

# **Challenges Christians Face**

## **Lawsuits against Believers**

*1 Corinthians 6:1-11*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

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# Lawsuits against Believers<sup>1</sup>

## Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the question of whether to sue fellow Christians in civil court. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Lawsuits against Believers."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 6:1-11:

**<sup>1</sup> When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? <sup>2</sup> 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? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! <sup>4</sup> So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? <sup>5</sup> 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, <sup>6</sup> but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? <sup>7</sup> To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? <sup>8</sup> But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers!**

**<sup>9</sup> 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, <sup>10</sup> nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup> 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)**

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<sup>1</sup> The material for this sermon is taken from Richard L. Pratt, Jr., vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 83-94.

## Introduction

The United States is the most litigious society in history.

One website says that in 2002 over 16 million civil cases were filed in state courts.<sup>2</sup> That's 1 lawsuit for every 20 people in this country. In fact, Americans spend more on civil litigation than any other country, accord to a study in the *Economic Journal*.

Why are there so many lawsuits in America? Part of the reason, according to the *Economic Journal*, has to do with incentives to sue, of which Americans have plenty. While in most European legal systems the loser in a suit must pay a large portion of the winner's legal fees, in America each party pays its own. So, simply speaking, in America there is little to lose. Many people apparently file a lawsuit just to see how far they can go with it.

In his commentary on *1 Corinthians* pastor and author John MacArthur points out that the legal situation in Corinth probably was much as it was in Athens, where litigation was a part of everyday life. It had become a form of challenge and even entertainment. One ancient writer claimed that, in a manner of speaking, every Athenian (and Corinthian) was a lawyer.

When a problem arose between two parties that they could not settle between themselves, the first recourse was private arbitration. Each party was assigned a disinterested private citizen as an arbitrator, and the two arbitrators, along with a neutral third person, would attempt to resolve the problem.

If they failed, the case was turned over to a court known as the Forty, who assigned a public arbitrator to each party. Interestingly, every citizen had to serve as a public arbitrator during the sixtieth year of his life.

If public arbitration failed, the case went to a jury court, composed of from several hundred to several thousand jurors. Every citizen over thirty years of age was subject to serving as a juror. Either as a party to a lawsuit, as an arbitrator, or as a juror,

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.sixwise.com/newsletters/06/10/05/how-many-lawsuits-are-there-in-the-us--amp-what-are-they-for-an-amazing-overview.htm>.

most citizens were regularly involved in legal proceedings of one sort or another.

In Corinth, Gentile Christians had been so used to arguing, disputing, and taking one another to court before they were saved that they carried those practices over into their new lives as Christians. That course was not only wrong spiritually but practically unnecessary.

On the other hand, for centuries Jews had settled all their disputes either privately or in a synagogue court. They refused to take their problems before a Gentile court, believing that to do so would imply that God, through his own people using his own scriptural principles, was not competent to solve every problem. It was considered a form of blasphemy to go to court before Gentiles. Both Greek and Roman rulers had allowed the Jews to continue that practice, even outside Palestine. Under Roman law Jews could try virtually every offense and give almost any sentence, except that of death. As we know from Jesus' trial, the Sanhedrin was free to imprison and beat Jesus as they pleased, but they required the permission of Rome, represented by Pilate, in order to put him to death.

Because Christians were considered by the Romans to be a Jewish sect, the Corinthian believers were probably free to settle their disputes among themselves.<sup>3</sup> But they did not do so. Although Christians from a Jewish background might have been inclined to do so, Christians from a Gentile background were used to the sport of public litigation.

The believers in Corinth were settling their differences in civil litigation. Paul argued that this practice had to end because it revealed that the problem was a symptom of something much worse. It revealed another serious problem in the congregation: the Corinthians neither understood nor lived the gospel.

### Lesson

Like the Corinthians, many Christians today fail to under-

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<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 136-37.

stand the gospel properly. The result is that many Christians have a worldly value system. And because we don't understand the gospel properly, we behave like non-Christians and sometimes end up taking each other to civil court. We need to grow in our understanding of the gospel so that we can properly live out the gospel norms in our daily lives.

And so, in today's lesson we learn about how Christians are to handle disputes among themselves.

