

The Mention of the Ten “Unjust Ones” that Will Not Inherit the Reign of God: A Socio-Rhetorical Reading of 1 Cor 6:1-10

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Abstract

In the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians we find a list of 10 unjust ones that will not be part of the reign of God (6:9-10). What was the necessity for Paul to use such a list in the Corinthian correspondence? This list has become a controversial passage today because there is the tendency of understanding some of the elements in it – like the mention of homosexuals – with a contemporary knowledge. Is the preacher of the Good News to the gentiles rejecting the possibility for some specific groups of people to inherit the reign of God? To answer these questions, it seems necessary for me to read this passage with a socio-rhetorical lenses, finding those cultural phrases and images found in the first century Mediterranean word and portrayed in Corinthian correspondence.

Keywords: unjust, Corinthians, Socio-cultural, Mediterranean, First Century, homosexuals, rhetoric

Introduction

In 1 Corinthians 6:1-11 we find a list of 10 “unjust ones” that, according to the Apostle Paul, “will not enter the reign of God”: “Have you not known that unjust ones shall not inherit the reign of God? be not led astray; neither whoremongers, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor male-bedders, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the reign of God. And certain of you were these, but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God” (6:9-11).²

The context in which we should read this pericope is an admonition by Paul against certain members of the community in Corinth who were taking other Christians – probably of lower economical or social status – before civil roman courts to deal with issues of material goods: “[How] dare any one of you, having a matter against the other, go to be judged before the unjust, and not before the saints? have you not known that the saints shall judge the world? and if by you the world is judged, are you unworthy of the minor judgments? have you not known that we shall judge angels? why not then things of life? If you, indeed, have judgment on things of life, then those despised in the assembly sit down [to judge]; I speak to your shame: so, there is not among you one wise man, not even one, who shall be able to discern in the midst of his brother. Instead brother with brother goes to be judged, and this before unbelievers! Already, indeed, then, there is altogether a fault among you, that you have judgments with one another. Why do not you rather suffer injustice? Why do not you rather be defrauded? but you do injustice and defraud, and these to brothers” (6:1-8).

This context clearly indicates that Paul astonished to know that Christians are having disputing among themselves over minor material matters of this life, knowing that this world ruled with injustice, and the new creation were God will rule with justice is about to dawn. This act was done, probably, because the plaintiff was of a high economic or social status that could pay for the court’s fees, putting the defendant party in disadvantage before the court either because he didn’t have the social or economic resources to have a fair trial.

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² My own translation of the Greek Text, following the literal translation of Robert Young (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1898).

That is what Paul finds more scandalous: brothers were publicly exposing disputes of minor importance before judges that were not members of their community, and, thus, incapable of understanding the Christian beliefs, just to gain benefits and honor of a world that will be judge by them all³. For that reason, Paul offers an alternative to deal with these issues of internal conflicts. The Jews in the Diaspora had a peculiar judicial organization that allowed having their own council and courts to pass judgment over internal issues following the precepts of the Law of Moses in the cities where they lived, following the example of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council in Jerusalem, as long as they do not involve a Roman citizen from outside the community.

After offering a solution of how to deal with this type of situation, Paul saw the necessity of using an interesting list of vices in a personified style, called by him “unjust ones” that will not inherit the reign of God. What could have been the reason for Paul to use this list? Of whom is he referring in this list of unjust? At first, it seems like Paul was rejecting the possibility for some specific groups of people to participate in the reign of God, making this text to be read as one of today’s most controversial passages within the Pauline correspondence. To answer these questions, I found it necessary to study it first, from its social and cultural context and, then, from its Greco-Roman rhetorical style. This socio-rhetorical approach can be applied when attention is focus in the use of certain phrases and images abstracted from the culture known by the implied recipients of the epistle. I consider that such a reading will give us the necessary insights to understand the reasons for the use of this strong list of personified vices.

1. The socio-cultural aspects

As a member of the Greco-Roman culture and society, Paul strategically used images, expressions, examples and experiences of the daily life of the Corinthian community to make his message come across more powerfully and easier to be accepted. Biblical scholar, Bruce Malina has demonstrated that in the societies of the Ancient Mediterranean world there were certain social values that were at the core of their family and social life⁴. In this pericope (1 Cor 6:1-11), two distinctive social values are found: the patron-client relationship, the value of honor and shame⁴. Finally, the mentioned of “unjust ones” in 6:9-10 are based in the traditional catalogues of vices and virtues founded in different philosophical schools of the Greco-Roman world.

1.1 Patron-Client.

Socially speaking, ancient Mediterranean people thought that the relationship of patron-client, keeping the tradition of honoring benefactors, that is, the relationship that rose among peoples of unequal status and resources (aristocrats to peasants, king to subjects, father to son, etc.). It was, above all, an imitation of the patron-client relationship between the gods and humans. Finally, it could be extended to include the emancipated slaves, the servants of the household and even the slaves.

