

If You Live in Sin, Will You End Up in Hell?

Ricardo Campos, Pastor Grace Chapel, Orange, CA April 23, 2017

I. Introduction

Is it possible for Christians who live in sin to go to heaven? Can those who live a life of fornication, adultery, prostitution, worshiping idols, homosexuality, robbery, greed, drunkenness, slandering, or extortion go to heaven? Does 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 really say that Christians who live like this will end up in hell? If this is not what it says, then what is God saying in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11?

II. If God's Not Threatening Christians with Hell, What's to Keep Them from Living in Sin?

At first glance 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 seems to say that those who live in sin will end up in hell. Is that what it says? There's a key question that we must always ask when interpreting Scripture or any literature for that matter, "What's the context?" Another key question, especially when dealing with the subject of eternal salvation, is "Who's the audience?" When we ask these two questions of 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, here's what we discover:

Who's the audience in 1 Corinthians? Right from the beginning, God makes it clear that He's speaking to His children: they are the "church of God," have been "sanctified in Christ Jesus," "called *to be* saints," Jesus Christ is their Lord, God and Christ send them grace and peace, and God is their Father, 1:2-3. There's more: God gave them His grace through Christ, Jesus has enriched them "in all utterance and all knowledge," the testimony of Christ was confirmed in them, they have no shortage of God's gifts, Jesus will confirm them to the end so that they will stand blameless when Jesus returns, God called them "into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ," and they are Paul's brethren, 1:4-9, 11 (not to mention the other things Paul says about them in the rest of the letter, e.g., they are Christ's, 3:23, and they have received the Gospel in which they now stand, 15:1). Why's all this important? Because from 1 Corinthians 1:2 to 16:24 you know that whatever Paul says to the Corinthians, NOTHING he says will undo who they are and what they have: at the very least, they've been sanctified (past tense) in Christ Jesus, God is their Father, and Jesus will make sure that they stand blameless when He returns. In other words, once God adopts you into His family, no one can take you out of it, not even you (John 10:27-29).

In fact, all of the New Testament epistles from Romans to Revelation, all of them are written to God's children. So whatever God says in these letters, He's saying it to His children. There are several passages that seem to say that maybe we really didn't believe in Jesus and therefore we're not really God's children or that if we continue to live in sin, then we prove that we're not God's (like James 2:17 and 1 John 3:10, 15). But God is crystal clear about how we become His children: simple faith, John 3:16. So if it looks like He's questioning our salvation, we need to look again and ask: who's the audience and what's the context, i.e., what is God really talking about?

What's the context? The Corinthians are thoroughly sinful: they're arrogant, judgmental, think they're doctrinal geniuses who've surpassed the spirituality of the apostles, are involved and put up with sexual immorality that isn't even practiced by the pagans. Instead of judging such wickedness, they're bragging about it. In fact, there's no one among them able to judge such matters or the legal disputes between them. So they're suing and defrauding each other. Then Paul says, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God?" That's the context and yet look at what God says to these sinful children in 3:10-15:

¹⁰ According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. ¹¹ For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³ each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. ¹⁴ If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; **but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.**

Some think that this passage is proof that if you live a life of sin, then you will wind up in the lake of fire. But God actually says the opposite here. What's the context? This is not the Great White Throne Judgement of Revelation 20, where all non-Christians are judged according to their works. This judgement is the Judgement Seat of Christ, where all Christians and only Christians are judged (Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10) to determine how much "inheritance" ("reward," 3:14) they will get. If you decided to live a life of sin that only produced wood, hay, and straw, then you will get no reward. In fact, you will suffer shame when Jesus puts your work to the test. It will go up in flames, but you yourself will enter the Kingdom "yet so as through fire." Why "fire"? Remember the context, Jesus is determining your rewardability. Whether "fire" is literal or metaphor, the point is that Jesus will test your work. If it passes, you will get a reward. If it fails, then it will go up in smoke but not you. Therefore, in the same letter that contains 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 the apostle Paul clearly says that if all you do is believe in Jesus and spend your life sinning, then you won't get any rewards/inheritance, but you yourself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