I would like to use the following outline for today's lesson, which I have taken from Richard Pratt's *I & II Corinthians*:

1. An Incredible Problem: Mishandling Lawsuits (6:1-6)
2. An Underlying Problem: Not Living the Gospel (6:7-8)
3. The Root Problem: Misunderstanding the Gospel (6:9-11)

## **I. An Incredible Problem: Mishandling Lawsuits (6:1-6)**

First, notice the incredible problem of mishandling lawsuits.

Although the Gentiles were used to bringing lawsuits against each other in public courts, the Jews were not. They did not believe that it was appropriate for Gentiles to handle their disputes.

Since Paul came from a Jewish background, he agreed that it was an incredible problem for Christians to mishandle lawsuits by airing their problems in the public arena. So, he set down two principles for dealing with the incredible problem of mishandling lawsuits.

### *A. Christians Should Not Bring Lawsuits against Each Other in Public Courts (6:1, 6)*

First, Christians should not bring lawsuits against each other in public courts.

It was inconceivable to Paul that Christians would actually bring lawsuits against each other in public courts.

And so he said in verse 1: **“When one of you has a griev-**

**ance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?”** And similarly, in verse 6, he said, “. . . **but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?”**

What is the nature of the **grievance**? Paul does not specify what the **grievance** is.

Some have thought that the **grievance** had to do with the illegitimate sexual relationship he had just mentioned in chapter 5. However, that is unlikely because Paul had already passed judgment on the man and had indicated that he was to be put out of the fellowship.

More likely the **grievance** has to do with some kind of financial dispute because he asked in verse 8, “Why not rather be defrauded?”

Nevertheless, regardless of the nature of the grievance, Paul indicates that Christians should not bring lawsuits against each other in public courts.

But, obviously, Christians do have grievances with each other. How are they to solve their disputes with each other?

That brings me to the second principle.

*B. Christians Should Judge Lawsuits against Each Other (6:2-5)*

Second, Christians should judge lawsuits against each other.

Paul anticipated the objection that Christians were not competent to judge disputes between Christians. And so, by asking a series of questions Paul affirmed that Christians should judge lawsuits against each other.

He asked in verses 2-5: “**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? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? 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 . . . .?”**

## **II. An Underlying Problem: Not Living the Gospel (6:7-8)**

Second, notice the underlying problem of not living the gospel.

The fact that the Corinthians mishandled lawsuits by taken fellow Christians to the public court was terrible, but the problem flowed out of an underlying problem. The Corinthian Christians were not living the gospel. They mistreated one another and failed to reconcile their differences in accordance with the gospel.

### *A. Lawsuits Indicate a Defeated Lifestyle (6:7a)*

First, lawsuits indicate a defeated lifestyle.

Paul said in verse 7a: **“To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you.”**

The purpose of a lawsuit is basically to win an argument. Two sides have a disagreement. They try to resolve it themselves but they cannot do so. Then, the aggrieved party seeks to remedy the wrong by forcing the other person into an arena where a third party can rule on the dispute. The judge rules; one party wins, and the other party loses.

And so by having **lawsuits at all with one another is already** an indication that two Christians are not able to resolve a conflict. And whatever decision the public court reaches **is also already a defeat** for Christians.

### *B. Christians Should Avoid Dishonoring Christ in Public Court (6:7b)*

Second, Christians should avoid dishonoring Christ in public court.

Paul said in verse 7b: **“Why not rather suffer wrong? Why**

**not rather be defrauded?”**

The Corinthians had already lost sight of some of the most precious principles by which they were to live. For example:

- Christians are to love one another (James 2:8).
- Christians are to serve one another (Galatians 5:13).
- Christians are to work in harmony with one another to build up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:16).

For these reasons, it would be better to **suffer wrong and be defrauded** than to struggle and fight with one another.

*C. Christians Who Cheat Christians Sin Grievously (6:8)*

And third, Christians who cheat Christians sin grievously.

Paul said in verse 8: **“But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers!”**

It seems that the Christians in Corinth were not simply disagreeing over certain issues. They were apparently intentionally wronging and defrauding each other. And that, of course, is a grievous sin.

**III. The Root Problem: Misunderstanding the Gospel (6:9-11)**

And third, notice the root problem of misunderstanding the gospel.

At the bottom of the Corinthians’ legal problems was a misunderstanding of their identity in Christ, and the behavior to which that new identity called them. This misunderstanding led to their mistreatment of others, and then to mishandling disputes.