Applying this perspective to our pericope, the relationship between Paul and the believers in Corinth was that of a Patron-Client. It was through the Apostle’s preaching that the Corinthians received the Good News of Jesus Christ, called them to convert from their previous life of vices, injustice, and socio-economic divisions and discriminations, and to become the eschatological members of the new creation that would judge matters of this world and angels – or the rulers of this world⁵. Following a current theme in Paul’s missionary evangelization, the day of their baptism, the Corinthians had been justified and sanctified, becoming members of the household of God and, thus, heirs of his reign in Christ. As patron, Paul felt secure in using his paternal and yet authoritative voice, to manifest his displeasure when he knew about the behavior of some of the Corinthians, his clients. For Paul those brothers acted exactly as those who were not yet being baptized and justified. Injustice, discrimination and a list of 10 unjust behaviors were not a proper way of living for those who had become a new creation. Yet, he not only recriminated their actions, but he offered, as a benefactor, the solution to their error. This could have been the reason to admonish the Corinthians to accept in good spirit his advices and proposals. Indeed, the voice of the person reading the letter out loud to the assembly was heard as Paul’s voice himself (cf. Rom 16:1-2).

³ There are several other passages in 1 Cor that revealed how the Christians were acting in a scandalous way, presenting a double standard in the way they lived: a man marrying his father’s wife (5:1-3); sexual intercourse with harlots (6:16-18); their unequal manner of partaking in the Lord’s Supper (11:18-22); their boasting of spiritual gifts (12:1-3).

⁴ Cf. Bruce Malina, *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels* (London: Routledge, 1996), 39-51.

⁵ John H. Elliot, *Patronage and Clientage*, in Richard L. Rohrbaugh, ed., *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 39-48.

It was not his voice that carried the authority. It was God's voice that spoke through the words of Paul, and God's voice is the authority, because God was the real patron and father of all (cf. 1:10).⁶

1.2 Honor and Shame.

Honor, shame, guilt, anxiety are patterns of human personality found in every society and culture. The ancient Mediterranean world was not the exception. For them Honor was a public claim to worth or value and a public acknowledgment was required for that claim. Also, positive shame was a concern for maintaining and protecting one's worth, value, reputation, while negative shame was the loss of one's honor. In the Greco-Roman world, the behavior of honor and shame depended upon the opinions of others, either among the members of the family (father-son) or the society in general⁷.

When applying this Mediterranean model to 1 Corinthians 6: 1-11, it is noticeable that Paul pointed out that the attitude of certain members of his spiritual children (the Corinthians) has brought negative shame not only on themselves, but on Paul as their *paterfamilias*. Their attitude was a proof to the society that these Christians were not different than the rest of the Corinthians (the unjust, as Paul's called them). When the letter was read before the assembly gathered to hear it, all would be expected to feel guilty of bringing shame into their new and fragile family by their bad judgment as demonstrated in their actions: "I speak to your shame" (6:5). Furthermore, because their internal conflicts have been exposed in public the honor of the entire Christian community has been put to shame and it is no longer the honor of Paul who was been questioned but that of God who is, after all, the father of them all.⁸ The first rhetorical question carried this heavy presumption: "[How] dare any one of you, having a matter against the other, go to be judged before the unjust, and not before the saints?" (6:1).

1.3 The catalogue of vices and virtues.

To highlight even more the negative shame the actions of those members of the community that sued other brothers, Paul, presented a list of unjust ones to demonstrate that those who were not acting like members of God's family, could not aspire to receive in inheritance God's reign in the new creation, just as the eschatological preaching of the Apostle among them: "be not led astray; neither whoremongers, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor male-bedders, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the reign of God" (6:9-10). Are these group of people direct targets of God's eternal damnation? Does it mean that the Good News is not for everybody? How can we give a better interpretation of these characters presented in this list? It was not the first time that Paul used a list of wrong actions or "works of the flesh" that went against God's spiritual plan for all believers, called by Paul as "fruit of the Spirit" (cf. Gal 5:19). However, biblical scholar Joseph Fitzmyer⁹ points out that such list should not be compared to the one used in Galatians, but it should be understood as a catalogue of evil actions that caricature members of a group that are contrary to their own.

The use of catalogues of vices and virtues was a very popular literary style of Greco-Roman culture. According to Daryl Charles and Austin Fagothey¹⁰, a reflection about human virtue among the classic philosophical schools gave rise to a diversity of moral codes used in their discourses and writings when they were teaching the practice of certain behaviors that were good and laudable styles of life to imitate (virtues), or the rejection of despicable actions (vices) that were to be avoided at any cost by a good and honorable citizen. One technique was to present those vices and virtues in a personified manner because, in the end, a vice or a virtue was not mere ethereal ideas; they were concrete human behavior of a person that belong to a group.

