

THE PROBLEM OF LITIGATIONS 1 Corinthians 6:1-11

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INTRODUCTION

In this passage, Paul addressed a “little” problem in Corinth. Some believers in the church were taking each other to court before unbelievers. But that problem was just a symptom of a far more serious flaw in the congregation: the Corinthians’ neither understood nor lived the gospel.

AN INCREDIBLE PROBLEM: MISHANDLING LAWSUITS

This section begins with a series of questions indicating Paul’s incredulity that the Corinthians would actually sue one another in public court rather than handle legal matters within the church community.

6:1. The Corinthians’ willingness to sue one another in public court was inconceivable to Paul. In this question, he addressed himself to those brethren who were willing to sue other Christians in public court. He wondered that a believer would actually take a legal **dispute ... before the ungodly ... instead of the before the saints**. Paul understood that believers sometimes have legitimate disagreements that necessitate adjudication, but it astounded him that followers of Christ would take their issues before unbelieving judges.

The concept of “judgment” found in this verse links it to the preceding material regarding the incestuous man (5:3,12,13), and to the Corinthian divisions and opposition to Paul (4:5). Though they considered themselves wise (3:18-20), their wisdom led to their divisions (3:21-22). The Corinthians lacked discernment (compare 6:5). They judged when they should not have (4:5), and failed to judge when they should have (5:3,12; 6:1).

6:2-3. Whereas the first verse had addressed those believers who sued other believers, these verses addressed the whole church. Anticipating the objection that Christians were not competent to judge such legal or civil matters, Paul asked if they had forgotten two basic Christian beliefs that pointed to the contrary.

First, he incredulously (or sarcastically) wondered if the Corinthians had forgotten that **the saints would judge the world**. Jesus himself taught that his followers would act as judges at the end of time (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30; see also Rev. 20:4). The language of the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) also implies this in Daniel 7:22 where it says, “judgment was given to the saints of the Most High.” This future role of believers reflects that they will be victorious over their enemies and enjoy

the honor of ruling with Christ after he returns (compare 2 Tim. 2:12). Paul believed that this future for believers demonstrated that the body of Christ was not incompetent to adjudicate problems within it. To be sure, not every believer at every moment is competent for such matters, but the church as a whole should be able to act.

Second, Paul reminded the Corinthians that believers **would judge the angels**. Many angels fell from their positions of authority when they rebelled against God (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6; Rev. 20:10). Followers of Christ will pass judgment on these angels when Christ returns. This fact demonstrated that the church's ability to make decisions about conflicts among believers should not be dismissed.

On the basis of the church's future role in such important matters, Paul argued that the body of Christ should also be **competent to judge trivial cases** such as those regarding worldly disputes between Christians over things that he defined as **the things of this life**. Though lawsuits may not seem trivial when they involve huge sums of money, all such disputes are trivial when compared to the weightiness of the final eternal judgment in which Christians will exercise authority.

By making the matter of public lawsuits a question of the Corinthians' competence (**are you not competent**), Paul further undermined the Corinthians' admiration of worldly wisdom (2:1,13; 3:18-20). They were so impressed by the false wisdom of unbelievers that they had forgotten the wisdom the church had received from Christ.

6:4. That the Corinthians had **disputes** is clear, but the original language of the second portion of this verse — **appoint judges** — is somewhat ambiguous. There are two possible interpretations of this second portion. On the one hand, Paul may have been ordering the Corinthians to **appoint as judges even men of little account in the church** because even men of little account in the church are better able to adjudicate than are the unbelievers of the public courts (NIV; NASB margin). On the other hand, Paul have been expressing astonishment that the Corinthians effectively **appoint[ed] as judges men of little account in the church**, i.e. unbelievers (NIV margin; NASB, NRSV), by taking their cases to public court.

It is not possible to be dogmatic on this interpretive issue, but either option fits well with the context. Both translations point out the foolishness of preferring public courts when one seeks justice. Practically speaking, because Christians should see things in light of the kingdom of God, and have true, spiritual wisdom (1:24,30; 2:6-8; 3:19), any Christian should have greater wisdom and be a better judge than even the wisest unbeliever. This does not mean that the disputants will necessarily like the judgments of Christians better, especially if they are as worldly-minded as the Corinthians. It does mean, however, that one should expect Christians' judgments to surpass worldly judgments in righteousness and ultimate perspective.

