

But You Were Washed

1 Corinthians 6:1-11
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¹ When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? ² Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ³ Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! ⁴ So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? ⁵ I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, ⁶ but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? ⁷ To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? ⁸ But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers! ⁹ Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

1 Corinthians 6:1-11

Here the apostle Paul instructs the Corinthian Christians not to go to court against one another. The Corinthians had an almost endless list of problems, shortcomings, divisions, and sins; and the way they handled their problems was by seeking restitution against one another in the public courts. Paul speaks of a plurality of lawsuits (v. 7). It seems this was a common occurrence as they continued to follow the world's wisdom. They lived in a litigious society. The court was a form of public entertainment. It was considered normal and wise to handle disputes there, so the Corinthian Christians followed the lead of their culture.

But Paul writes to tell them not to do such a thing. In fact, because of their identity in Christ, because of what God had done to them and for them, because of their current status as God's people and their eternal destiny as cosmic judges themselves, there is nothing more ridiculous, nothing more inconsistent with who they actually are, than taking their problems to the secular courts.

We will approach this passage in two ways. First, we will consider the practical application for us today of Paul's instructions to not go to court against one another. What does that mean? What does that look like? And then second, we will climb the enormous biblical and theological mountain of truth that forms the grounds for Paul's instructions. Why is it, exactly, that taking a brother or sister in the Lord to court is so very contrary to our Christian identity?

Do Not Go to Court Against a Fellow Christian

We begin with the practical applications of Paul's instructions for us today. In v. 1, Paul writes, "When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to the law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?" The implications of Paul's words here are very clear. Do not take a Christian brother or sister to the public courts to settle your grievances. The word "dare" in v. 1 often carries the meaning of being bold or courageous. Paul is telling the Corinthians that to go to court against one another is so wrong, it so offends God, and it so runs contrary to their Christian identity, that it takes a lot of courage to do it. So, don't do it.

Our temptation in reading this passage, I believe, is to think, "Well, this is just one of those sins that I don't have to worry about. Obviously, I will never take a fellow Christian to court." But we can't merely skip over Paul's words here. In a variety of ways this continues to happen among Christians today, and we must never be so confident to say that this will never happen to us.

Recently I read in our local newspaper about a church in our community whose leaders were suing and counter suing one another over church leadership matters. The headline in the paper read, *God's house divided: Lawsuit pits elders against each other*. Last year I saw members of a large, influential church in our own denomination, upset over actions taken by their leadership, take their complaints to the editorial page of their local newspaper. In effect, they brought their case before the unrighteous, just as the Corinthians were doing.

The reality of our own situation is that because we are a relatively close body of believers, our lives intersect with one another quite frequently, and there always exists the danger of serious disputes arising among us. In my time at Calvin PCA, I have entered into business transactions with some of you. Because I am so deftly inadequate as a handyman, I've hired a number of you to do work around our home. I've sold a car to one of our church members. As a church we are frequently working with and for one another, sometimes in formal business dealings, but often times in voluntary service to one another. In all of these interactions there is always the potential for something to go horribly wrong. Relationships may suffer. Disputes may be serious and difficult. And the public courts are often an attractive option.

Here is the reality. If you have been a member of Christ's church, you have almost certainly had some sort of dispute with another Christian over something. Sometimes these disputes are serious. They are often over the kinds of things that the world goes to court over. But in spite of the fact that the world goes to court over these same issues, Christians must not.

Paul offers two alternatives to the public courts in matters of irreconcilable differences. First, you may take the dispute to a fellow Christian for help in resolving the matter. Paul asks in v. 5, "Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers?"

In some ways Paul is laying on sarcasm here. The Corinthians think that they are wise by the world's standards, but Paul points out the irony that they are apparently not wise enough to settle their own disputes. His overall point is that either the church or a fellow Christian ought to help Christians resolve disputes between one another, not the public courts.

The second option Paul offers is to allow yourself to be wronged, and let it go. In v. 7, he writes, “To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?” In other words, it is far better to be wronged without restitution than to go to the public courts. We’ll discuss why this is in the next section. For now we simply observe that Christians should not go to court against one another.