⁶ Cf. John D. Crossan, and Jonathan L. Reed, *En busca de Pablo: El Impero de Roma y el Reino de Dios frente a frente en una nueva visión de las palabras y el mundo del apóstol de Jesús* (Estella: Verbo Divino, 2006) 364-365.

⁷ According to John Pilch, "in cultures where honor and shame are the dominant controls, secrecy, deception, and lying are strategies for defending one's reputation by seeking to influence the opinions of others. Challenge and riposte are strategies for attempting to increase honor with the risk of losing some as well." "Honor and Shame" in *Biblical Studies* (2012). <<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393361/obo-9780195393361-0077.xml>>.

⁸ Thiselton suggests that Paul's shame refers to vv. 1-4. Thiselton, Anthony C., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 434; See also, Raymond F. Collins, *Sacra Pagina 7* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 234; see also J. Paul Sampley, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 854.

⁹ Joseph A., Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University, 2008), 255.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Daryl Charles, *Vice and Virtue Lists*, in Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background. A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 1252-1257; Austin Fagothey, *Ética, teoría y aplicación* (5th ed., México D.F.: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 155-165.

Bruce Malina agrees in saying that these codes cannot be seen as a moral code that judges an individual behavior but the identity of anyone that belongs to a certain group as it was the case in the Mediterranean world of the 1st century.¹¹ In reading our pericope in its Greek text, one can see that they were written without a definite article, to translate them with a definite article (the idolaters, the whoremongers, the drunkards, etc.) is more a modern interpretation of the text, rather than what the text meant.

The elements of those rhetorical lists were not carved in stone. They were changeable, edited or amplified depending on the time, the necessity, or the doctrine taught by the different schools. For the Judeo-Hellenistic communities, for example, used some of these different moral codes of the schools that were in close contact with their mentality, like Stoicism¹². Philo of Alexandria used the Jewish stereotype for pagans: Wise men are virtuous, but vicious people are idolaters (cf. Deut 19:15-19; 21:20-21) as presented by Walter T. Wilson.¹³ It was thus not surprising to find those moral codes also in the early Christian literature. Paul, born and raised in a Judeo-Hellenistic context may have known different examples of such catalogues, as it can be perceived in his writings. A good example of it is the list presented here by Paul that had both cultures as its sources and functions as a personification of the vices that identify those who do not worship God. Whether Paul was the creator of this catalogue of “unjust ones” or whether he borrowed it from his Judeo-Hellenistic surroundings is something that we will never know for sure.

In 1 Cor 6:9-10 there is a list of personified actions that were commonly found in the Corinthian society, but that supposedly they did not do it after their baptism: “certain of you were these, but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God” (6:11). For Paul, those members of the community who took other brothers before pagan courts were still living as if they had never heard the Gospel of Jesus and to accept it making them God’s children. Because they did not act as such, they should have not expected to receive God’s reign in inheritance. On the contrary, they would perish together with all others who continued living a life of vices and injustice.

2. The rhetorical argument of 1 Cor 6:1-11

One of the formal literary approaches to the letters of Paul has been rhetorical analysis which presents the diverse styles used by certain authors of the Bible and the logical way they elaborate their arguments in order to transmit the message of the Christian faith, not only intellectually but also by emotionally appealing to their audience. Rhetorical interpretation has situated the texts of the New Testament, especially the discourses found in the epistles, in a literary and historical context. The books of the New Testament indeed belong to a culture saturated by a rich rhetorical and literary tradition as well as a profound and diverse religiosity. Most of its authors came from communities that enjoyed two cultural traditions: the Hellenistic and the Semitic. This cultural and religious richness have influenced their rhetorical style.¹⁴ The letters of the Apostle Paul are a good example of such influence. Without entering fully into the debate of whether 1 Cor ought to be identified with one of the three classical styles of ancient rhetoric, I would suggest that, in its canonical edition, 1 Cor is a mixture of these styles¹⁵.

¹¹ Cf. Bruce Malina, *The Social World of Jesus*, 42-43.

¹² Cf. Edward Zeller, *The Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics* (London: General Books LCC, 2009).

¹³ Cf. Walter T. Wilson, *Philo of Alexandria, On Virtues: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012).

¹⁴ Cf. Walter G. Hansen, *Rhetorical Criticism*, in Gerald Hawthorne, Ralph Martin and Daniel Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 822; Clifton Black, *Rhetorical Criticism*, in Joel Green, ed., *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 257, 261-262.