Moreover, from the perspective of the importance and value of the church, which Paul emphasized throughout this letter, appealing to public courts demonstrates a lack

of respect for God's holy institution the church. In fact, this seems to have been the Corinthians' greatest problem, and thus may have been Paul's main point in this verse.

6:5-6. Paul asked another question to bring **shame** to his readers. Obviously, the Corinthians' shame was not his ultimate goal. Rather, he wanted to shame them into altering their perceptions and behavior. He wondered sarcastically if the Corinthian congregation that prided itself on eloquence and wisdom (2:1; 3:18-20; 4:7) actually had no one **wise enough to judge** the disputes. Paul had already made it clear that such wisdom exists among believers, but the Corinthians had failed to search for such a one, probably because they had also failed to understand true wisdom. Instead, they were doing the unthinkable: they were going **to law against another – and this in front of unbelievers**.

There seem to be two problems indicated in verse 6. First, that Christians appealed to **law** in disputes between themselves, and second that they sued one another **in front of unbelievers**. On the one hand, Paul argued that the secular law of the land enacted by unbelievers was inferior to God's wisdom for judging disputes between believers. Paul had already argued for many chapters (1-4) that human wisdom fell short of God's truth, and that the world considered the gospel foolish (1:18). Christians, however, know that the gospel is supremely wise. Because the gospel includes things like unity in Christ and forgiveness, which worldly standards of justice ignore, the secular law of unbelievers is not equipped to adjudicate disputes between Christians. Unbelieving human law simply does not reflect true wisdom, true godliness, or true justice. Regarding public courts it might be said that justice is blind, not because it treats all men equally, but because it can't see the truth.

On the other hand, the Corinthians sued one another **in front of unbelievers**. What is so wrong with going before unbelieving judges? Paul reminded them that in these situations it is a **brother** who takes his brother to court (6:6). Christians are brothers and sisters of each other. They share the intimacy of belonging to the same spiritual family, and their loyalty to that family ought to outweigh their desire not to be defrauded. Thus, they should not go outside that family to settle disputes.

Further, bringing the disputes of the Christian family into the public eye damages the reputation and witness of the church. The gospel is supposed to reconcile believers in fellowship with each other in Christ. What will the world think when it sees Christians appealing to those without the gospel to solve the problems that the gospel should be correcting? Naturally, the world will think the gospel is ineffective. Even if a church court were to misjudge a case, this would be preferable to damaging the credibility of the gospel by going to public court.

AN UNDERLYING PROBLEM: NOT LIVING THE GOSPEL

The fact that the Corinthians mishandled lawsuits by taking them to public court was terrible, but this problem flowed out of an underlying difficulty. The Corinthians

mistreated one another, and subsequently failed to reconcile their conflicts in a Christian manner.

6:7. Paul closed his expressions of dismay over lawsuits by pointing out how self-defeating they were. Anyone who brings a lawsuit against another intends to win, but Paul pointed out the irony of lawsuits among Christians. Because a public lawsuit defeats the church by damaging its witness and reputation, those who participate in public lawsuits can't win. They do more damage to themselves by injuring the church in this way than they suffer by being wronged by other Christians. Whatever decision the public court reaches, they **have been completely defeated already**.

Further, the fact that there were lawsuits in the church demonstrated that the Corinthians had lost sight of some of the most precious principles by which they were to live, proving a prior defeat. Christ taught his church the law of love (Jam. 2:8); Christians should serve each other (Gal. 5:13); there should be a unified body in which every member works in harmony with the others (1 Cor. 12:22-26; Eph. 4:16). For these reasons, and to protect the church, it would be better **rather to be wronged and cheated** than to struggle and fight with each other.

6:8. Demanding justice and recompense, however, did not only defeat the Corinthians. They were guilty not only of failing to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39) and to submit willingly to lawsuits (Matt. 5:40), but also of being wrongdoers themselves. They actually **cheat[ed] and did wrong** to each other, even to their **brothers**.

