

FIRST CORINTHIANS

The Case Against Lawsuits I Corinthians 6:1-11

Suppose you bought a fifteen year old home from a lovely Christian couple for \$90,000. There was sweet fellowship with the couple and you prayed about the house with them. It seemed like the Lord had opened the door for you to have this home. Soon after you moved in (and the Christian family who sold you the home had moved out of town), you discover that major defects in the building structure because it was built on a sinkhole and the house was riddled with termites. It might cost as much as \$30,000 to fix the house. What would be your reaction? What would you do? Take your brother to the secular court? Tell it to the church? Forget the whole thing and chalk it up as a learning experience? These are all options for a Christian whenever he is wronged or defrauded, but not all of these options would be the Lord's will because First Corinthians 6 speaks to this issue or to any issue that could involve a lawsuit between two Christians.

Paul has been dealing with problems in the church at Corinth. In chapter five, he dealt with the problem of incest and the need for the church to take disciplinary steps. In chapter six, he will deal with lawsuits and moral laxity. In chapter five Paul has said that Christians are not to judge the unsaved on the outside but are to judge the saved on the inside. Within the church at Corinth, there were Christians who felt they had been wronged and defrauded by their fellow Christians in matters pertaining to this life. Apparently, these lawsuits caused deep distress, charging up their emotions so as to have them make wild accusations and hold bitter resentments.

ADMONISHING THOSE WRONGED 6:1-7

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Paul was shocked, indignant and outraged at this audacious act of prosecuting a brother in Christ before the secular law courts. He says, "How dare you do this act!" These Corinthians were taking their law problems, disputes and complaints before the unsaved judges, bringing the name of Christ low and ruining the testimony of the local congregation. Surely the Apostle Paul did not mean that a Christian should never go to the secular law courts against unbelievers. If a lawsuit is brought against us by an unbeliever, it may be necessary for us to defend ourselves. Nor was Paul saying the Christian would not get justice before the secular courts because the courts were corrupt. Actually, the Romans as a whole had an excellent law system. Nor was he saying a Christian should never use the secular courts to defend his cause for even Paul himself said, "I appeal to Caesar". The thing Paul is critical of is Christians taking other Christians before the secular courts. He was stunned that one Christian would prosecute another before the secular courts

where an unbeliever was presiding. Even the Jews understood that disputes were to be settled among the brotherhood, for they had a maxim which said, "It is a statute which binds all Israelites, that if one Israelite has a cause against another, it must not be prosecuted before the Gentiles." Yet these carnal Corinthians had not even reached the Jewish standards and it was a disgrace. Paul's point was that all lawsuits between Christians should be handled by church courts within the local church and not in the secular courts.

I am going to go out on a limb here because I do not think that this passage says a Christian should never go to the secular court against another Christian. What is taught here is that Christian courts should be used before the secular courts are even considered. The general rule is that the church does not go outside with inside affairs. Yet, there may be exceptions only after the church court system has been utilized.

Arbitration Encouraged (6:2-7a)

Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? Lawsuits are to be handled by the saints. When a Christian is wronged or defrauded by another Christian, either the elders or qualified men of wisdom within the local church are to set up a church court. The question naturally arises as to whether Christians are competent to make these kinds of judgments? Can they handle the technicalities? Paul's answer is that Christians will one day rule and reign over the world with Christ in the future kingdom.

And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? If we Christians are to rule with Christ in the future kingdom, can we not judge in the smaller, more trivial things such as money, property, damages and personal reputation? These are very small things in light of eternity. While Paul did not actually say it, he implied that by learning to arbitrate among Christians in matters of law, we are practicing up for our rule with Christ in the future.

Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! In eternity, Christians will judge angels. This probably refers to the final judgment of wicked angels where we will with Christ delve into the motives and hidden desires and urges of supernatural beings. Because of our future status as judges over men and angels, we ought to be able to preside in the mundane affairs of life, the elementary squabbles which deal with the simple things of life. The Corinthians had not been doing this. They were letting unbelievers do it in the secular courts.

Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! This could probably be better translated, "Do you appoint them (secular judges) who are of no account in the church?" The Apostle Paul did not mean to dishonor these secular judges. He was saying a secular judge who does not understand the relationship of one Christian to another, who has no concept of the family of God, who does not understand that Christians are members one of another, should not judge on matters concerning believers. The dignity of secular judges does not give them authority in the church of God. Whether honorable or not, if they have not been born again, they have no standing in the church, and are not qualified to judge in spiritual matters.

I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another— and this in front of unbelievers! Paul spoke with tongue in cheek, with great sarcasm. The Corinthians were so proud of the fact they were men of wisdom, sophisticated Greeks, yet there was not one wise man among them who could arbitrate their disputes. To have a dispute with a brother is bad; to take that dispute before a secular court is worse; to let unbelievers in that law court judge in the dispute is worst of all. What Paul was arguing for was arbitration within the church for settlement of disputes. If a brother has wronged or defrauded you, then go to your elders and ask them to set up a court of law within the church to arbitrate the matter. This would have a phenomenal impact upon our society if Christians settled all their disputes between themselves in such a fashion.

