



A Study of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

Lesson 9: Is There Not One Wise Person ... 1 Corinthians 6:1-11

Last week, we picked back up of 1 Corinthians by diving into chapter five. We had left off at the end of chapter four some five months earlier but that lengthy gap of time did not keep us from noticing that Corinthians 5...starts a section based on a new and alarming report received by Paul...and is dramatically different from the first section of the book...which is primarily about the ongoing divisions that existed in the church at Corinth.

What we saw was that Paul turned in chapter 5 to begin a stinging rebuke of the Corinthian believers for their failure to exercise discipline against a seriously immoral man in the Corinthian church...I hope you remember how chapter five started...it started with, **"It is actually reported..."**

In contemporary language, it would have been something like, **"For heavens sake, is it true...actually true that..."** You see it is very, very emphatic.

Now the thing that was being reported was that there was a man in the church at Corinth who was involved with his stepmother in an ongoing incestuous

relationship. Paul's rebuke was triggered by the Corinthians "live and let live" attitude. It seems the Corinthians were actually proud either of their tolerance of the affair and of their own spiritual elevation over such earthly matters. Paul ripped into the Corinthian church with a flourish and commanded them in his absence to cast the wicked man out of their midst...what he meant was to excommunicate him both from the sacrament of the Lord's Table and to break off their relationship with him until he came to a place of repentance.

I think that today especially when "**intolerance**" is about the only sin a person can commit, Paul's instruction comes across as rather shocking.

What Paul was saying was, "**Do not keep the wicked man inside the church...cast him outside.**"

Now he is not talking about an unbeliever. No, he is talking about a believer who lives a continually ongoing immoral life and who wants to identify with the body of Christ while doing so.

Now at first glance, we might be apt to conclude that the Corinthians were just about impossible to offend...that they were pretty much tolerant of any and all behavior... that they would never confront each other over moral or personal failure. When we get to chapter 6, we learn that that was not the case. We learn instead that when it comes to their personal rights or to their money that they were, in fact, quite willing to confront each. In fact, what we learn is that some individual was so anxious about his own money or possessions that he was willing, perfectly willing, to take his grievances outside of the church and to sue another member of the church.

Paul was beside himself. He was absolutely flabbergasted by the thought.

Now what we are going to see in chapter six is that Paul is going to say, **“Do not take your grievances outside of the church...keep them inside.”**

Do you see what I mean? In chapter five, it was, **“Do not keep the wicked inside, put them outside of the church.”** In chapter six it is, **“Do not take your grievances outside of the church...keep them inside.”**

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 6:1**...If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints?

Now in Greek, this particular verse is very emphatic. What Paul does is take the verb **“to dare”** and move all the way forward in the sentence. In Greek, you see, word order is not important like it is English...in Greek, if you want to emphasize something you simply move it toward the front of a sentence and Paul does that here...he moves the word all the way to the front.

Listen to how Gordon Fee analyzes the passage:

The opening salvo of Question 1 reveals both the nature of the problem and the depth of Paul's feelings toward it. He is simply horrified by what he has heard. This is indicated by the very way the question is asked (especially the presence of the verb first, which is difficult to put into good English): **“Dare anyone, having a case against another, take it for judgment before the ungodly and not before the saints?...the gall of such a man!”**¹

Do you see what I mean...Paul is saying, **“Dare someone actually sue a Christian brother in pagan court?”**

The start of chapter was emphatic you will remember but this is really emphatic.

Paul pretty much blows a spiritual gasket. You see...Paul is indignant at such an action. The fact that there are disputes was one thing...that happens. But the fact that those disputes were being aired in a pagan courts before unbelievers was something else altogether. It was a tradition that obviously Paul had carried over from his Jewish upbringing. In Judaism, it was forbidden to expose disputes before Gentile unbelievers. I think one quote will make the point:

Rabbi Tarfon used to say: In any place where you find heathen law courts, even though their law is the same as the Israelite law, you must not resort to them...²

Obviously, the ancient Jews were deeply concerned about the impression such lawsuits would create in the mind of Gentile pagans. I think they were concerned about the impression Gentile pagans would draw about their God and there is no doubt that Paul had the same concerns because he does talk elsewhere about trying to make good impressions on unbelievers.

^{NIV} **1 Thessalonians 4:11**...Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, ¹² so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

What is interesting is that in 1 Corinthians 6 he uses an entirely different line of argument with the Corinthians to get them to avoid suing each other. He starts his line of argumentation in verse 2.