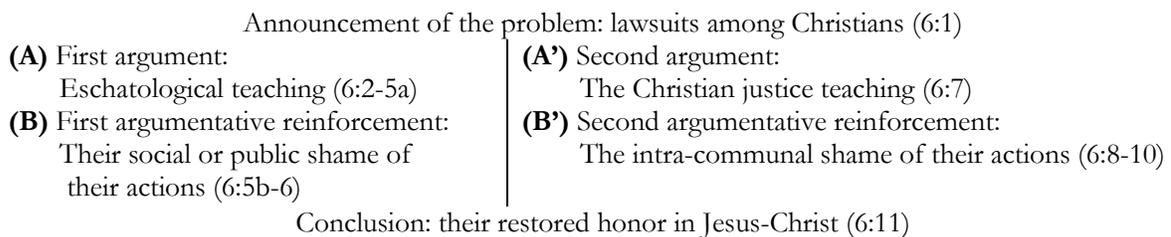
¹⁵ 1 Cor has been included in what can be termed an “ecumenical collection” of Paul’s letters where the central message of his gospel has been clearly transmitted into the Church throughout generations. Unfortunately, some of the social, cultural and religious situations of the Corinthians in the first century have not been taken into consideration in attempts to better understand the impact of his words in the life of the first Christians. It must be kept in mind that the Corinthian correspondence constituted the written pronouncements of the Apostle Paul to a fragile Christian community to guide them in dealing with certain concrete situations within their social, cultural and religious environment. For more information about the Corinthian correspondence, cf. Calvin J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*, Louisville (5th ed., Westminster: John Knox Press, 2009), 92-93, 110-111; Jan Lambrecht, *1 Corintios* in William R. Farmer et al. eds., *Comentario Bíblico Internacional* (Estella: Verbo Divino, 2003), 1461; Jerome Murphy, O’Connor, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, in Raymond E. Brown et al. eds., *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 803; David Trobisch, *Paul’s Letter Collection: Tracing the Origins* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 73-86.

It has certain aspects reflective of the epideictic style because Paul wanted to clarify certain dogmatic aspects of his preaching and, in this way, provide a solid basis to his exhortations.¹⁶ However, others have argued that 1 Cor is a deliberative speech because the Apostle wanted his readers to change their way of thinking and to agree with the proposals he offered to them in order to solve their problems.¹⁷ Finally, this letter also contains certain aspects of the classical judicial style because Paul is presenting reasonable arguments to put an end to the conflicts that have sprung up among the Corinthians.¹⁸

This mixture of styles in one letter should not be surprising, since early Christian literature was written for multiple purposes and goals. In our particular study we can see how certain aspects of Greco-Roman rhetoric appear to have influenced the composition of the Corinthian correspondence as well as the others letters by Paul.¹⁹ A good example of it is the list of personified vices of 1 Cor 6:9-10 that makes part of a small deliberative discourse (6:1-11) in which the readers are encouraged to live an irreproachable life before their fellow citizens, following the morality in accordance with their new reality as Christians, and not repeating the unjust manners of the nonbelievers. With this background in mind, an argumentative unit can be proposed, taking into consideration those social and rhetorical aspects that can be seen in this small discourse.

2.1 The argumentative discourse of 1 Cor 6:1-11.

1 Cor 6:1-11 is a small argumentative discourse unit. First is the announcement of the reason for this new argumentation in the letter: the case of lawsuits in pagan courts (6:1,7a). This presentation is then followed by a double argumentation based on the Corinthians' faith experience (6:2-5a and 6:5b-6, 11/ 6:7 and 6:8-10). Finally, the argument concludes that needs no further explanation: their new identity in Christ (6:11). For a better understanding, I suggest that this argument can be organized into two parallel units (A, B/ A', B'), following the structure given by Charles Talbert:²⁰



In this diagram the arguments used are developed in a *crescendo* movement. Paul has begun by using the diatribe style in his argument, employing rhetorical questions in a sarcastic tone, especially when he asks them if there were indeed “wise” members among the Christians of the minority wealthy group who had failed in passing judgment in minor cases “thing of life” (6:2). Then, with eschatological emphasis, Paul exposes the irony of their actions: Those who are going to judge the angels do not even regard themselves as capable of judging trivial cases among themselves (6:2-5a) and therefore they seek the help of an unjust tribunal (6:6). These two groups, the just (the believers) and the unjust (the unbelievers), constitute the common thread that sews the argument together.²¹ The conclusion will confirm once again the importance of these two different groups (6:11). Paul's next step was to use the Corinthians' arguments against themselves. If they wanted to go into a public court in order to obtain their property back and restore their public honor, they have failed; in Paul's view they have been doing completely the opposite:

¹⁶ William Wuellner, *Greek Rhetoric and Pauline Argumentation*, in William R. Schoedel and Robert L. Wilken, eds., *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition: In Honorem Robert M. Grant* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1979), 177-178.

¹⁷ Cf. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Rhetorical situation and historical reconstruction in 1 Corinthians”, in *NTS* 33 (1987): 390-393; Anders Eriksson, *Traditions as Rhetorical Proofs: Pauline Argumentation in 1 Corinthians* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wisell, 1998), 68-69.

