

1 Corinthians 6:1-8
Isaiah 5
Psalm 10

“How to Think about Judging in the World”

Mar 30, 2014

Isaiah is speaking of the economic and social sins of Jerusalem.

He speaks of Israel as a vineyard –
a vineyard is a well-organized culture.
God tended and cared for his vineyard, wisely and well.

And he looked for good fruit – he looked for grapes.
But instead it yielded wild grapes – otherwise called “stinkfruit.”

The rest of chapter 5 explains the parable.

Some people were joining house to house and field to field
(think of Ahab and Jezebel who killed Naboth in order to seize his vineyard,
and turn it into a vegetable garden!) –
they were using their power and status in order to enrich themselves.

Others were drunkards who cared only for their own pleasure –
and so they perverted justice for a bribe.
“So long as I get what I want, I don’t care about anyone else!”

And so God says that he will bring judgment against Israel.

When God’s people treat each other so terribly,
then God’s judgment is not far behind.

For the last two days we hosted the ‘Beauty for Ashes’ conference here at the church building,
as a group of 80-100 Rwandans came together to worship God
and encourage one another as they remember the brutal genocide 20 years ago.

On April 7, 1994, the radical Hutu-controlled government of Rwanda
embarked on the systematic extermination of the Tutsis
and the moderate Hutus who protected them.

Over the next 100 days, more than 700,000 Rwandans were killed.

Here’s the worst part:

Both the Hutus and the Tutsis are Christians.
In 1994 89% of Rwandans claimed to be Christian
(62% Catholic, 15% Protestant, 11% 7th Day Adventist).

For many years, the Christians of Rwanda had not treated each other well.

It reminds me of the so-called “Christian” middle ages –
when Christian nations were regularly at war with one another.
Europe was “Christian” for a thousand years –
a thousand bloody years.

When God's people treat each other like this,
then God's anger will burn against his people.

Psalm 10 reflects on this situation.

Psalm 10 speaks of the wicked "hotly pursuing the poor" –
but who are the "wicked"?

They are not wicked Gentiles.

They are wicked Israelites.

Or, to put it more jarringly, they are wicked Christians.

How can this be?!

A wicked Christian is a contradiction in terms!

Yes, that is exactly right!

And that is *precisely* the problem!

You can't have a wicked Christian!

But we *do* have wicked Christians!

Remember that all baptized members of the church are "Christians."

I'm not saying that they are all regenerate.

I'm not saying that they are all going to heaven.

I'm simply saying that "Christian" refers to one who *claims* the name –
not what's in his *heart*, but what is on his lips!

Psalm 10 helps us with this,

because Psalm 10 reminds us that God *does* see the heart.

He sees through the outward veneer –

he will not forget the helpless –

our God will "hear the desire of the afflicted,"

he will "strengthen their heart"

he will "do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed,

so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more."

Sing Psalm 10

Read 1 Corinthians 5:9-6:11

Paul opened 1 Corinthians with a strong emphasis on the centrality of the cross of Christ.

Now he is applying the way of the cross the whole of the Christian life.

1 Corinthians 5-11 is dealing with the three basic parts of human life.

Nowadays we might call it sex, money, and worship.

In Genesis 1, God blessed Adam and Eve,

"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (there's the sex – making babies)
and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea

and over the birds of the heavens
and over every living thing that moves on the earth”
(there’s the money – labor – making stuff)

So, in the beginning, God called us to make babies and make stuff.

Indeed, in the curse in Genesis 3,
baby-making and stuff-making is precisely where we now suffer.

Genesis 3:16 – “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing”
Genesis 3:17 – “cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life.”

Sin has now corrupted these two basic areas of human life.

In chapter 5, Paul talks about this as “greed” and “sexual immorality.”

Last time we talked a little about greed.

The definition of greed is

“a strong desire to acquire more and more material possessions
or to possess more things than other people have, all irrespective of need.”

And the idea of greed in the NT (and in ancient literature generally)
invariably includes *actions* that harm others.

The covetous person simply *desires* something that belongs to another.

The greedy person actively pursues it.

The greedy person wants more than is rightfully his –
and will use unjust means to acquire what he (or she) wants.

Some greedy people are really clever and can “stay within the law.”

That’s how chapter 6 connects to chapter 5.