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 6:2**...Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? ³ Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! ⁴ Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church!

Do you see the three questions Paul is asking? He's asking, **"Don't you know you're going to help judge the world? Don't you know you are going to judge the angels? And if you are going to judge both the world and the angels, can't someone there arbitrate or judge this small stuff?"**

Now, Paul's point is exceedingly clear, but do you notice how we have a tendency to skip over the point he is making and to hear only part of what he is saying. It is almost comical. He says we are going to judge the world and the angels so we ought to be able to settle our own disputes without taking them before the world. Yet, rather than being convicted about sharing our disputes with the world, we focus on the other less important aspect. **"Now what was that you said about judging the world?"**

Now that idea comes from a number of different verses...verses like:

^{NIV} **Daniel 7:22**...until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.

^{NIV} **Luke 22:28**..."You are those who have stood by me in my trials. ²⁹ And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, ³⁰ so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

^{NIV} **Matthew 19:28**...Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

And from a non-canonical book...

^{NRS} **Wisdom 3:7**...In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble. ⁸ They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will reign over them forever.

But it is not something that is really fleshed out...it is not something that emphasized. We know it is true because of what Paul argues here that it is true... but the idea concerns a future time when all things are brought to completion...and that is his principal point.

He is saying, **“Don’t you know you’re going to help judge the world? Don’t you know you are going to judge the angels? And if you are going to judge both the world and the angels, can’t someone there arbitrate or judge this small stuff?”**

You see last week we talked about the fact that the Corinthians had an over-realized eschatology. That is, we talked about the fact that they thought they were further along than they were...they thought they had already arrived...here Paul turns that kind of thinking against them and says, **“You know in this matter, you have an under-realized eschatology because you don’t seem to realize who you are and what you will ultimately be doing. Why on earth would you want to go to the outside world to judge such unimportant disputes between you when ultimately you are going to help judge the world itself? Wake up and recognize who you are!”**

Chuck Swindoll puts it like this,

He says to not deal with it within the Body of Christ is to be like a certified public accountant who goes to a second-grader to check out the accuracy of his math. It's like a couple with a marriage problem going to a therapist who has been

married four or five times. It's like a professional consulting an illiterate for a literary criticism."

Now, I should tell you that verse 4 is a difficult verse to translate and there are several views about how it should be understood. But regardless of how you take the verse, the NAS translation is terribly vague. It is possible to read it over and over again and miss the sense of what Paul is saying. Listen to this:

^{NAS} **1 Corinthians 6:4**...If then you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church?

Here's what it is saying? It makes the verse a question and this is the question, **"When you take your lawsuits outside the church aren't you really taking them to people that are viewed with absolutely no respect or standing whatsoever in the church."**

The NKJ and KJV both follow the same line of thought. Listen to the NKV:

^{NKJ} **1 Corinthians 6:4** If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge?

Now the NIV translates the verse in a completely different manner. Instead of making it a question...it makes it an imperative.

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 6:4**...Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church!

I think that gets the sense across much better. It's as if he is saying, **"It doesn't matter who you pick in the church to settle such disputes. It can be a novice; it**

can be the most spiritually immature person there. It doesn't matter who it is; anybody will be better than airing your disputes before unbelievers."

Calvin has the same idea in mind when in his commentary he states:

Even the lowest and meanest among you will discharge this office better than those unbelieving judges to whom you have recourse.

I read one author who put it like this, **"Wouldn't it be better to go down to the second grade Sunday School class and pick one of the slowest kids there to decide the conflict rather than take it to the unbelieving world?"**

Now it is not that Paul thought the courts had no purpose whatsoever. He himself appealed to the courts and to Caesar when he was wrongly beaten and arrested...but he did not go to court with another believer simply because his rights had been trampled.

There is another reason I think understanding the passage in this way is correct. That reason is found in verse 5.

NIV 1 Corinthians 6:5...I say this to shame you.

There are two things I want to point out about verse 5. First, Paul has used whatever argument he has presented to shame them. He's saying that even a spiritual novice can decide such issues better than the unbelieving world. He's saying that they should know that. Obviously, the fact that they do not know that meant that there were too many spiritual novices among them. Now, I want

you to understand the harshness in Paul's accusation. It is rough and it is intended to be rough. It is plain spoken.

