

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Corinthians 6

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

First Corinthians 6 divides into two closely related sections united by a common diagnostic: the Corinthian believers are functionally behaving as though the gospel has changed nothing about how they relate to one another and to their own bodies. The first section (vv. 1–11) addresses the scandal of lawsuits between believers before pagan courts. Paul’s argument is not primarily legal or procedural — it is ecclesiological and eschatological. The saints will one day judge the world and angels; how then can they be so impoverished in wisdom that they cannot adjudicate trivial disputes among themselves? The very existence of these lawsuits is already a defeat (v. 7). Paul identifies two failure modes: taking a brother to court, and suffering injustice from a brother while doing nothing — both flow from the same root: self-interest untransformed by the gospel. The vice list of vv. 9–10 functions as a mirror — “such were some of you” (v. 11) — showing what they came from and therefore what they are no longer. Justification, sanctification, and adoption (“washed, sanctified, justified”) define their present identity, making the lawsuits doubly incoherent.

The second section (vv. 12–20) addresses sexual immorality, specifically porneia and the use of prostitutes. Paul confronts two slogans apparently circulating in Corinth — “all things are lawful for me” (vv. 12, repeated) and “food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food” (v. 13) — that were being used to justify sexual license. His counter-argument works on multiple levels: theological (the body is for the Lord, not merely for appetite satisfaction), anthropological (the body is a member of Christ, not just a biological container), pneumatological (the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit), and eschatological (God will raise these bodies, as He raised Christ). The body is not morally neutral territory. Sexual immorality is uniquely different from other sins because it is a sin against the believer’s own body — the body that belongs to the Lord, that has been bought at a price, that is indwelt by the Spirit, that will be raised. The section closes with the imperative that anchors both halves of the chapter: “glorify God in your body” (v. 20).

This Text — Intent:

God is seeking to confront believers whose practical behavior reveals that they have not grasped the radical body-and-community implications of their union with Christ. The Corinthians have absorbed the gospel at the level of confession without allowing it to transform either their communal life (lawsuits) or their bodily life (sexual immorality). The intent is not merely to correct behaviors but to rebuild a theology of the body and community that makes those behaviors unthinkable — to make the believer see that their body, their relationships, their disputes, and their appetites are no longer their own. The

chapter presses toward a single bottom line: you have been bought at a price; live like it. The intended effect is not guilt but reorientation — a renewed understanding of what it means to belong wholly to Christ.

Subject Sentence: Union with Christ transforms both communal conflict and bodily conduct among believers.

Primary Claim: Because believers belong wholly to Christ — body, community, and future — both the lawsuits that shame the church and the sexual immorality that defiles the body are exposed as direct contradictions of the gospel they confess. God is calling the church to live in coherence with what she already is: purchased, indwelt, and destined for resurrection.

Interpretive Evaluation

The “lawful” slogans (vv. 12–13): The two slogans — “*All things are lawful for me*” and “*Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food*” — are among the more contested phrases in 1 Corinthians. One reading treats these as Paul’s own statements, perhaps a Pauline principle about Christian freedom, which he then qualifies. A stronger reading, now widely preferred, treats them as Corinthian slogans that Paul quotes and then systematically dismantles. The textual evidence favors the latter: the repetition with qualification (“but not all things are helpful,” “but I will not be enslaved by anything”) is Paul’s standard refutation-and-correction pattern. The slogan about food extends a legitimate body/appetite argument into sexual behavior, which Paul refuses — because unlike food, sexual immorality has union implications. The Reformed reading affirms that Christian liberty is real (Paul does not deny the slogan’s kernel) but that liberty is not an absolute trump — it is bounded by what masters us, what builds up, and what honors the body’s true owner.

Verses 9–10 (the vice list) and the question of assurance: The phrase “the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God” followed by the vice list has generated two interpretive errors running in opposite directions. Antinomian readings minimize the list, arguing that since believers are justified, the list cannot apply to them in any practical sense. Moralistic readings elevate the list into a works-based warning: persist in these sins and you forfeit salvation. The Reformed reading threads between them via v. 11: “such were some of you” is a past-tense identity statement, not a conditional. The force is identity-transformative, not merely behavioral. The vice list functions as a “you are not this anymore” mirror, not a “do this or lose your salvation” threat. This does not evacuate the warning — Paul’s use of the list still implies that persistent, unrepentant practice of such sins raises serious

questions about whether genuine transformation has occurred. First John 3:6–9 and Galatians 5:19–21 provide canonical confirmation of this pastoral balance.