Because the law courts in the ancient world were designed to protect property rights.

And so a powerful person who is also a greedy person,
can work the system in such a way as to exercise his greed
without ever breaking the law!

Some people know how to exploit the tax system to get tax breaks
that were not intended for them – and that they do not need –
but they know how to work the system!

Other people know how to exploit churches to get people to give them money and things.

Greed can exist among the very rich.

Greed can exist among the very poor.

Because greed invariably includes actions that *harm* others.

Greed is always about pushing others out of the way, so that I can get what I want.

And here in chapter 6, Paul gives us a case study in greed.

1. A Case Study in Greed: Going to Court (v1)

When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?

There are two parts to the background that are really important.

First, the Jewish background.

The rabbis had argued that it was unlawful for the Jews to bring their civil cases before Gentile courts. And the Romans had allowed the Jews to judge their own internal cases. Jews often spoke in terms of “Jew” and “Gentile” – or the “saints” and the “unrighteous” (like Paul does here). When Paul describes the church as “one new man” bringing Jew and Gentile together, he uses language that will continue in the early church, as the early fathers will speak of a “third race” – a new humanity – characterized by true justice and holiness.

Second, there is a Roman background – particularly in Corinth.

The Roman courts were places for patronage and social networks to operate. The wealthy and well-connected had major influence in the courts. In one sense, this has always been the case. The civil courts exist, in large part, to protect property – so they tend to be more difficult for the “little guy” to negotiate.

In Romans 13, Paul will clearly assert the *right* of the magistrate to exercise justice – but here Paul is not dealing with that question. Here Paul is saying that Christians should not go to law “before the unrighteous.”

Too often, the focus is on “unbelievers” (v6) – but Paul also appears to be concerned that the courts of Corinth are *unjust*.

The word in verse 1 is “the unrighteous” – which could simply be a synonym for “unbeliever” – except for the fact that Paul uses the same word in verse 9 (and the same root is translated “wrong” in verses 7-8), making clear that those who wrong others will not inherit the kingdom of God.

So when Paul says “does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints” he is not just saying “Christians” vs. “non-Christians.” Paul remembers all too well the problems with Israel. Just because the judge is a member of a Christian church does not mean that he is just!

In other words, Paul sees the court case of chapter 6 in the same context as the divisions of chapters 2-4, and the sexual immorality in chapter 5.

Paul understands that the Corinthians are trashing the name of Christ
as they inflame the divisions in the church
by appealing to the unrighteous.

When the church is divided –
when the people of God rely on outsiders in their fight with one another –
they are completely forgetting the way of the cross!

So what does this mean for us?
Some would say that Christians should never take each other to court, period.
Others would distinguish between criminal cases and civil cases.
Paul is plainly not talking about murder or robbery here.
If someone kills your wife, you may go to the courts for justice!

Plainly the question is “lawsuits.”
And many have argued that the Roman and Jewish background is crucial.

I would argue that when two Christians have a dispute over money,
generally they should attempt to resolve these sorts of claims out of court,
perhaps using a Christian arbitrator.

But it’s worth noting that Paul was dealing with a notorious corrupt civil court system.
It appears that his central concern is that Christians are trying to use the courts
to “wrong and defraud” (verse 8) their own brothers.
After all, the way to get a favorable verdict is through bribery,
“pulling strings,” doing favors.

What would Paul say if you had a good equitable legal system?

I think it’s clear that Paul would *still* raise objections.
How are you approaching the case?
Are you approaching the case in an adversarial manner?
Are you trying to finagle the nuances of the case for your benefit?
(I know, that’s what lawyers do!
But that’s greed.
Greed doesn’t care about what’s right.
Greed cares about winning.)

If you are a lawyer – if you are a businessman –
the way of the cross will cost you.

Paul turns to the would-be lawyers in Corinth, and he says:

2. “Trivial Cases”: Viewing Matters of This Life in the Light of the Gospel (v2-4)

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?*

What does it mean that “the saints will judge the world”?

After all, the OT is abundantly clear that *God* alone is judge!
Jesus Christ is the one who will judge the living and the dead
when he returns in glory!
So how can Paul say that the saints will judge the world?