THE ROOT PROBLEM: MISUNDERSTANDING THE GOSPEL

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

6:9-10. By taking their lawsuits before unbelievers, the Corinthians demonstrated that they had forgotten a basic Christian doctrine: there is a big difference between believers and unbelievers. On the one hand, **wicked** people are not destined to **inherit the kingdom of God**. Unbelievers face a future of divine judgment. They will not receive the blessings of God when Christ returns in glory (John 5:29; Rom. 2:5-10; 2 Cor. 5:10; Heb. 10:26-27). By reminding the Corinthians of the judgment that awaits the wicked, Paul again emphasized that the Corinthians were behaving like the unbelieving wicked. In verse 8 he had used the verbal form of "wicked" to say "do wrong." Believers must not allow themselves to **be deceived** in these matters.

To make his point more clearly, Paul offered a list of lifestyles that were common outside the Christian community. He did not speak of people who occasionally fell into these sins, but of those who unrepentantly made these sins the patterns of their lives. Similar lists of sinful lifestyles appear elsewhere in Paul's writings as well as in the rest

of Scripture. Here he first mentioned sexual sins: 1) the **sexually immoral** (“fornicators” NASB, NRSV), those who are involved in any kind of pre-marital or extra-marital sexual relations (Exod. 22:19; Lev. 18:6-23; 19:20,29; Lev. 20:10-21; Deut. 22:20-21,28-30; Ezek. 22:9-11; Mat. 15:19; Mark 7:21-22; Rom. 13:13; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 4:19; 5:3,5; Col. 3:5; 1 Tim. 1:10; Heb. 13:4; 1 Pet. 4:3; 2 Pet. 2:18); 2) **idolaters**, mentioned here because of the close association between sexual immorality and many pagan religions (Exod. 34:15-16; Deut. 23:17; 1 Kgs. 14:23-24; Jer. 5:7-8; Ezek. 16:36-39; 22:4,9; Hosea 4:12-13; Rom. 1:24-27; Gal. 5:19; Col. 3:5; 1 Pet. 4:3); 3) **adulterers**, those who break the sanctity of marital sexual exclusivity (Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18; 22:22-27; Jer. 5:7-8; 7:9; 29:23; Hos. 4:2; Matt. 15:19; Mark 7:21; Rom 2:22; Heb. 13:4; 2 Pet. 2:14); 4) **male prostitutes**, those who served in pagan religious sexual rituals (Deut. 23:17; 1 Kgs. 14:24; 15:12; 2 Kgs. 23:7); and 5) **homosexual offenders**, those who practice homosexual relations in general (Lev. 20:13; Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Tim. 1:10).

He then turned to other social sins: 1) **thieves**, those who steal as a way of life (Exod. 20:15; 22:1; Lev. 6:2; 19:11,13; Deut. 5:19; Isa. 1:23; Jer. 7:9; 21:12; 22:3; Ezek. 18:7,12,16,18; 22:29; Ps. 50:18; Prov. 22:22; Hos. 4:2; 7:1; Mic. 2:2; Zech. 5:4; Matt. 19:18; Rom. 2:21; Eph. 4:28; 1 Pet. 4:15); 2) **the greedy**, those who have unquenchable desire to possess for themselves (Exod. 20:17; Deut. 5:21; Ps. 10:3; Mic. 2:2; Mark 7:22; Rom. 1:29; Eph. 4:19; 5:3,5; Col. 3:5; 2 Pet. 2:3,14); 3) **drunkards**, those who imbibe alcohol to excess (Prov. 20:1; 23:29-30; Isa. 5:22; 28:7; Hos. 4:11; Rom. 13:13; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:18; 1 Pet. 4:3); 4) **slanderers**, those who falsely accuse others (Lev. 19:16; Ps. 15:3; 50:20; Prov. 10:18; Isa. 32:7; Jer. 9:4; Mark 7:22; Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8; 1 Pet. 2:1); and 5) **swindlers** (“robbers” NRSV), those who take what is not theirs (Lev. 5:21; Ps. 61:11; Eccl. 5:17; Isa 10:2; Ezek. 18:7,12,16,18; 22:27,29; Mal. 1:14; Matt. 23:25; Luke 11:39; 18:11).

Except for the addition of **thieves** and the expansion of the **sexually immoral** into subclasses of **adulterers**, **male prostitutes** and **homosexual offenders**, this list is identical to the list in 5:10-11. Paul hoped the Corinthians would remember that people who practice these things would not **inherit the kingdom of God**. He implied that professed 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 men could judge rightly between Christians.