¹⁸ Cf. Duane F. Watson, *The Three Species of Rhetoric and the Study of the Pauline Epistles*, in J. Paul Sampley and Peter Lampe, eds., *Paul and Rhetoric* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 32.

¹⁹ Very probably Paul was not specially trained in the arts of rhetoric that would be the case normally for someone involved in the politics of the Empire. However, he and the others who worked in his preaching team were surely influenced by it due to their education in Hellenistic cities where they heard public speeches utilizing deliberative, epideictic and, less frequently, judicial style. Cf. Duane F. Watson, *The Three Species*, 41; Jeffrey T. Reed, *The Epistle*, in Stanley E. Porter, ed., *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period 330 B.C.– A.D. 400* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 171-193.

²⁰ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 35.

²¹ For a discussion of community and boundaries, see Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (2nd ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 86–110.

They were putting to shame not only themselves but the entire community (6:8). Their life was a contradiction before the pagans (6:5b-6). At the peak of the *crescendo* movement, Paul reveals to them the eschatological consequences of their actions: those who act this way will not inherit the reign of God and, to make it rhetorically even more clearly, he adds insult to injury, presenting to them a list of 10 types of evildoers whose actions, as they knew very well, were the actions of the “unjust ones” (6:9-10) and not of those being washed, sanctified and justified in Christ Jesus. In other words, those Christians who were taking other Christians before a pagan court have been acting like unbelievers (the unjust) and, therefore, should not expect to receive inheritance in the eschatological reign of God.²²

2.2 The rhetorolects.

In addition to being influenced by the social and cultural aspects of the Greco-Roman world, the Apostle used certain aspects of the ancient Mediterranean culture to make his argument even stronger certain modes of discourse of the first century can be also discerned in the texts of the early Christian discourses. Those modes of discourse are called “rhetorolects” by Vernon K. Robbins. For him rhetorolects (an elision of “rhetorical dialect”) “is a term that “refers to emergent modes of discourse like those created by early Christ-believers, who shaped and reshaped language so that they could articulate their new faith understandings about Jesus Christ and the implication of that faith for life in their communities (the *ekklesia*) and in Mediterranean societies.”²³ Robbins has pointed out six rhetorolects in the making of early Christian literature that utilize elaborated argumentation to explain better their faith: prophetic, apocalyptic, wisdom, precreation, priestly, and miracle.

I could see that in the immediate context of 1 Cor 6:1-11 Paul has developed his argument incorporating into its construction three of the rhetorolects typical of the Greco-Roman world when he addressed the particular case of Christian members taking other Christians before a pagan court: the oracles, the apocalyptic, and the moral rhetorolects²⁴.

1. Oracles rhetorolects: The Mediterranean world was familiar with oracles of women and men who, in ecstasy, revealed the divine will in the destiny of mortals. These prophecies were common in both the Semitic and Hellenistic cultures. By words and deeds, they proclaimed the realization of God’s reign as a concrete reality inside the parameters of the politics of this world. 1 Cor 6:1-11 reflects this prophetic characteristic when Paul denounces those in charge of public offices who were looking after their own interests, judging with partiality in favor of the rich and neglecting the poor. Paul’s words make it clear that for him it was inconceivable that those who were justified in Christ were thinking of receiving justice from these corrupted courts when they should have been the ones implementing justice in this world, according to God’s reign.

2. Apocalyptic rhetorolects: Early Christian apocalyptic discourses received their inspiration in the experience of the image that the Greco-Roman world had of the Emperor and his imperial court. Just as the Emperor and his court had an absolute control over their dominions, Christians regarded themselves, in their eschatological theology, as the earthly image of a divine court that had power to rule over the entire cosmos, rewarding those who acted good and chastising those who committed evil deeds. At the end, only those who were purified of all evil from the world would be welcome to reside in the divine city where resided God, the true Emperor, and his court composed by those justified and sanctified by him. In 1 Cor 6:9-11 Paul insisted that the Christians in Corinth could not continue living their lives as they did before their conversion: “Have you not known that unjust ones shall not inherit the reign of God? be not led astray...”. The customs and norms of the corrupt society could not be the same as the customs and norms of those who had a new identity in Christ Jesus. Only those who had been washed, sanctified and justified could inherit the reign of God and be the eschatological judges of the angels in charge of those nations led by corrupted rulers.

²² Cf. Charles K. Barret, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 36; Brian S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5–7* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 111; Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 106, 104-105; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 430-431.

²³ Vernon K. Robbins, Robert H. von Thaden Jr., Bart B. Bruehler, *Foundations for Sociorhetorical Exploration: A Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity Reader* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), p. xxii.

