, Paul was speaking of ultimate salvation and entering heaven.

First, because that is the most natural interpretation of his words. Why would Paul's warnings to practicing sinners be so solemn if those sinners were only in danger of missing out on some heavenly bonuses? And if forfeiting heavenly bonuses was the danger Paul had in mind, why didn't he express his meaning more clearly? Like the innocent little boy who, after hearing his pastor explain "what Paul really meant" in a certain scripture passage, I also ask, "If Paul didn't mean what he said, why didn't he just say what he meant?"

Second, Paul pronounced God's eternal condemnation upon homosexuals in his letter to the Romans (see Rom. 1:26-2:5). Are we then to think that his Corinthian warning to homosexuals that they will not inherit God's kingdom is only a warning that they will miss out on some heavenly rewards on their certain journey to heaven?

Third, the apostle John wrote that immoral people and idolaters "will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Rev. 21:8). Are we then to think that Paul's Corinthian warning to immoral people and idolaters is only a warning that they will miss out on some heavenly rewards on their certain journey to heaven?

Fourth, Paul used the phrase "inherit the kingdom of God" twice while writing to the Corinthians, once in his warning to practicing sinners and once in the fifteenth chapter. In the context of the second usage, Paul was unmistakably writing about the time when we will enter into heaven:

Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot *inherit the kingdom of God*; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable (1 Cor. 15:50, emphasis added).

Paul was clearly communicating that our perishable, flesh and blood bodies cannot enter heaven. No doubt he borrowed the expression under consideration from Jesus Himself:

Then the King will say to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, *inherit the kingdom* prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34, emphasis added).

Was "the King" speaking about receiving earthly blessings or heavenly perks, or was He speaking of getting into heaven? The answer is quite obvious. The King will say to the other group assembled before Him, "Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire" (Matt. 25:41).

For these and other reasons, we can rest assured that when Paul warned practicing sinners about not inheriting God's kingdom, he was talking about entering heaven. His choice of words, using *inherit* as opposed to *enter*, only serves to emphasize that heaven is a gift of God's grace, inherited, and not earned.

A Second Objection

One popular author claims that the initial text I've used for this chapter, 2 Corinthians 13:5, where Paul admonished the Corinthians to test themselves to see if they are in the faith, was written to encourage the Corinthians to "recognize the salvation they clearly possess." That is, they should have been "checking themselves not for *information* but for *confirmation*." Supposedly Paul was "very confident of their salvation" and certainly didn't intend for them to question their possessing it.

Is this true? Clearly the answer is *no*. Let us consider Paul's words in their immediate context. First, let's consider the preceding verses:

For I am afraid that perhaps when I come *I may find you to be not what I wish* and may be found by you to be not what you wish; *that perhaps there may be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances*; I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and *I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced* (2 Cor. 12:20-21, emphasis added).

Clearly, Paul was concerned that when he visited the Corinthians again, he would be disappointed by their behavior. He cites numerous sins of which he had previously mentioned in his letters to them, and he states his specific fear of finding them guilty and unrepentant of practicing *impurity, immorality and sensuality*. Paul listed *those very same three sins* in Galatians 5:19, stating that those who practice them will not inherit God's kingdom. Additionally, Paul had written in his first letter to the Corinthians that neither fornicators, adulterers, effeminate nor homosexuals would inherit God's kingdom (see 1 Cor. 6:9-10).

Beyond this, Paul also expressed his fear of finding strife, jealousy, angry tempers and disputes when he came to Corinth, four other sins which he listed in Galatians 5:20, stating that those who practice such things will not inherit God's kingdom. Are we to conclude that Paul was "confident of their salvation," as one very popular author wants us to believe, when he has made it so clear that people who act like some of the Corinthians were acting are obviously not saved?

Read carefully as Paul continues:

This is the third time I am coming to you. Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses. I have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to *those who have sinned* in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again, *I will not spare anyone* (2 Cor. 13:1-2, emphasis added).

What kind of facts was Paul speaking of that were to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses? Paul could only have been speaking of the facts of the sins committed by professing Corinthian believers. The context as well as the phrasing points to this (see the verse before and after 13:1, as well as Deut. 19:15).

Paul then threatens those “who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well” that if he returns, he “will not spare anyone.” In what way will he not spare them? Will he tell them that they are doing wrong? No, he’s already clearly told them that. Paul can only be threatening that he will do what he ordered the Corinthians to do to a false believer in the church who was living in immorality: He will excommunicate them also as false believers, as proven by their continued practice of grievous sin and lack of repentance. Otherwise his bark has no bite.

Paul continues:

Since you are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me, and who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you. For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we shall live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you. *Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!* Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—*unless indeed you fail the test?* But I trust that you will realize that we ourselves do not fail the test (2 Cor. 13:3-6, emphasis added).

Paul wrote, “Test yourselves to see *if* you are in the faith.” Notice the word *if*. That indicates the possibility that they were not “in the faith.” Paul did not say, “Test yourselves and you will see that you are in the faith, because I’m very confident of your salvation.”

Notice he also wrote that they should recognize that Jesus was in them, “*unless indeed you fail the test.*” Is this not a clear indication that Paul believed the sure possibility existed that some of them might fail the test? Certainly. This becomes even more clear in 13:6 when he contrasts himself and Timothy (see 2 Cor. 1:1) with them: “But I trust that you will realize that we ourselves do not fail the test.” The Corinthians might fail the test, but he and Timothy would not. It was

obvious that Jesus lived in Paul and Timothy, but it was not so obvious that Jesus lived in all the Corinthians who professed to believe in Him.

The Conclusion?

The biblical evidence is overwhelming: The new birth changes the behavior of sinners, sometimes radically in the case of gross sinners. Why is it then that the behavior of so many people who claim to be born again is not much different from those who don't claim to be born again? For example, pollster George Barna has noted,

A recent study we conducted showed that born-again Christians substantially differed from non-Christians on just nine of the 66 variables on which we compared the two groups. Even more significant was the finding that Christians were virtually indistinguishable from nonbelievers on all 65 of the nonreligious variables we examined—matters of core values, defining attitudes and central behavior tendencies.⁴

Barna's polls also revealed that, while 87% of non-Christians said they had watched a PG-13 or R-rated movie in the past three months, 76% of born-again Christians had done the same. Amazingly, *non*-Christians were more likely than born-again Christians to have given to a nonprofit organization in the past year, and were also more likely to have given money to a homeless or poor person.⁵

There can be only one conclusion: Many people who think they are born again are not. They think they are going to heaven but aren't.

How do you measure up? If you've just realized that you have been self-deceived, you should fall on your knees before God, repent of all known sins, and cry out to God to change you by His Holy Spirit. Truly receive Jesus as your

⁴ *Igniting a Moral and Spiritual Revolution: Social Scientist Analyzes the Data*, by George Barna, in *the Promise Keeper*, Vol. 2, No. 1, January/February 1999, p. 1.

⁵ See *The Second Coming of the Church* (Word: Dallas, 1998), by George Barna, p. 6.

Savior from God's wrath and sin, trusting in Him alone. Make Him your Lord and Master. He will begin a transforming work in you and deliver you from sin's power!