Remember the implications of what we learned early in our study. The Corinthians were apparently angry at Paul that he had withheld the **"good stuff"** from them. They were angry with Paul because the new teachers they had acquired had been teaching them **"deeper doctrines"** whereas Paul had restricted himself to simplistic things like **"Christ and Him crucified"**. Paul is turning their own argument back on them now. He is saying, **"Any novice should be able to judge such matters. Anybody would be better than secular, unbelieving judges."**

Now in case you're skeptical that that is what Paul is saying look at the last half of verse 5. It's brimming with sarcasm. Paul winds up asking these super saints at Corinth a vicious question. Look at it.

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 6:5...** Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? ⁶ But instead, one brother goes to law against another-- and this in front of unbelievers!

In simple terms, he is asking:

"Is there nobody there among you super saints that you can entrust to arbitrate such disputes. I thought you guys were infatuated with knowledge and wisdom. Can nobody be found in the whole church with enough sense to avoid taking such disputes before unbelievers?"

Paul is rough on the Corinthians. He is not unduly rough, however, in view of the way he views division in the church and for me that is the most convicting

aspect of this argument. He views it as reprehensible that we should fight and break into factions. Obviously, people are going to disagree and sometimes they will even disagree over important issues. You only have to look back to Galatians to see Paul ripping into Peter over what he viewed as an important issue. Of course, in Galatians the issue was the purity of the gospel and he was right to rip into Peter the way he did. But the Galatians were having disputes over less important issues. When we get to verse 7, we get a glimpse of what the content of that dispute actually was.

NIV 1 Corinthians 6:7...The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?

Two things are in Paul's mind here. First, the fact that there is a lawsuit or legal dispute is bad. It is a sign that the Corinthians have already been defeated.

Secondly, Paul goes after the plaintiff. In Paul's mind the plaintiff was wrong. Now, the first point I understand. It is easy enough. For the Corinthians to have let this dispute get to the point of litigation was a sign that the whole church was in trouble. It points back to all of Paul's initial concerns about disunity in the church.

It is his second point that surprises me. Apparently someone had been cheated either out of money or property. They had been defrauded or abused in some way by another member in the church. We will never know the details of what happened. But Paul does not address, at least initially, the defrauder. He addresses first the man who had been defrauded. He does so with those two terrible questions at the end of verse 7.

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 6:7**...The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?

Do you get his point? Paul is saying that the man who had been defrauded that he would have been better off to let it go. He would have been better off to let the offense of his brother pass. He seems to be referring back to the ideas taught by Jesus Himself in Matthew 5.

^{NIV} **Matthew 5:39**...But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. ⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Do you see what he is saying? He is saying that there are times where for the sake of the Kingdom of God we would be better off to just let offenses go.

Now that is not say there is no place for lawsuits today. I don't even want to hint at that. Certainly, if may be necessary to bring a lawsuit if a person is physically injured and cannot work or provide for themselves. I understand that sort of thing. But with regard to suing a fellow Christian, the biblical command seems clear. I think it is possible to even make broader application concerning the role of using lawsuits to assert our rights before an unbelieving world.

It is one thing for groups like the ACLJ to proactively try to protect Christians from persecution in our society, but to sue other Christians for the purpose of

destroying them or acquiring wealth is something else altogether. It seems that the idea of bearing an injustice of any kind for the benefit of Christ's church has just about disappeared. We will not be mistreated; we will not be trifled with.

In our culture, today, we are sue happy. But that is really just a symptom of an even more pervasive problem. We simply refuse to be treated unjustly, ever. People are sue happy, but more than that they will not be corrected or mistreated in anyway. We feel an obligation to speak out with passion anytime we are abused. If we hear something that makes us mad, or angers us, we want...no, we insist on being vindicated. We will have our say, no matter who it kills or what it destroys. It is here that Paul is really getting to the heart of the issue at Corinth. The issue he is really addressing is the issue of triumphalism.

Now, listen to me for a moment. Last week, I outlined the steps we are commanded to take if we are sinned against or if we have a concern about a person's actions. Do you remember what they were?

1. Go to that person privately. Explain the problem.
2. If there is no satisfaction, take a couple of brothers and go back to the person a second time.
3. If there is still no satisfaction, take you complaint to the church, which means the elders. If you have a worthy complaint, they will speak to the offender.
4. If there is still satisfaction, the elders will bring the person before the church on charges.

Now, the one thing I left out and the one thing that Paul so clearly addresses here is that sometimes it is appropriate to just take it on the chin. We should develop thicker skins. There are some things that are just not worth fighting over.