6:11. By contrast, many of the believers in Corinth once lived in these patterns of life, but their faith in Christ had changed them so that they became much more reliable as judges of disputes within the church. Since these patterns of life lay in the past for those who truly believed, such could take confidence that they would inherit the kingdom of God. Those believers who still fell into these sins needed to remember that their new identities in Christ (**such were some of you**) protected them from judgment. At the same time, their new identities also required that they live no longer like the wicked, but instead like believers.

Believers are **washed**, cleansed from sin through faith in Christ as symbolized in baptism (Acts 9:17-18). They are **sanctified**, set apart from the world and brought into relationship with God (John 17:19; Acts 20:32; 26:18; 1 Cor 1:9). They have been **justified**, declared innocent before God (Rom. 3:24,28; 5:1,9; 8:30; Gal. 2:16; 3:24; Tit. 3:7). This blessing comes to believers **in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ** as they call on Jesus' name and rely upon him for their salvation. They also come **by the Spirit of our God** as the Holy Spirit applies the work of Christ to believers (Acts 10:47; Rom. 5:5; 15:16; 1 Cor. 12:3; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; Tit. 3:5). Followers of Christ differ fundamentally from the sinful world around them. Therefore, believers should not make it their practice to bring their lawsuits against each other before unbelievers.

APPLICATION

While the implications of Paul's teaching in this chapter may be readily apparent to many modern readers, the actual application of these principles is terribly difficult in many cases. This difficulty arises from the fact that churches rarely establish church courts to handle matters other than church discipline, and church members no longer respect the judgment of the church enough to accept that judgment in civil matters – especially when money or property are concerned. We ought to heed Paul's advice, but we generally aren't willing to do so. If we truly understand Paul's argument, however, our unwillingness may yield to submission.

One of Paul's basic assumptions was that the laws unbelievers enact don't always reflect true justice. Neither do unbelieving judges value true righteousness. Because believers do recognize true justice as God has revealed it in his Word, we are better qualified to judge matters righteously and justly. The fact that God will allow us to participate in the judgment of the world and of angels proves this better qualification to be true, making church courts the best recourse for those who desire justice and righteousness. The church having such greater insight into matters of righteousness, we should not look to the wicked for righteous judgments.

The problem is that believers don't want justice; we prefer advantage and profit. As a result, even when church courts are formed and do render decisions, the losing party often refuses to abide by the church's decision, and drags the suit into public court. To prevent this type of appeal to public courts, we need to change the way we think. First, we must realize that we are new people in Christ. We are not the sinners we used to be (even though we still sin all the time), and our new identity in Christ demands different behavior than we used to practice before we were saved. Second, we need to put things in perspective, recognizing the relative triviality of earthly matters. The most important things in life are not protecting our wealth and our rights, but building the kingdom of God, building unity in Christ, spreading the gospel. Public lawsuits between brothers discredit the church and hinder its work. Therefore, in order to protect the reputation and witness of the church in the public eye, we should refrain from using the public courts to solve our family problems. For most of us, this means

raising our opinion of the church, lowering our opinion of public justice, and replacing our desire to protect our public rights with a desire to pursue righteousness.

Knowing these things ought to help us change the way we feel, as well. We should learn to be ashamed when we reject the righteous counsel of the church just so that we may get what we want from public courts, and also when we hinder the church's work by damaging its reputation in this way. We should also be ashamed for placing worldly interests above gospel interests, refusing to turn the other cheek and to submit to lawsuits, being unwilling to be cheated even for the sake of the kingdom of God. Further, we ought to feel terribly guilty and wicked for cheating and defrauding our fellow believers, knowing that when we do so we act just like those who will suffer God's eternal punishment. Still, we may maintain confidence in our salvation even when we have fallen into such sin, never losing sight of the fact that God has saved us by grace, not according to our merit.

Hopefully, when we know and feel in a more biblical manner, we will be more eager to follow Paul's instructions not to sue believers in public court, and we will appoint judges in our churches to handle property and rights disputes. On an individual level, we ought to be more willing to place the church's interests above our own, preferring to suffer unjust treatment than to damage the church's witness and thereby hinder its ability to build the kingdom of God. More fundamentally, we will stop cheating and defrauding one another so that we can avoid lawsuits altogether.