What's the context of 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, inheritance or eternal salvation? Looking at the context a little closer, in chapters 1:1-6:8, the Corinthians are so puffed up, so arrogant that each one thinks they're better than the rest. Why? Because they think that their VIP doctrinal teacher is the best and anyone who doesn't follow him is an idiot (1:12). Paul would love to teach them deeper truths about Christ and the hope of His Gospel, but he can't because they're so carnal (3:3). They don't realize that neither doctrine, nor the VIP preachers that preach it are the main point. What's important is the heart of the Gospel: Jesus Christ and Him crucified (2:2). God is not interested in a bunch of doctrinal students who simply learn spiritual wisdom (2:6-8); He's built them into a holy temple where He and His Spirit dwell (3:16). Thus, everything that God's given them, including the VIP preachers, are all theirs; there's no need to fight over them (3:21-23).

Therefore, they're supposed to see VIP preachers like Apollos and Paul as God's servants not celebrities that they compare and judge. Why? Because it is Jesus who will judge everyone when He returns, each one's praise will come from Him (4:1-5). But the Corinthians have so clung to the apostles' VIP status that the Corinthians see themselves as VIPs. In fact, they claim for themselves things that don't even belong to the apostles (4:8, 10). The truth is that the apostles are not celebrities at all: they're poorly dressed, starving, beaten, and homeless (4:11-13). Paul is not saying any of this to shame them; he's trying to prevent showing up like a father with a rod about to beat his kids. Instead of bringing a rod, he wants to bring love and gentleness (4:14-21).

The Corinthians have gotten so bad that there's even a guy having sex with his step-mother and they're bragging about it! (5:1-2). Paul urges them to judge this individual, kick him out of the church by handing him over to Satan so that this guys' sinful ways may be destroyed but his spirit will be saved from shame and a loss of inheritance when the Lord returns (5:3-13). But there isn't anyone among them able to judge such matters (6:1-5). In fact, instead of settling their legal matters within the church, they're taking these legal issues before the non-Christians! (6:6-7). Things are so bad that they're cheating and defrauding each other (6:8).

So what's the subject, is Paul talking about the Corinthians' eternal destiny or something else? What has Paul been talking about from the beginning? They way Christians, God's children, are supposed to behave and if they misbehave, then they will suffer loss when the Lord returns. He hasn't mention heaven or hell once. He doesn't say that the unrighteous will not "enter" the Kingdom. He says that they will not "*inherit*" the Kingdom. Isn't this is what He's been saying from the beginning? He's mentioned four times that Jesus is going to return one day to judge us (1:8; 3:10-15; 4:1-5; 5:5). If we fail to obey Him during this life, then our work will go up in smoke (3:10-15). But if we're obedient children who live in harmony with the Lord, then our reward and praise will come from Him (3:14; 4:5). Therefore, it matters how we live, not to determine our eternal destiny but our inheritance.

Now, some object. They insist that 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 is saying that Christians who live in sin will go to hell. But there are some insurmountable problems with this interpretation:

First, notice the list of sins: they include adultery which also includes lust (Matthew 5:28), stealing, coveting, and drunkenness. If these sins disqualify us from heaven, which Christian hasn't committed at least one of these sins? Now you might say, "The problem is not if you commit these sins once or once in a while, the problem is if you commit these all the time." Do you really think that God's OK with a little sin? Doesn't 1 John say that God is light and in Him in NO darkness AT ALL and whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him (1 John 1:5; 3:6)?

Second, notice what 6:11 says: not only does it say that they *have been* washed, sanctified, and justified (past tense), but it says, "And such were some of you." The Corinthians used to be fornicators, adulterers, covetous, etc. The fact that Paul says this implies that they've forgotten who they are. They have strayed so far from God that they've reverted to their old sins. Why do you think Paul mentions these specific sins? He didn't pick them out of a hat nor was he trying to create a Top Ten list. He lists these precisely because these are the sins they're now committing: are there fornicators, adulterers, other sexual sinners, thieves, covetous, drunks, slanderers, and extortioners among them? Yes (5:1-2; 6:8, 12-20; 11:21). Paul is showing them that they've forgotten their true identity. Is it possible for Christians to forget who they are and live in sin? Yes, that's Paul's point (and Peter's, 2 Peter 1:9).