It can be documented that the early church did set up courts to arbitrate disputes between Christians. The courts were set up in the early part of the week. It was the elders or some particularly wise man who arbitrated in these sessions. By holding court in the early part of the week, decisions could be rendered before Sunday so that the fellowship of the assembly would not be disrupted and the parties could sit down together at the Lord's Table. This practice stopped when Constantine made Christianity the official religion in Rome and church and state were wedded. The result was that the church thought they no longer needed to handle their own problems and turned over lawsuits to the state.

The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. To have an unbelieving judge arbitrate for two Christians is a defeat regardless of the verdict. No matter who wins the lawsuit, the cause of Christ suffers. People are turned off when they see believers fighting each other in an open, aggressive, hostile way. What lawsuits among Christians means to the watching world is that Christians are no better off than non-Christians. What have we to offer the unsaved world if we have to get unbelievers to settle our disputes? For so many pastors and Christians it is a new revelation to learn that Christians are not to go to secular court against each other. They don't understand that the early church never went to the secular courts to settle problems. Throughout history, many Christians have used church courts. Presbyterians, for instance, have had courts of law within the church since their inception in 1643. It is true that these courts in Presbyterianism are not used today as they should be, and when they are used they are not always effective, but they do have the mechanics for these things to happen. So often Independents are reinventing the wheel! When a church court makes a decision on a dispute that decision is binding. Quite often there is compromise and middle ground found, and the decision is to be accepted by both parties, even though neither party may be very happy.

I have seen church courts where two disputing parties come to agreement through compromise. Both agree on a settlement. Then one party leaves and decides that the decision is not fair. Therefore, he balks and wants more money. The ultimate outcome is that the other party refuses to pay what he did not agree to pay. Consequently, nobody receives anything, and the work of the church court was in vain.

Deprivation Recommended (6:7b)

Why not rather be cheated? If we cannot prosecute our brother, if arbitration is impossible, then there is a third option. Deprive yourself of your right when wronged. When you consider the damage and injury that may be done to the body of Christ, you may decide to drop the lawsuit altogether. A Christian should voluntarily take wrong, even if he is right, rather than go to court (outside the church) against a brother. The Christian should voluntarily take wrong and say, "I leave it all with God. I'm not going to say anything about it. If they wrong me, You understand, O God." Christians are to give way to any aggressive, self-centered attitudes, insisting upon their own rights at all cost. Without complaint, gossiping, accusations or bitter spirit, an offended brother is to follow the example of Christ who, when wronged, gave up His rights, committing Himself to God who judges righteously. As Christians, we should never forget we are called to demonstrate a different lifestyle before the world, one in which we are ready to surrender our personal rights for the cause we serve.

ADMONISHING THOSE WRONGING 6:8-11

Defrauding Practiced (6:8)

Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers. These carnal Corinthians were not only not ready to suffer wrong, but Paul accused them of actively doing wrong to others. They were doing wrong to their brothers. Apparently they were not just going to court for damages but to make money. Greed became a factor.

Christians should love all men but there is a special love for those who are brothers and sisters in Christ. This does not mean that it is alright to wrong people as long as they are not Christians. Paul is not saying we should take the shirt off an unbeliever's back, but that we should show love for our Christian brothers and sisters.

At times there may be Christian real estate agents who are not honest with their clients.

There may be a Christian rancher who sells a horse at top price, knowing that a good day's work will bring the horse up lame. There may be the Christian contractor who skimps on materials to save money to make more profit and after a few years the house he built will fall apart. There may be the Christian employer who juggles the figures so the employees do not get their share in the profits that they rightly deserve. There may be the Christian student who defrauds his or her professor by accepting a grade not deserved because of cheating. There may be the Christian who moves out of a community with bills unpaid, defrauding the companies to which he owes money. These things may happen at times but they should not happen at all. When they do happen, it

becomes a definite matter for the church, and church courts should spring into action immediately.

Notice carefully it nowhere says in this passage that a Christian is commanded not to go to a secular court against his brother. It is discouraged. It is belittled. It is made very clear it is not a wise course of action. Whatever else this teaches, it says that Christians are to go to the church courts first before the secular route is even considered. If this were done, 95% of all disputes among Christians would be settled.

A Christian friend of mine had a multimillion dollar business. One of his lesser partners who was also a professing Christian sought to steal the business from my friend. Through various manipulations, he stole the name of the company, took away a large number of employees, ran off good business and set up a competing company of his own in the same city.

