

5. Paul supported the truth of resurrection with a couple of practical considerations and then summed up with a sober rebuke and exhortation (vv. 33-34). Paul's words are sharp and to the point; in themselves, they are not the least bit vague or ambiguous. However, they must be kept within the larger context if they are to be properly understood; *treating them in isolation virtually insures that Paul's meaning will be missed.*

- The reason this deserves early mention is that, probably more often than not, Christians are guilty of this very error. In particular, the maxim of 15:33 is commonly treated as a generic truism to be applied to any and every instance of immoral or unholy associations or relationships.
- Pastors often cite this verse when instructing their congregations about their personal associations and being "unequally yoked" with unbelievers and parents use it to warn their children about the dangers of careless choices in friends.

But, while it's demonstrably true that bad associations and friendships tend toward one's corruption, Paul wasn't speaking to that; his meaning is something else altogether – something that is hugely important to the matter at hand.

- a. Paul began his rebuke/exhortation with a maxim – "bad company corrupts good morals" – drawn from Greek culture rather than the Scripture. Specifically, it comes from the dramatic comedy *Thais* written by the well-known Greek dramatist Menander (circa 341-290 B.C.). Menander was known for his moral maxims, many of which found their way into Greco-Roman popular culture as proverbial sayings. This is likely the source of Paul's knowledge of this saying.

It may at first appear strange that Paul would cite from a pagan source in rebuking the Corinthians, but it's not the only time he used truths from outside the Scripture to make a point – a point that became inscripturated. Indeed, Paul did not regard such citations and allusions as inappropriate or unholy. He recognized that men's fallen condition doesn't alter the fact that they are the image and likeness of God (ref. Genesis 9:5-6).

- Even people with no conscious knowledge of the living God – people who are living in rebellion against Him – are still able to discern existential, philosophical, moral and ethical truths consistent with the person and character of God (and authentic humanness).
- Righteousness – that is, the truths and features of human "rightness" – is graven on man's very being. Thus it's not unknown to him; rather, he *suppresses* the truth as a feature of his unrighteousness (Romans 1:18-19).

So it is that men in their natural state instinctively sense that they are more than mere animals; though they often seek to suppress and deny it, human beings have an inherent awareness that they are "offspring of deity" such that "in God they live and move and have their existence" (Acts 17:26-29).

Unregenerate men are capable of recognizing, articulating and promoting truth, and so it was with Menander. And so it was with classical Greek culture which appropriated his maxim and made it a general proverb. Paul had likely heard it in that context, but he here employed it for a particular reason and with a particular meaning. Two things are especially important to note in that regard:

- First, Paul was applying it to the Corinthians, but with respect to the *matter of resurrection* and their understanding of it and relation to it.
  - More specifically, Paul perceived the Corinthians' relationship to the truth of resurrection to be a matter of *deception*. Hence his preface to his citation of Menander's maxim: "*Do not be deceived*" (v. 33a). Importantly, what appears here to be a warning is actually a rebuke: Paul wasn't urging the Corinthians to be on their guard against deception; his grammar indicates that they were *already* deceived. Paul was insisting that they *stop being deceived*. Persons and/or ideas had been leading them astray and it needed to end.
- b. Paul perceived that the Corinthians were deceived and their deception involved the way they understood and related to the truth of resurrection. This is the framework for interpreting his citation of Menander's maxim. (Neither Menander's meaning in his comedy nor popular usage is relevant; what matters is Paul's meaning and that is determined in context.) And framed by the context, a more appropriate rendering would be something as follows: *Spurious associations deceive and ultimately ruin a sound and well disposed ethic.*
- The noun often rendered "company" (*homilia*) connotes the assembling of separate entities into a close association. These entities can be people, but they can also be ideas or words – thus the transliteration *homily* to refer to a sermon or lecture. It's also notable that Paul used this noun in the plural: he spoke of *bad associations* rather than one such association. Treating these considerations in context, it's quite likely Paul was referring to the assembly of various ideas and notions – i.e., to a *mindset* – rather than a company of people (though human associations are implicated in this).
  - This understanding also fits well with the fact that this *homilia* results in deception which corrupts. Moreover, Paul characterized this corruption as pernicious, leading ultimately to the ruination of the entity subject to it (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 4:20-22; Jude 10; Revelation 19:2).
  - And what is ruined by this destructive *homilia* is a person's *ethic*: his disposition of mind which governs his habit – his pattern of life. And not any ethic but a person's *good* ethic, where "good" denotes that which conforms to what is right and true in both its essential character (*goodness* – cf. 1 Peter 2:3 with Luke 5:39; also Matthew 11:30) and in its active disposition (*kindness* – cf. Luke 6:35; Romans 2:4; Ephesians 4:32).

Paul's concern, then, seems to be that spurious notions among the Corinthians regarding the truth of resurrection were adversely affecting their understanding of their present lives and future destiny in Christ. And the result of their corrupted thinking was corrupted conduct – perhaps not so much in terms of flagrant ungodliness as in lives conformed to natural interests and desires.

- c. Paul's rebuke in view of this deception is stunning: "*Become sober-minded as you ought and stop sinning*" (15:34a.) Indeed, given that the matter of concern was a flawed understanding of resurrection, it might appear at first glance that Paul was overreacting. Some at Corinth were struggling with the truth and dynamics of the dead being raised, but did this amount to *sin*? Why would Paul treat this matter with such severity? The answer is evident in the larger context: Resurrection isn't merely an intriguing concept or a secondary Christian doctrine; Paul recognized that it is the marrow of the gospel because it is the very essence of God's purpose and accomplishment in Christ. God's design is the summing up of everything in His Son, and this "summation" is the creation's participation in Christ's resurrection as He is the beginning and first fruits of new creation.

Therefore the Corinthian situation wasn't at all insignificant and Paul made sure they understood that by the way he characterized their error. His expression, "become sober-minded" (NASB), is most literally rendered *wake up from your stupor – as is both needful and right*. What makes this rebuke all the more stinging is that this Greek verb connotes recovering from the senseless stupor induced by drunkenness. Paul saw the Corinthian error regarding resurrection as a matter of culpable carelessness and folly, not conscientious misjudgment.

And he was in the position to make this judgment because he had been the Corinthians' teacher. Paul knew full well that their error wasn't born of ignorance of the truth of resurrection (ref. again 15:1-3); it was the result of careless, fleshly thinking. For this reason the Corinthians were indeed guilty of sin, and thus it was perfectly appropriate for Paul to demand that they *stop sinning*.

- d. Paul regarded the Corinthians' questioning of resurrection to be evidence that they were deceived. But they weren't innocent in this; they were culpable in their deception because it was grounded in their own careless and undisciplined thinking. They had become like men in the throes of a drunken stupor, out of touch with what is real and unable to think with a clear mind. Perhaps most stinging was Paul's summary assessment: This situation proved to him that there were those at Corinth who were sinfully *ignorant of God* (15:34b).

Paul wasn't speaking absolutely; he wasn't saying that these individuals had absolutely no knowledge of God, but that their error regarding resurrection implies error respecting God Himself. *To the extent they misjudged resurrection they revealed their ignorance of God*. To a congregation which prided itself on its mature knowledge (cf. 1:4-31, 3:18-4:21, 5:1-6, 8:1-13), Paul could not have given a more stinging rebuke. And he intended it so, for he spoke to their shame.