I would suggest that Paul is applying his doctrine of union with Christ.
If we have been united to Christ in his death –
and if we have been raised with Christ
and seated with him at the right hand of the Father –
then we also are united with him in his judging the nations.

In Romans 6 Paul says that if we have been united to Christ in his death,
then we have died to sin –
and if we have died to sin, how can we live any longer in it?

Likewise, here Paul says that if we have been united to Christ
the one who will judge the living and the dead at the final day,
then we are competent to judge matters of everyday life.

The ESV says “trivial things” –
which is a fair way of putting it.

Paul says the same thing in a slightly different way in verse 3:

³ *Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!*

In verse 2, Paul had said “trivial things” – the “least” things –
now in verse 3 he refers to them as “matters of this life.”
Paul is not talking about criminal cases –
but what we would call the ‘small claims courts’ of the ancient world.

⁴ *So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church?*

At least with verse 4,
it would seem clear that if you lived in a “Christian” nation,
then Paul would not object to using the courts.
If “everyone” is a Christian (at least in name),
then there would be no real difference between the courts and arbitration.

But again, it’s important to keep in mind Paul’s objection to greed.

If you are trying to use the courts to manipulate the system –
with the result that your brother is left holding the short end of the stick –
that is greed.

3. Now I Do Want to Shame You! The Corinthians' Folly (v5-6)

In chapter 4, verse 14, when talking about the Corinthians' dispute over their teachers,

Paul said, "I do not write these things to make you ashamed."

Now, when talking about the Corinthians' taking their disputes to the unrighteous,

Paul says, "I say this to make you ashamed!"

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?*

When it was a matter that just affect Paul and other teachers, Paul admonishes them gently.

But when it is a matter of the reputation of Christ,

Paul *does* want to shame them!

If you care more about your stuff than you do about Christ, then shame on you!

Has it come to this?!

None of you are wise enough to arbitrate between brothers?

And so you take your piddling little disputes before unbelievers,

and demonstrate your folly and weakness before the watching world?!

Paul is not making a categorical claim that Christians are wiser or more just than non-Christians.

He's making a claim about what sort of community we ought to be.

We ought to be the sort of place where disputes get resolved.

If Jesus is the one who will judge the living and the dead on the final day –

then those who belong to Jesus should be able to resolve their minor disputes

between now and then.

4. "Why Not Rather Be Defrauded?" The Way of the Cross (v7-8)

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!*

Why are you fighting?

You may be right!

But so what!

Does that matter more than Jesus?

We tend to think simply in terms of abstract justice:

if I have been wronged, then I will demand my rights.

“I had a fiduciary responsibility to my children” – therefore I had to go to court.

But Paul says “why not rather suffer wrong?”

This is where the poverty of the English language comes out:
the word here means to act unjustly.

It’s connected to the same root as the noun in verse 1 – the “unrighteous” (or “unjust”).
When you take your brother before the unjust,
in an attempt to use the courts to get your way,
then you have “unjusted him” – you have “penalized” him.

We have no way of saying “you unjusted him”
we have to say “you did injustice” or “you were unjust” –
which has the effect of separating the person from the act.

That’s why it’s important to translate verse 8 “but you yourselves wrong and defraud.”
“You wronged him”

But it’s really important to see the connection between this –
and the “unrighteous” of verse 1 and the “unrighteous” in verse 9.

When you take your brother before the unjust,
then you are becoming like the unjust –
the ones who will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Because the same word translated “the unrighteous” in verse 1
is also translated “the unrighteous” in verse 9 –
and the ESV footnote calls attention to the fact that it’s the “wrongdoers.”

You should be using your social connections to love and serve others –
not to get your own way!

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.*

We’ll come back to this next week,

because verses 9-11 deserve more time than we have now!

But I want you to see that Paul continues his focus on these two basic parts of our life –
sex and money –

in his description of “the unrighteous” in verses 9-10.

But *such* were some of you.

Everything that is inconsistent with who you are in Christ needs to change!

And the glorious thing is that *in Christ Jesus* –
you are no longer who you once were:

*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.*

Tonight we'll be looking at part of what it means to be “washed” –
purified and brought into the family/people of God.

Once you were sexually immoral – but you have been washed.
Once you were greedy – but you have been sanctified.
Once you were unjust – but you have been justified –
in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

You are no longer who you once were!