If God isn't threatening us with hell in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, what is He saying? Our

membership in God's family is not like an exclusive membership to the most prestigious private organization in the world where you have to maintain your membership by paying your dues and avoiding unseemly behavior. Our position in God's family is permanent: He's our Father and we are His children. And as with any father, there's a certain way we're supposed to behave. If we fail to behave properly, He won't disown us, but it will affect the inheritance He gives us:

Imagine you're a father. You have 10 children. All of them are so arrogant that they're looking down on their brothers and sisters. Why are they so conceited? Because each of them thinks that they've found the ultimate guru and anyone who doesn't follow him is an idiot. That's not all, one of your sons is having an affair with his friend's step-mother and the rest of your children are bragging about it! To top it off, all of your children are suing each other. This one loaned money to that one and he won't pay it back. This one made a business deal with that one and he broke it, etc., etc. In fact, they're all cheating each other left and right. This is the Corinthians.

Now, how would you handle this situation? What would you do? Would you disown them? If you did disown them, would that make them no longer your children? And what would you do when it came time to writing your will? How much inheritance would you leave them and would it depend on their performance, their obedience to you?.....our inheritance may be based on our performance, but our birth is not.

Why are the Corinthians failing so badly? Is the problem that they need the “meat of the Word”? They need more doctrine, mature doctrine, not just the “milk of the Word”? Paul seems to imply that he cannot teach them the “solid food” of the Word (3:2). But why wasn't he able to give them the “meat of the Word”? Because they were thoroughly carnal (3:1, 3-4). The problem is not that they need more doctrine or more mature doctrine. They're up to their ears in doctrine! They even have their favorite doctrinal teachers: Paul, Apollos, Peter, even Christ! Peter, Paul and Apollos didn't just teach them the spiritual ABC's over and over. They covered everything they needed to mature in Christ. And what did they do with all that doctrine? They used it to become arrogant and conceited.

The heart of the Gospel is Jesus Christ and Him crucified. This sounds like basic information, like there's no depth to it. But the Gospel is precisely what Paul and the rest taught the Corinthians over and over (2:2; 15:1-4). In fact every time Paul wrote a letter to one of the churches, it contained the Gospel (e.g., Romans 1-11; Ephesians 1-3; Colossians 1-2). Every admonition Paul mentions in these letters—which urges us to live spiritual lives—they're all based on the Gospel he mentions in the first half of these letters (e.g., Romans 12-16; Ephesians 4-6; Colossians 3-4). But when you're carnal, when you're not actually living live with the Father and the Son, all you will see is a Professor who's teaching you doctrinal knowledge, and in the Corinthians' case, doctrinal information that they used to beat each other up with.

But the Gospel is not basic; it's deep, wide, and very powerful, in fact, it's the power of God to those who have ears to hear (1 Corinthians 1:24; 2:4-5). For example, when you read Ephesians 1:7 what do you hear? Do you hear the basic doctrine of the Cross? Do you think, “Oh, yeah, Jesus died for my sins”? Or do you see the power of God? The power of God to cleanse you from your torturous guilt because you were watching porn last night? Do you see the power of God to deliver you from your terrible self-esteem because you realize that He's now redeemed you? Does an overwhelming sense of the Father's love come over you every time you think, “No one loves me”? Do you feel Jesus' deep and personal concern for you? Are you struck by the incredible grace that your Heavenly Father has poured upon you? When you read Ephesians 1:7 do you see, hear, and feel these things or is it just another doctrinal point to you?...when you fail to walk with the Lord, you will miss the 100 different ways that He has to bless you every time you take a long, deep glance at the Gospel.

III. Conclusion

*Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; **but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.***