Verse 18 — “sins against the body”: Several traditions have wrestled with what it means that sexual immorality is “a sin against his own body” in a unique way. Some flatten this by treating all bodily sins as equivalent. Others (particularly those with a more Platonic anthropology, common in some Catholic and Gnostic-inflected readings) miss the force of Paul’s anti-Gnosticism here — Paul is not denigrating the body but elevating it. The body matters precisely because it has been joined to Christ, is indwelt by the Spirit, and will be raised. The “unique” quality of porneia is not about scale of harm but about the union-violation it enacts: it takes what has been joined to Christ and joins it to another. Dispensational readings sometimes treat vv. 19–20 primarily as a reference to the corporate temple of the Spirit (as in 1 Cor. 3:16–17), but the personal pronouns and the singular “your body” in v. 19 make the individual indwelling the primary referent here, without denying the corporate dimension.

The lawsuit section (vv. 1–11) and church discipline: Some Baptist and congregational readings develop vv. 1–6 primarily into a mandate for formal church courts or ecclesiastical arbitration structures. While Paul clearly assumes the church has sufficient wisdom and standing to adjudicate internal disputes, the text’s primary argument is eschatological and identity-based, not procedural. The Reformed reading sees Paul establishing the *legitimacy* of informal internal resolution and the *scandal* of airing family business before an unbelieving court — but does not elevate this to a detailed polity prescription. The passage is about wisdom, identity, and gospel coherence, not the mechanics of a church court system.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 2:24** — “The two shall become one flesh.” Paul quotes this directly in v. 16 to ground the union-consequences of sexual immorality; bodily union is not morally neutral because it enacts the “one flesh” structure God embedded in creation.
- **Romans 12:1** — “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” The bodily-holiness theme of 1 Corinthians 6:20 finds its parallel imperative here; the body is the concrete site of worship and therefore of sanctification.
- **1 Corinthians 3:16–17** — The corporate temple of the Spirit passage immediately preceding the arguments of chapter 6; Paul’s pneumatology of indwelling applies both to the community and to the individual body, providing the theological infrastructure for 6:19.
- **Revelation 19:7–8; 21:2** — The church as the Bride of Christ whose wedding garments are “the righteous deeds of the saints.” The eschatological dimension of

bodily holiness — Paul’s “God raised the Lord and will also raise us” (v. 14) — is set within the larger biblical-theological frame of the new creation.

- **1 Peter 1:18–19** — “You were ransomed... with the precious blood of Christ.” The “you were bought with a price” logic of 1 Corinthians 6:20 finds its explicit grounding here — purchase-ownership language frames the entire ethics of bodily holiness in the NT.

Aim: To confront the persistent gap between confessed gospel identity and practical bodily and communal conduct, pressing believers toward coherence between what Christ has declared them to be and how they actually live.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3	Rhetorical rebuke: Do you dare take intra-church disputes before unbelieving judges? The saints will judge the world and angels.	Three rhetorical questions signal escalating astonishment; eschatological warrant is the primary argument.
4–6	Practical application of the eschatological principle: even the least esteemed in the church is qualified to arbitrate; shame is attached to taking a brother to court before unbelievers.	The “least esteemed” (v. 4) may be ironic: even the most marginal believer surpasses a pagan judge in this context.
7–8	The deeper diagnosis: the very existence of lawsuits is already a defeat; the gospel should produce a willingness to accept being wronged; instead, the Corinthians are the wrongdoers.	Verse 7 is the ethical apex of the first section — Paul’s penetrating reframe. Not “who is right?” but “why are you suing at all?”
9–11	The vice list as identity mirror: the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom; you were once characterized by these vices; but you have been washed, sanctified,	Three past-tense passives in v. 11 (washed, sanctified, justified) — all trinitarian: “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	and justified.	
12	First Corinthian slogan introduced and doubly qualified: “all things are lawful” — but not all are helpful; but I will not be enslaved.	The slogan appears twice, each time with a different qualifying response. Paul refuses the framework of unlimited libertinism.
13a	Second slogan: “food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food” — God will destroy both.	The slogan imports a stomach/food analogy for sexual appetite that Paul will directly reject.
13b–14	Counter-argument: the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord; the Lord is for the body; God raised Jesus and will raise us.	The resurrection of the body is introduced as the foundational counter to body-as-morally-irrelevant.
15–17	Union argument: your bodies are members of Christ; to join to a prostitute is to take Christ’s members and join them to her; “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24) vs. “one spirit” (v. 17).	The union-language is shockingly strong — not metaphorical but ontological. Paul assumes union with Christ is bodily, not just spiritual.
18	Direct imperative: flee sexual immorality; it is a sin against the sinner’s own body, unlike other sins.	The unique nature of porneia is not about severity but about the self-violation it enacts — the body is not merely harmed externally.
19–20	The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit; you are not your own; you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.	The theological climax and practical imperative. Three grounds: indwelling Spirit, purchase-ownership, divine claim.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6	The Lawsuits: Eschatological Absurdity
2	7–11	The Deeper Defeat: A Gospel