²⁴ Vernon K. Robbins, *Socio-rhetorical Interpretation*, in David Aune, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 199-200. For more on cultural anthropology and the social models, cf. Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (3d ed., Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001), 17-24.

3. Moral rhetorolects: The moral discourses of the Jewish and Hellenistic philosophical school of the first century taught that the divine will was manifested at the interior of the family life and its relations with other members of the society. In the family the order in the house was a miniature of the order of the Empire and its success politically and economically. Paul, as the Apostle of Jesus Christ, had brought a new way of life to the Corinthians, a way of life that reflected more truthfully the divine desire that all humans would live in a new creation not ruled by the corrupted conventions of the society with its political or economic interests, but where all despicable acts and abuse of authority and power would not be allowed. The words of Paul in his letters should had been heard and obeyed as if they were the words of their own *paterfamilias*, or, better said, the words of Paul had authority because they announced the will of God.

In this small discourse, Paul pointed the grave fault that some Christians of Corinthian committed: On the one hand, they were proclaiming equality among all community members thanks to their new identity in Christ Jesus through the sharing of the same bread and wine (the partaking of the Lord's Supper) but, on the other hand, they had disputes among themselves in regard to material possessions, undermining those of lower economic status, and competing for honor and public recognition inside and outside the community²⁵. Paul reminds them that the social and religious parameters of the Roman Empire should not be applied to their new reality (6:11). If they were already associated with the glorified Christ to judge this passing world (6:2-3), they ought to be more than capable of resolving their own issues among themselves. The believers have been made new; they all share a new identity in Christ Jesus. It was absurd to resort to demanding justice from a tribunal that belonged to an unjust world.

3. Analysis of the catalogue of the “unjust ones.”

1 Cor 6:1-11 is a very interesting passage, to say the least, because it gives us a glimpse of the internal jurisdiction practiced by the first Christian communities. They saw the necessity to develop a formal juridical system that helped them to solve their problems without recourse to a legal system that was not in accordance with their new reality. It was a question of separating themselves from an impure world that soon was going to be judged by God. Its apocalyptic language is unquestionable. The end of times was not in the future, not even in a near future but it was a reality that had begun to be experienced here on earth. Those who in their baptism in Christ were going to judge even the angels are now putting into practice their juridical competency by resolving their own issues according to the values of the reign of God. This does not mean that Paul wanted Christians to live in isolation from the rest of the world. His eschatology does not deny the present life but is a strong critique against the corruption of the world within which Christians were called to live a virtuous life. All the evil of the present world was going to be neutralized at the end of time by the divine justice and goodness would take its rightful place. That is why 1 Cor 6:9-10 cannot be truly understood outside its immediate context.

As I interpret this particular catalogue, I can make the division of these personified vices or “unjust ones,” as Paul calls them, into two groups: five in 6:9 and five in 6:10. The first group enlisted the stereotypes that the Judeo-Hellenistic communities, and some of the philosophical schools of the time, had of the behavior of the Greco-Roman pagan world. One of those stereotypes was that the immoral behavior of the Gentiles was their idolatry and polytheistic cults. Paul would use this catalogue of stereotypes to caricature those civil officials that pretended to distributed justice among the brethren in a Corinthian tribunal when they did not practice a virtuous life because they were rooted in idolatry practices:

1. Whoremongers (*πόρνοι*): Strictly speaking, this noun referred to those who traded with sex, either paying or selling their body for sex. Notice that it is a masculine noun which makes it clear that the texts was referring to men engaged in prostitution either themselves or indulging themselves sexual intercourse or who practices sexual cultic practices with prostitutes. Although there was a remarked difference between the cultic and secular prostitution in the Greco-Roman world, the practice of sexual intercourse with prostitutes was reserved to men only, single or married (Plato, *Leg.*, VIII:841).

Sometimes this term has been translated as “impure” (*ἀκάθαρτοι*) as they have been associated to those sexual acts considered as impure for the purity system and code of worship of ancient Israel (Hos 3:3; Ez 23:19), and as a metaphor for idolatry (Ex 34:15-16; Hos 4:12). It was then, as Joseph Fitzmyer suggests²⁶, that this word could have been used in the catechesis among the Hellenistic Jewish communities inviting pagans to conversion.

²⁵ Cf. Andrew D. Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1–6* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 71.

²⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 233

2. Idolaters (*eidōlolátrai*): Israel strongly condemned the practice of idolatry due to the exclusive worship of YHWH as essential to the covenant (Ex 20:3-6). That idolatry comes right after fornicators follows the logical connection that Israel made between illicit sexual acts and idolatry and between idolatry and adultery (Hos 2:18-22; 4:11; 6:10; Jer 2:20-23; 3:6-10; Wis 14:12). Fitzmyer²⁷, in reading Philo of Alexandria (*De migr. Abr.* 12:69), suggested that Hellenist Jewish literature affirmed that the invention of idols was the beginning of fornication.