DIGGING DEEPER

Judgment (6:1)

The book of Acts explains that when Paul was in Corinth, the Jews appealed to the secular court for redress against the Christians (Acts 18:12-17). They did so by dragging the Christians before the judgment seat (*bema*) (compare Matt. 27:19; John 19:13; Acts 25:6,10,17). Judgment seats in the ancient world were typically located in very public places such as in markets, and archaeology suggests that Corinth was no exception. Thus, lawsuits in ancient Corinth would have been very public. Roman proconsuls would have presided over such suits (compare Acts 19:38), and would have judged them according to Roman law, which was not always righteous or just by Christian standards.

Wrong(ed), cheat(ed) (6:7-8)

"Wrong(ed)" (*adikeo*) is a generic term referring to all sorts of wrongdoing and injustice. It is cognate to the noun *adikos* that is translated as "ungodly" in 6:1 and "wicked" in 6:9 (compare Matt. 20:13; Luke 10:19; Acts 7:24,26,27; 25:10,11; 2 Cor. 7:2,12; Gal. 4:12; Col. 3:25; Phlm. 1:18; 2 Pet. 2:13). "Cheat(ed)" (*apostereo*), in turn, denotes the more limited form of injustice of defrauding or robbing, or of more generally

depriving someone of something to which he is rightfully entitled (compare 1 Cor. 7:5; 1 Tim. 6:5; Jas. 5:4; see also the Septuagint at Deut. 15:7; Mal. 3:5). In 1 Corinthians 6:7-8, the use of these terms in conjunction probably indicates any type of injustice, but with particular reference to cheating in property or monetary matters.

Inherit the kingdom of God (6:10)

The term “kingdom of God” (often also called the “kingdom of heaven” by Matthew) broadly refers to God’s kingship over creation (Isa. 66:23), particularly as God asserts his authority by sending Christ (Matt. 4:17; Gal. 4:4) to defeat his enemies (Ps. 110:1-2; 1 Cor. 15:25; Heb. 10:13) and establish his eternal rule (Luke 23:42; Rev. 11:15; 22:5) as heir to the Davidic throne (Matt. 1:1; 21:9) and to the throne of heaven (Heb. 1:8; Rev. 4:8-10; 5:13). The gospel depends heavily upon the idea of the kingdom of God in promising that Christ will share his inheritance with believers (Gal. 3:26-29). His inheritance includes not only the full realization of the blessings of covenant keeping promised in the restoration, but also Christ’s own reign (2 Tim. 2:12). (For more Old Testament background on this concept, see Isa. 40:9-11; 52:7; Obad. 21; Mic. 4:1-8.)

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you believe that the church is really more capable of rendering just decisions in matters of property and personal rights than the state is? Do you think that most believers you know would render decisions more justly than public courts do?
2. When Christ returns believers will judge angels and the world. But why should we trust them to judge righteously now, before Christ returns?
3. Would you be willing to let your own church judge between you and another believer in your congregation if you had a disagreement that would normally require legal intervention? If they judged in favor of your opponent and you thought that you were truly in the right, and the matter was over a substantial amount of property, should you and would you take the matter to public court to seek justice? Why?
4. Does your church have a system for appointing judges to arbitrate, mediate, or judge disputes between members of your congregation? Does your church ever employ this system to judge cases? If so, how do the disputants react to the church’s decisions?
5. Do you value more highly the work of the church, or your rights and property? How are these values reflected in the way you spend your time, energy, and money? How are these values reflected in the way you respond when mistreated by Christians?

6. Have you ever been involved in a lawsuit in public court? Have you ever been involved in a lawsuit in a church court? Were you satisfied that justice was done? Was your legal opponent satisfied? Do you think people are more likely to be satisfied with the decisions of public courts or church courts? What does this imply about the value we place on property and rights on the one hand, and on righteousness and the church's work on the other?
7. Do you think Paul intended this chapter to be an absolute teaching on lawsuits, or do you think he overstated his case in favor of the church in order to get the Corinthians to change their divisive behavior and mistreatment of one another? Why? Are there other ways of looking at this passage?
8. In your community, do public lawsuits really discredit the church? Or does no one really pay attention to the church or to Christian lawsuits? Are you aware of anyone outside the church that thinks Christians are hypocritical because they sue one another in public court?
9. Why did Paul include such a long list of sins in this passage? How does this list relate to his teaching on lawsuits?
10. How does this passage relate to the context of the preceding material, both in chapter 5, and also in chapters 1 through 4?