

Are Sinners Welcome Here?

By John R. Gibson

HOMOSEXUALS DRUNKS
ADULTERERS SHALL NOT
INHERIT THE KINGDOM
OF GOD 1 COR 6 9 10

The words in the box above appeared on a sign outside the meeting place of the Garden City, GA church of Christ a few years ago and stirred up enough controversy to be featured on the Savannah NBC television affiliate's local news. While I have questions about the effectiveness of a sign like this, what interested me most was the reaction of some who saw the sign.

One woman found it to be very unwelcoming: "I want to say they show prejudice as far as I'm concerned. I'm not a religious fanatic, but I do believe we are all God's children and should all be welcome in the church and if I read that said and I was a homosexual, an adulterer, or an alcoholic, I wouldn't feel welcome there... It is in the Bible, but it's not the whole passage. My firm belief is that everybody deserves to be in the kingdom of God and doesn't take exception."

Cody Patterson, executive director of Act Out Savannah, a homosexual rights organization, said, "The church is supposed to be there to spread God's word to other people, but if you're going to ostracize people and shame them away from your church, then are you really spreading the message of God?" He added his hope that the sign would be changed, "They managed to offend people. So now the ball is in their court. Of course, they have the ability to change that sign."

As I've already said, I may not think it was the best way to approach the subject and the sign may not have been perceived as welcoming, but to call it prejudice is to miss the point entirely. 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10 clearly states that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God, even to the listing of seven more types of sinners than those found on the sign. The notion that all are the approved children of God regardless of their conduct is simply not found in the Bible.

Matthew 7:13, 14 calls the path to life a narrow way few will find. Jesus spoke of Himself as the way, the truth, and the life in the singular and declared that no one could approach the Father except through Him (John 14:6). The children of God are those who put their faith in Jesus Christ and are baptized into Christ (Galatians 3:26, 27). While God so loved the entire world that He would give His Son to die for all (John 3:16), the same God demands of all men everywhere that they change their ways (Acts 17:30, 31). Despite the one woman's contention, not everyone is going to find a place in the kingdom of God.

Yes, Jesus was welcoming toward sinners and never self-righteous in His dealings with them, but He also called on men to radically alter their behavior so that they were no longer hateful, lustful, unfaithful, dishonest, vengeful, etc. (Matthew 5:21-48). He once warned His audience that if they did not

purify their hearts so as to produce good words they would face condemnation (Matthew 12:34-37). Many more examples could be cited, but to say that Jesus was a friend to sinners is to tell only a part of the story. He befriended sinners in an effort to bring them to repentance and the remission of sins and commanded His apostles to do the same thing (Luke 24:46-49).

And that leads to the comment of Mr. Patterson that the church had the ability to change the sign. Certainly they could do have done that, but does he realize how ironic his words are? The Garden City church was not seeking to condemn drunks, homosexuals, or adulterers, but by pointing out their lost condition they hoped to motivate them to change their lives, something they certainly have the ability to do. Even if the sign had been changed, it wouldn't alter the fact that sinners can and must change their lives.

What about the statement that drunks, homosexuals, and adulterers would not feel welcome in the Garden City church? I can't speak for that group, but I feel very strongly that the Jones Road church must have an atmosphere that welcomes sinners into our assemblies. We must have the spirit portrayed in Luke 15 where the shepherd sought the lost sheep, the woman searched for the lost coin, and the father welcomed the erring son back home. But does that mean we should allow sinners to remain comfortable with and in their sins?

The sign that sparked the controversy and inspired this article contains a strong warning that both sinners and saints must heed (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10), *“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.”* While we should welcome everyone into our assemblies, we must preach in such a way as to produce a conviction of sin and cause sinners to understand that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Yet our goal must not simply be the creation of guilt feelings. Our aim must be that they be so cut to their hearts that they ask what they need to do to be saved (Acts 2:37). Don't forget that after the stern warning in 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10 the next verse adds, *“And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God”* (1 Corinthians 6:11).

Any who are willing to make their sexual immorality, homosexuality, drunkenness, covetousness, etc. a past tense activity can be washed in the waters of baptism and thereby become justified saints of God and no longer sinners barred from the kingdom of heaven. While I may question the wisdom of a particular sign, I appreciate the Garden City church's reminder that there is still a standard of righteousness and we must have the courage to hold forth this standard to all. Yet, we must not stop there. Let's have the love and concern necessary to lead sinners to the Lord who was such a friend to sinners that He gave His blood for them (Matthew 26:28).

All quotes from the New King James Version.