3. Adulterers (*moichoi*): Adultery was seen in ancient Israel as an act that went against one of the commandments of God in the Covenant at Sinai (Ex 20:14; Deut 5:18). For them, adultery violated the right of property that a man had over his wife, either because she was seduced by or had sex with another man that was not her husband. The Mosaic Law prescribed the death penalty for the adulterer (Lv 20:10) and the first century the Roman law punished it severely as well (*Lex Iulia: de adulteriis coercendis*).

4. Effeminate (*malakoí*): This Greek adjective literally means “soft” or “tender.” In ancient Mediterranean culture, this term was used negatively when a man behaved contrary to the nature of a male, that is, his rudeness, strength and courage. A softly or tenderly manner was the nature of women. In a patriarchal society a soft or tender man was shameful because he was acting “like a woman.” In many cases, young adult men wanted to keep a life of idleness and indulgence that avoid any moral responsibility that their society expected from them, to the point that even some of them decided to remain as boy-prostitutes for man and women alike that will economically support their lifestyle. Consequently, the term *malakoí* could be used as a metaphor for those young men who were sexually penetrated by an adult man. Fitzmyer²⁸ clarified that these “effeminate” should not be confused with those that the ancient Greeks called *kinaidos* who used to totally abandon their role as male and dressed, thought, and behave like a woman, in order to be treated socially and sexually as a woman (cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 494). Those were called *cinaedus* or *catamitus* (catamites) by the Romans and were not socially acceptable. This term could also be confused with the Greek noun *pórnoi* (already included in this catalogue) that denoted the paid prostitutes whose vast majority of clients were male. The confusion may occur because, in ancient Greece, male prostitution was restricted to adolescents, contrary to female prostitution which covered all age groups of lower economic status. In a Greco-Roman society, culturally speaking, a free man could sexually penetrate anyone, male or female, if they were of a lower social status than him, including prostitutes and house slaves. In my opinion, the best translation of *malakoí* would be “effeminate” because it implies the misogynist concept of women’s nature being not equal to men. However, in some contemporary translations, this term is being translated as boy prostitutes or homosexuals, leaving out some of the cultural and social implications for a man to be lazy, indulged in sexual activity and avoiding supporting himself or to have a family of his own.

5. Male-bedders (*arsenokoítai*): This term is not found in any other Greek literature before its appearance in our pericope, and probably Paul did not coin it, either. It seems that it was taken from the Hellenistic Jews reading of a passage in Leviticus in the Septuagint version: “and the one who lays down with a man as laying with a woman (*arsenos koíte gynaikós*), [it is] an abomination” (20:13). Despite its origin, the term had a clear connotation of a sexual activity between a male who penetrates another male, either by pleasure or abuse. Some cultic practices involved a certain type of sexual activity where a man seeking prosperity or fertility for their crops, cattle or family offered his seed to a god. The idea was to imitate on earth the same life-giving sexual activity of the gods.

Sometimes this term has been translated as sodomites or homosexual offenders. The first one makes reference to the destruction of Sodom because of their sins (even if the text never says that the sin was solely homosexual activity), and the second one has a contemporary interpretation of sexual orientation, a term unknown to the Greco-Roman society, that continue seeing sexual activity as morally acceptable. I prefer to translate this Greek noun as “male-bedders” because it kept the sense of a sexual act perpetrated by a man with authority over other males in the social relationships of patron-client or master-slave, totally independent of what we consider today the sexual orientation of both parties.

Paul’s ironic tone became stronger with the mention of the second group in 6:10, for they were intimately linked to the abuses committed in a civil court. In fact, for Paul, these ten behaviors were not proper to those who have been justified by Christ because they damaged the honor of those doing it, shaming the entire community, and insulting God who, in the end, called them to be part of his reign:

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 233

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 256

1. Thieves (*kleptai*): This term refers to those who plunder others of any material possession destroying even the social coexistence (cf. Rm 2:21; 13:9). Romans saw in this action as an insult to the owner of the objects, that was civilly punishable. In the Old Testament, those who practiced robbery were excluded from the Israelite's camp for this act was an affront against one of the commandments of the Decalogue (Ex 20:14; Lev 19:11; Deut 24:7). Moreover, this term was transferred to false teachers, who did not care to instruct men, but abused their confidence for their own gain (an embezzler as in Jn 10:10).

2. Covetous (*pleonéktai*): These were the ones who, in ancient times, wanted and hoarded for themselves more than what they really needed in life, always desiring of having more, especially what belongs to others (cf. Herodotus 7:158; Xenophon, *Mem.* 1,5,3). They would do anything to get what they want, even if they had to defraud or tramp on the rights of others. Among the Hellenist Jewish communities this type of behavior was harshly criticized (cf. Sir 14:9). Later, Christian literature will consider it a grave sin (cf. *Didache* 3:3).