Division	Verses	Label
3	12–14	Identity That Forbids This The Slogans Dismantled: Liberty Is Not License
4	15–18	The Union Argument: What Sexual Immorality Actually Does
5	19–20	The Governing Reality: Bought, Indwelt, Claimed — Glorify God

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Union with Christ transforms both communal conflict and bodily conduct among believers.

Primary Claim: Because believers belong wholly to Christ — body, community, and future — both the lawsuits that shame the church and the sexual immorality that defiles the body are exposed as direct contradictions of the gospel they confess. God is calling the church to live in coherence with what she already is: purchased, indwelt, and destined for resurrection.

Applications (Five)

1. (Mind/Belief) The Corinthian error was not primarily behavioral — it was anthropological. They functioned as though the body were morally neutral territory, a private possession to be used according to appetite. The believer must rebuild a theology of the body from the ground up: this body is a member of Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, and will be raised from the dead. Sexual decisions, bodily habits, and physical self-stewardship are not private matters — they are theological acts. The next time you face a choice about what you do with your body, the operative question is not “is this legal?” or “does this harm anyone?” but “does this honor the Lord whose body this is?”

2. (Affections/Worship) The phrase “you were bought with a price” is not merely a doctrinal statement — it is a reorientation of the affections. The Corinthians were treating their freedom as self-ownership: “all things are lawful for *me*.” But the cross reveals that you were purchased out of a worse ownership and into a better one. The affective movement this passage demands is not obligation but gratitude — not “I have to give my body to God” but “this body was ransomed at infinite cost and given back to me to be spent for His glory.” Let the price paid recalibrate what your body feels like it is *for*.

3. (Will/Behavior) Paul does not say “resist sexual immorality” or “manage it carefully.” He says *flee* — the Greek (*pheugete*) is an urgent, directional imperative with no qualifications. This is not a summons to willpower management but to decisive, physical relocation away from the situation. Where in your life are you currently standing close to what you should be running from? The pastoral application of verse 18 is not accountability strategies and content filters — those may be tools — but a posture of flight: do not negotiate; do not linger at the door; do not test the strength of the temptation. Remove yourself.

4. (Mind/Belief) The lawsuit section demands a reorientation of what “winning” means inside the church. The Corinthians were taking each other to court because they could not tolerate being wronged and not prevailing. Paul’s startling statement is that the willingness to absorb loss for the sake of a brother is itself a gospel witness — and that the lawsuit itself, regardless of outcome, is already a defeat. The mature believer must internalize that justice within the body of Christ operates on different terms than justice before the world: suffering wrong without retaliation is not weakness but the shape of the cross applied to community life.