*A. The Unrighteous Will Not Receive the Gospel’s Blessings (6:9-10)*

First, the unrighteous will not receive the gospel’s blessings.

Paul said in verses 9-10: **“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be de-**

**ceived: 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.”**

Paul is not saying that Christians are able to lose their salvation. He is simply saying that the Christians are acting like non-Christians, whom he calls **the unrighteous**.

And then he listed the kinds of sins that are practiced by non-Christians, **the unrighteous**. He did not speak of people who occasionally fell into these sins, but of those who made these sins the patterns of their lives. Similar lists of sinful lifestyles appear elsewhere in Paul’s writings and in the rest of Scripture.

Here he first mentioned sexual sins:

1. The **sexually immoral**, those who are involved in any kind of premarital or extramarital sexual relations.
2. **Idolaters**, mentioned here because of the close association between sexual immorality and many pagan religions.
3. **Adulterers**, those who break the sanctity of marital sexual exclusivity.
4. **Men who practice homosexuality**, those who practice homosexual relations in general.

He then turned to other social sins:

1. **Thieves**, those who steal as a way of life.
2. **The greedy**, those who have unquenchable desire to possess for themselves.
3. **Drunkards**, those who imbibe alcohol to excess.
4. **Revilers**, those who falsely accuse others.
5. **Swindlers**, those who take what is not theirs.

Except for the addition of **thieves** and the expansion of the **sexually immoral** into subclasses of **adulterers** and **men who practice homosexuality**, this list is identical to the list in 1 Corinthians 5:10-11. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that people who practice such things would not **inherit the kingdom of God**.

He implied that professing believers in Corinth who lived

such lifestyles should take care that they were truly in the faith, knowing that if they did not repent they would perish.

He also pointed out the folly of taking lawsuits before these kinds of people, as if such wicked people could judge rightly between Christians.

*B. Christians Are No Longer Among the Unrighteous (6:11)*

And second, Christians are no longer among the unrighteous.

Paul said in verse 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.”**

Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to know that they had been like the unrighteous. But now they were new creations in Christ. And he uses three marvelous terms to describe their new status as Christians:

1. **Washed** speaks of new life, of regeneration. Jesus “saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).
2. **Sanctified** speaks of new behavior. To be sanctified is to be made holy inwardly and to be able, in the Spirit’s power, to live a righteous life outwardly. Before a person is saved he has no holy nature and no capacity for holy living. But in Christ we are given a new nature and can live out the new kind of life. Sin’s total domination is broken and is replaced by a life of holiness.
3. **Justified** speaks of new standing before God. In Christ we are clothed in his righteousness and God now sees in us his Son’s righteousness instead of our sin. Christ’s righteousness is credited to our account (Romans 4:22-25).

The Corinthian believers had experienced transformation **in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our**

**God.** God's name represents his will, his power, and his work. Because of Jesus' willing submission to the Father's will, his death on the cross in our behalf, and his resurrection from the dead, he has provided our washing, our sanctification, and our justification.

A transformed life produces transformed living. Paul is saying very strongly that it was unacceptable that some believers were behaving like those outside the kingdom. They were acting like their former selves. They were not saved for that, but from that.

### Conclusion

In his commentary on *1 & II Corinthians* Richard Pratt suggests that the following principles can be derived from this passage:

1. Christians are more able than unbelievers to judge righteously in civil matters.
2. Believers have a new identity in Christ, and this new identity requires new and appropriate behavior.
3. Legal controversies between Christians can damage the reputation of the church and the gospel in the eyes of unbelievers.

As a result of these principles, the following applications should be adopted:

1. Churches should establish procedures for settling cases where one believer has a claim against another believer.
2. Believers should be willing to abide by the decisions of these mediators, and generally they should not appeal to secular courts to contest these decisions.
3. Believers ought to be willing to be defrauded in order to protect the church's witness and the gospel's reputation.

May God help us to follow these principles and apply them in our own lives so that the gospel can shine brightly in us. Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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## Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

*Answers for Life!*

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

Web site: [www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org](http://www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

## Challenges Christians Face

### **PRAAYER:**

Lord Jesus, we want to uncover the sources of our problems. Help us to look beneath the surface to the motivations and misconceptions that lead us into trouble. Bring us to a fresh awareness of the gospel and show us how it can be the source of faithful living in your service.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

### **CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, as you leave here today, go and be the spiritual children that our heavenly father calls us to be!