3. Drunkards (*méthysai*): The Old Testament were ambivalent towards the alcoholic beverages. On the one hand, they were considered a symbol of God's blessing that produced in God's people joy and diversion (cf. Deut 28:51; Ps 104:15); On the other, they could be a potential danger if they were taken imprudently because they not only perverted the right judgment of the leaders of the people (cf. Isa 28:7), but also transformed the religious leaders into oppressors (cf. Isa 56:10-12). The Jewish wisdom literature admonished against wine abuse, drunkenness, or "given to wine" (cf. Prov 4:17; 23:21,29-35).

4. Reviles (*loidori*): Being a culture of honor and shame, the Greco-Roman world considered the injuring of another's reputation by denigrating or abusive insults a grave matter, especially if they were not accurately founded because the harmony of ancient Mediterranean social groups was based on mutual trust. Ancient Jewish moral strongly reproached the outrage and defamatory phrases that attacked the reputation of the neighbor because they went against the Covenant of Israel with YHWH (cf. Lev 19:16). To slander (cf. Ps 35:15; Prov 16:28; 25:24), to speak evil or curse a man with authority (cf. Ex 21:27; 22:28; Ps 62:4), or God (cf. Lev 24:14-15; Job 1:11) were morally wrong. Moreover, to give false testimony against a neighbor was considered a direct break of the Decalogue (cf. Ex 20:16; 23:1; Prov 12:17).

5. Extortioners (*hárpagei*): This article defined those swindlers who were profiting at the expense of others by extorting them, as Aristophanes called them. This was an affront to the integrity and honor of a neighbor, and, for the Jews, God would give to the offender his due (cf. Isa 5:8-10; Am 8:4-7). On the contrary, those who acted in righteousness would be rewarded (cf. Isa 33:15). The wisdom literature taught that extortion and bribery hindered and corrupted the hearts of the leaders of the people (cf. Prov 28:16; Eccl 7:7).

In summary, the rhetorical use of this catalogue at the peak of Paul's denunciation carries a strong force that may have shocked the hearers of this letter. For example, the mention of thieves and covetous referred to the civil officers who, for economic reasons, were easily corrupted and delivered unjust sentences. Drunkards and revilers slanderers were associated with each other, since they could win to their favor the sentence of a civil official that participated in the banquets of a patron with more economic influence. Paul mentioned extortioners at the end, as in a *crescendo* style, because they did not care about justice, but were looking for their own material benefit, even if they had to trample over another. In any case, not a single element of this personified catalogue of vices (called "unjust ones" by Paul) shall be used to identify any person in particular, much less to condemn them to eternal damnation, knowing that such catalogues were a mere tool to identify, in a stereotype manner, those who belong to a group or society that needs to be avoided in order to prosper.

Conclusion

This socio-rhetorical interpretation can help readers of today to better understand that 1 Cor 6:9-10 is not a moral treatise in itself that condemns to Hell all those mentioned in its list, much less a theological discourse about sexual morality that radically condemns people because of their sexual orientation, as has been used and interpreted by some radical movements. 1 Cor 6:9-10 is rather the final rhetorical blow that Paul has thrown to a particular case that emerged in the midst of the Christian community in the city of Corinth, a fragile community that, as many of our communities today, had not yet come to live fully its vocation in Christ.²⁹ What Paul was saying is that the Christian members who are suing another Christian before a pagan court are acting not like believers (just ones) but as idolaters, pagans ("unjust ones").

²⁹ Cf. Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 100, 104-105.

They have inflicted injustice on their own brothers, even defrauded them (6:8); those are actions equally as bad as those committed by the “unjust ones”.³⁰ Therefore, “be not let astray...neither...nor... will inherit the reign of God” (6:8-9). These verses are a good example of what kind of moral life was expected from those who had accepted a new life in Christ that distinguished them from those whose morals were as vain as the gods they worshiped.³¹

Those who too eagerly use Paul’s words in 1 Cor 6:9-10 to condemn fellow Christians today easily forget the true message sent by the Apostle of the nations: the uncharitable behavior and treatment of one Christian against another is an unjust act that will carry in itself an eschatological consequence: their own exclusion from the reign of God³².

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³⁰ As Richard Oster notes, “the two passive ideas of ‘be wronged’ and ‘be cheated’ in 6:7 are now turned into active accusations in 6:8.” Richard E. Oster, *1 Corinthians. The College Press NIV Commentary* (Joplin: College Press, 1995), 135.

³¹ This is one of the conclusions reached by J. Daryl Charles, *Virtue Amidst Vice: The Catalog of Virtues in 2 Peter*, in *JSNTSupp* 150 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 112-127.

³² Simon J. Kistemaker has point out the connection between disinheritance and taking a brother to court. Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 188.

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