5. (Affections/Worship) The vice list of vv. 9–10 ends with three words that should move the reader: “washed, sanctified, justified.” These are not aspirational categories — they are past-tense, completed realities in the name of Christ and by the Spirit. Many believers live under a functional shame that treats their pre-conversion history as still definitional. Paul’s “such were some of you” is designed to sever that tie — not to minimize what was, but to declare that it is no longer what you are. Let the completed work of God in those three words be the emotional ground you stand on: not who you were, but what has been done to you.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: First Corinthians 6 contains one of the most developed theologies of the human body in the New Testament. Against both the Gnostic denigration of the body (which produces license — the body doesn’t matter) and the legalistic over-regulation of the body (which produces performance), Paul grounds bodily ethics in three irreversible theological realities: the body is a member of Christ, it is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and it will be raised. This is a robustly incarnational and eschatological anthropology — the body is not a container for the soul but the site of covenant relationship, spiritual indwelling, and future glorification. The passage also displays a fully trinitarian soteriology (v. 11: justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, by the Spirit of our God, implicitly the Father as the one who justifies) grounding a trinitarian ethics of bodily holiness.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This passage is a concentrated display of the Reformed *indicative-imperative* structure of sanctification: the imperative to glorify God in your body (v. 20) flows directly from the indicatives of purchase (“bought with a price”), indwelling (“the Spirit... is in you”), and identity (“you are not your own”). Sanctification here is not a ladder to climb but a coherence to inhabit — becoming in practice what you already are in Christ. The vice list and the “such were some of you” movement also illustrate the Reformed insistence on definitive sanctification: something has already happened to the believer that makes certain behaviors not merely wrong but incongruous — they no longer fit who this person is. Furthermore, the passage resists both perfectionism (the community clearly still struggles) and antinomianism (the community is clearly called to actual behavioral transformation), navigating the precise territory Reformed soteriology has always occupied: genuine change that flows from grace, not toward it.

Main Takeaway

Your body belongs to Christ — purchased by His blood, indwelt by His Spirit, destined for resurrection. The lawsuits that air family business before unbelievers and the sexual choices that join Christ’s members to what dishonors Him are not merely ethical failures; they are identity contradictions. You are not your own. Live like it — and let the price that was paid for you be the reason you do.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching the vice list as a threat rather than a mirror.** Verses 9–10 are frequently preached as a warning to professing believers that their sins may disqualify them from heaven — and this can easily tip into works-righteousness or into manipulation by fear. The passage’s own intent is revealed by v. 11: “such were some of you.” The list is a before-and-after contrast designed to communicate identity transformation, not a conditional threat. Preach it as a mirror that shows how far the gospel has carried them, not a ladder they might fall off.
- **Reducing the body theology to a mere anti-sex argument.** The pneumatological and eschatological arguments of vv. 13b–20 are the richest body theology in Paul, and the common temptation is to reduce them to a list of reasons not to have premarital sex. The full weight of the argument is about the ontological significance of embodied union with Christ — sexual ethics are the application of a much larger truth about what the body is and whose it is. Preach the theology and let the application follow, rather than leading with the application and bolting on proof texts.

- **Treating “flee” (v. 18) as a call to white-knuckled avoidance.** The imperative is often preached in a way that loads the burden entirely onto the individual’s willpower. But Paul’s argument does not locate the power of flight in the believer’s strength — it locates it in the prior indicatives: you are a member of Christ; you are a temple of the Spirit; you have been bought. The power to flee flows from knowing who you are and whose you are, not from trying harder.
- **Ignoring the lawsuit section or treating it as a digression.** The ecclesiological argument of vv. 1–11 is frequently treated as the awkward prelude to the more “interesting” sexual ethics material. But the two sections are deliberately joined — both address the same root failure: the Corinthians are functionally living as though they belong to themselves and their appetites rather than to Christ and His community. Preach both sections together and let their structural connection reinforce the single governing claim of the chapter.
- **Using “all things are lawful” as a positive statement of Christian freedom without Paul’s qualifications.** Verse 12 is one of the most frequently misquoted texts in conversations about Christian liberty. It is routinely cited in isolation as a Pauline endorsement of expansive freedom. But Paul quotes it only to qualify it twice and then to apply those qualifications to a behavior he is about to prohibit. The slogan is not Paul’s conclusion — it is the error he is correcting. Preachers must restore the quotation marks.
- **Moralizing the applications without grounding them in the purchase.** The final imperative — “glorify God in your body” — can easily be preached as a general call to clean living, detached from the specific gospel ground Paul provides. But v. 20 opens with “for” — the imperative is explicitly grounded in “you were bought with a price.” The motivation is not duty but belonging. Preaching that strips the imperative from its gospel ground produces behavioral compliance at best and Corinthian-style shame-avoidance at worst. The ground must be preached before the imperative lands with its intended force.