Are there exceptions? What if a lot of money is at stake? What if the family business is at stake? What if an important real estate transaction is at stake? What if your own reputation and good name is at stake? But here, as difficult as the teaching seems, Paul’s instructions are clear. If a grievance against a fellow Christian cannot be resolved within the Christian community, it is ultimately more honorable to merely be wronged (even when a lot is at stake), than to take another Christian to court.

We must, of course, be careful to recognize that this does not mean it is our job to protect other Christians who are involved in illegal activity. We do everything we can to handle sin “in house,” but if that sin is also illegal, we cannot simply cover it up. Illegal sin must be reported to and dealt with by the civil magistrates. Churches should never attempt to handle illegal activity on their own.

This has been a true stumbling block for many, many churches. Sometimes the sexual abuse of minors has been covered over by church bodies. This is most definitely wrong! Christians are not exempt from the civil law. Therefore, if I steal funds from the church, both the police and the presbytery ought to be called. We can never use this prohibition against taking another Christian to court as a cover for illegal activity.

What about cases in which you are involved in a dispute with a non-Christian? Here we must recognize that sometimes it is acceptable for Christians to take non-Christians to court. There is no biblical prohibition against that. We must always guard our motives in every situation, but we ought not merely sit back and do nothing if we have been wronged. God is a just God. He loves justice, and it is perfectly acceptable for Christians to pursue justice when necessary. In fact, we recognize that the civic court system is part of God’s common grace given to all mankind for the ordering of a just and equitable society.

Biblical and Theological Reasons for Not Taking Fellow Christians to Court

Paul’s practical instruction in this passage has been simple. Christians ought not to take one another to court. Now we ask, “Why is this the case?” And as we’ll see, Paul’s instructions rest on a very significant biblical and theological mountain of truth.

Because of our identity in Christ, because of who we are now and who we will be in eternity, the very idea of taking another Christian to court is truly absurd. Paul is obviously really upset by what the Corinthians are doing. He tries to bring public shame upon them (v. 5). He uses a kind of sanctified, but biting sarcasm against them. He understands that their error in taking one another to court is really a symptom of a great problem. The real problem in Corinth is that they do not understand the full scope of what it means to be a Christian, nor do they understand what God has done, and is doing for them through Christ. Whenever a Christian takes a fellow believer to court, it is in essence a fundamental denial of our own Christian destiny and distinctiveness.

First Paul reminds the Corinthians that they will actually serve in God's kingdom as eschatological judges alongside Christ. Paul says in v. 2, "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases?" While the Bible does not give us a lot of detail about the precise nature of our future judicial roles, its witness is clear, nonetheless. In some way, God's people will serve as judges over creation, even over angels (v. 3).¹

So, if Christians are going to be eschatological judges of the world, then why can't they make judgments among themselves now? Why turn to the world for judgments, when you will one day be judging the world? Surely we ought to be able to resolve among ourselves what Paul calls "trivial cases" (v. 2).

God has blessed his people with wisdom, with his Word, with knowledge of the truth, and with new hearts and minds that have new insight into what true justice is. The Bible clearly shows us how the very wisdom and knowledge of God is imparted to his people. Paul prays for the Colossians, that they "may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Col. 1:9). Certainly, if God grants wisdom to his people, then we ought to be capable of making reasonable judgments concerning disagreements among fellow believers.

Lawsuits between Christians also reveal distorted priorities. Again, we think of the fact that Paul calls these cases "trivial" (v. 2). In all likelihood, the world did not consider these cases trivial. They may have involved significant amounts of money or property. But, from Paul's perspective, they were trivial. With this language, Paul indicates that their priorities were warped toward the values of this age, rather than of the age to come.² That is to say, they cared too much about their rights and property, and too little about the glory of God and the good of their neighbor. If their priorities were straight, these lawsuits would not be an option. So Paul asks, "Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?" (v. 7). In other words, it is better to pay little heed to that which will not last.

Christian friend, is your property or money so important that you will fight for it at all costs? Or is there a point in which it is better to simply let it go? We ought to be so rooted in, longing for, and running toward the next world, that we are more than willing to hold loosely to the things of this earth. Thus, to take a brother in the Lord to court over material possessions is to distort our true Christian priorities. If we have any hope of becoming Christ-like Christians, we must learn to suffer wrong honorably. We must learn to bear with one another patiently, graciously, and with much forgiveness.