I listened a few day back to a sermon on this passage by Ray Stedman and in it he talked about a time when he was listening to H.A. Ironsides one of the most famous Bible teachers of the last century. Ironsides told the story about attending a Brethren meeting with his mother when he was only eight or nine years old. He said when he and his mother arrived they walked in...in the midst of an ongoing argument. Ironsides said one man finally stood up and clinching his fist said, **"Look here I want my rights...and I am going to have my rights!"**

Ironsides said that one old man, an old Scottish man, cupped his hand over his ear and asked, **"What's that you say?"**

The angry man said, **"What?"**

The old Scottish man said, **"What's that you say?"**

"I said I want my rights."

The old man said, **"You want your rights do ya...well, Jesus didn't come into the world to get his rights did he?...Nay brother, he came to get our wrongs and he got them didn't he?"**

Ironsides said the angry man...simply gazed at the older Scottish man for minute or two and all the steam finally went out of him and he said, **"Of course you're right brother and I will trust the brothers to settle the matter however they please."**

You see that is what Paul is driving at...that sometimes we are better to just let personal offenses go...to let them go for the benefit of the kingdom of God. And Paul is making the point that this life is where we learn to practice knowing the difference between what is important and what is not. Where else are we going to get the practice to judge angels...to judge the world.

But in case you think Paul let the defrauder off, altogether, I want you to look at verse 8.

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 6:8**...Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong (do unrighteously), and you do this to your brothers.

You see he is turning his attention here to the man who defrauded.

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 6:9**...Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders ¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God

Paul addresses the biblical view concerning sexual sin. He points out that people that are involved in recurrent sexual sin have no part in the kingdom of God. He distinguishes between unmarried people (fornicators...it's the broader term) and married people (adulterers). He addresses the sin of homosexuality. The term "**male prostitutes**" actually means a man playing the role of a female in a homosexual relationship. The term "**homosexual offenders**" means the man playing the more aggressive or manly role in the relationship.³ These terms had special import in Corinth where homosexual relationships between men and

boys were particularly tolerated. But in closing, Paul goes back to the issue at hand in verse 10.

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 6:10**...nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

You see Paul is saying that people that defraud, that make it a practice to defraud are really not believers. Paul is using the law here to drive the Corinthians back to the cross.

We are apt today, to quote verses 9 and 10 in our abhorrence of homosexuality and that is all right. Homosexuality is a terrible sin in America today. But we miss Paul's point when we single it out of the list apart from the other items mentioned there. We tend to miss the elements of verse 10. And you know verse 10 should cause us to ask, **"Are there any of us that have failed to deliver a fair days work for our pay? Are there any of us that have not lusted after the wealth or possessions of those around us? Are there any of us who have not lashed out in anger against those in our home or family, openly reviling those whom we should be apt to forgive?"**

You see Paul is painting with a broad brush here. And certainly all of us from time to time fail in these areas. That is why Paul reminds the Corinthians again of what Christ has done for them.

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 6:11**...And that is what some of you 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.

Paul is saying that the Corinthians were in the past just like the world, but now they have been washed and set apart. They have had the righteousness of Christ imputed to them and their sin has been imputed to Christ. They need desperately to live like what they are. They need in humble gratitude to remember what Christ has done on their behalf to treat other with equity and fairness. They have seen their guilt. They have experienced grace. Now, they need to exercise a little gratitude both by their behavior and their ability to forgive.

Now what we are going to see next time is that he is going to turn back again to this topic of sexual immorality. The way it works is that chapter 5 deals with the sexual sin of the immoral Corinthian involved in incest. Then the first part of chapter six turns to the issue of lawsuits and then the last half of chapter 6 and all of chapter 7 turns back to the issue of sex. It's chiastic...a literary sandwich.

- A) Sex...Chapter 5
- B) Lawsuits...First half of chapter 6
- A) Sex...Last half of 6

He is trying to make the connection that in those kinds of behavior we defraud each other as brothers and sisters and identify who we really are ontologically...in our deepest being.

You see the Corinthians had been suffering from delusions about their spiritual maturity but Paul is saying, **"That's over. I am going to tell you straight how it is. You have been bought with a price: therefore you must glorify God in your body."**

Let that be true for us as well.

Let's pray.

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians NICNT*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1987), 251.

² Fee, 251...footnote 11.

³ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 1686.