It is all too easy for even Christ's church to become akin to professional wrestling, with rivalries, mortal enemies, smack-downs, cage-matches, trash talk, and lots of anger and grunting and fuming. When we find ourselves in the middle of difficulties and disagreements among God's people, we must ask ourselves, will you defend your name and possessions at all costs? Will you refuse to lose? Will you fight back? Will you absolutely refuse to suffer loss? Or, will you remember the words of Jesus?

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well (Mt. 5:38-40).

If it is a trivial matter, merely pertaining to the temporal things of this life (v. 3), why not rather suffer wrong? To go to court, as Paul says in v. 7, is already to be defeated by sin.

Here we also learn that when believers bring their disputes between one another to the secular courts, blemishes are brought against the church. Paul is clearly concerned that the Corinthians are bringing shame to the name of Christ by their actions. In v. 6, Paul expresses shock that believers are going against one another in court in front of unbelievers. The message is clear. The church's witness to the world suffers when Christians cannot patiently, wisely, and quietly resolve their differences. The news article that spoke of the lawsuits between elders and pastors highlights this truth.

[The] pastor gave his first sermon in three weeks on Sunday after a heated debate over a civil lawsuit he filed against two church elders in January. And on Monday, the pair of church elders filed new counterclaims in court against the pastor. And so, even as the congregation continues to receive the Word of God during regular services, the people who run the church continue a battle for control....

How would you invite a non-believer to a church in this situation? How can you invite someone to be reconciled to God when you are unable to reconcile with your brother in Christ? How can you invite someone to church when the pastor is suing its members? When Christians bring unresolved conflict to the courts of the world, the church of Christ suffers and the very name of God is dishonored.

And finally, Paul reminds the Corinthians that to bring lawsuits against one another is directly contrary to the nature of God's work of redemption among them.

But you yourselves wrong and defraud--even your own brothers! Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:8-11).

In v. 1, Paul makes a clear distinction between those he calls the "unrighteous" and those he calls the "saints." Then, in v. 8, Paul indicates that the Corinthians are acting like the unrighteous. In vv. 9-10, Paul suggests that to continue to act like the unrighteous is not only foolish, but dangerous. The unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God. And, as Paul brings his argument to a close, it is almost as if he is asking the question, "Don't you know who you really are?"

If we truly knew who we are in Christ, that we have been washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of Christ, then we would see how foolish lawsuits and irreconcilable divisions among Christians actually are. When we truly grasp what God has wrought for us through Christ, then we may follow Paul's instructions here in 1 Cor. 6 with joy. Be wronged? No problem. Apply God's wisdom to the trivial problems of this life? No problem. See the church and our fellow Christians for who they truly are in Christ, and strive for unity and reconciliation? Yes, yes, yes!

One pastor writes:

The church is glorious to Christ. You may not see what's glorious about the church to God but he is going to show you. My friends, this is why it is so important for us to love the church now - with all her imperfections, all her weakness, all her failures and all her stumblings. One day, God is going to unveil her and she is going to take your breath away.³

Such Were Some of You...

In vv. 9-10, Paul reminds the Corinthians of who they once were: sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers, and swindlers. And here we must see that Paul does not now say, "But, you cleaned up your act," or "but, you straightened yourselves out," or "but, you turned your lives around." For Paul, that type of language is anti-gospel. The true gospel ultimately points to God's mighty acts of salvation in Christ. Thus Paul says, "And such were some of you. But you were washed..." (v. 11).

Ultimately, Paul ends his discussion about lawsuits by reminding the Corinthians of the exceedingly great truths of the gospel. Through the power of the gospel at work in their lives, God has not only saved them and forgiven them their sin, but he has also made them into new creations. Friends, if you are a Christian, you are a new creation. And as new creations, you must now understand that the only law court that ultimately matters is God's. And, as Paul says, God has justified you!

¹ See Dan. 7:22, Mt. 19:28, Rev. 20:4.

² Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 219.

³ LIGON DUNCAN FOOTNOTE????