My friend lost close to a million dollars through it all which almost caused him to go bankrupt. These two Christians went to the same church. The whole situation was taken before the elders. They heard the whole situation and the elders decided to do nothing. They told my friend just to suck it up and be willing to be cheated rather than go to the secular court. Easy to say if it is not your million dollars. This is one time I think a Christian had a right to take another Christian to the secular courts. Why? Because the church court did nothing. My friend lives in two realms. He is a citizen of heaven and citizen of the state. He may use the state if the church does nothing about his situation. However, if the church meets and makes a decision to arbitrate, then that decision is binding and there is no need to go to the secular courts.

Demanding A Changed Life (6:9-11)

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? The Corinthians knew this truth but they had forgotten it, so Paul had to remind them that being a Christian demands a changed life. He writes about the necessity of good works to prove or demonstrate the reality of salvation in Christ. The word "wicked" ties this verse to verse eight where it says, "You yourselves cheat and do wrong." The words "wicked" and "wrong" come from the same basic root. What Paul is saying is that when we are so aggressive in defense of our own rights and take another brother to the secular courts without using the church courts first, we are wronging that brother deliberately, every step being planned out. This raises in Paul's mind the question of whether a person who deliberately, habitually and purposely does this sort of thing is really saved at all. To consistently treat a brother so unjustly might mean the person has never been truly saved.

Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. Paul lists ten practices which are incompatible with the kingdom of God. People who are guilty of these sins and practice them as a way of life shall be excluded from the kingdom of God (salvation). Paul said, "Do not be deceived." There are many professing Christians who say with their lips they belong to Christ but they habitually

live just like the unsaved. They reason, "I'm saved; I'm eternally secure; therefore, I can live as I please as long as I don't hurt anyone?" People who reason this way are deceived and may be very far from the kingdom no matter what they profess. "Sexually immoral" refers to any illicit sexual relationship including premarital sex. "Idolaters" refers to idol worship, putting anything ahead of God in one's life. "Adulterers" refers to a violation of the marriage vow by sexual unfaithfulness (extra-marital sex). "Male prostitutes" could be translated "effeminate", referring to passive homosexuals who allow themselves to be exploited. "Homosexual offenders" are aggressive, active homosexuals and lesbians. This verse and many others tell us that homosexuality is a sin. It is not a disease. It is not essentially genetic. It is not due only to social environment. Homosexuality is a choice and it is incompatible with the kingdom of God. Those who habitually practice this sin shall not inherit the kingdom of God. Notice Paul lists homosexuality right along with adultery and any kind of sexual immorality, so homosexuality, while a very unnatural sin, is just sin, and can be forgiven like any other sin. "Thieves" are those who steal that which belongs to another. "Greedy" are those guilty of extreme greed (materialists). "Drunkards" are those addicted to alcohol or any drug. "Slanderers" are those with a destructive, gossiping tongue. "Swindlers" are those guilty of cheating and blackmail

And that is what some of you were. Most of the Corinthians had been involved in one or more of the sins listed here before they were converted to Christ. Paul said, "That is what some of you were. Christ had changed their lives and their lifestyles so that they were no longer practicing the gross sins mentioned in this list. Paul did not say those who have ever done these sins will not go to heaven. The Corinthians had been guilty of these sins but trusted Christ, receiving the forgiveness of sins and a new life. There is hope in Christ for the most perverted sinner. Nor did Paul say that if you have never done any of these gross sins, you are surely going to heaven. I suspect that the Pharisee Nicodemus had never done any of these gross sins, yet Jesus said to him, "You must be born again." What Paul is teaching is that these sins cannot be habitually practiced in the lifestyle of a true Christian. True saving faith in Christ will be demonstrated in the conduct and way of life of the person who has trusted in Christ. Christianity demands a changed life, not a perfect life but a changed life!

Notice carefully that an adulterer, fornicator, homosexual or drunkard does not stay an active adulterer, fornicator, homosexual or drunkard. They were doing that but not now. An ex-homosexual will fight the tendency to go back into the old life. The ex-adulterer will wrestle with lust. The ex-fornicator may do battle with strong sexual desire. The ex-drunkard may want to take another drink. But men in Christ are new creatures and they are forgiven. If God has forgiven them, surely we Christians can forgive them too, and they must learn to forgive themselves, based on the cleansing blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But you were washed. These guilty Corinthians were cleansed by the precious blood of Christ. They had their sins forgiven completely. "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen" (Rev. 1:5). God did not have the best material to work with when he saved these Corinthians. It took a mighty act of God to turn them from their sins and make them members of Christ's church.

You were sanctified. These rebellious, sin-hardened Corinthians were set apart to God in Christ for service and worship. They had been set apart to sin in Adam, but now they were positionally set apart to God in Christ.

You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. These sin-infested Corinthians were given a righteousness by God in Christ, and based on that righteousness God declared them righteous in His sight. They were acquitted of all they had done. As guilty sinners, they were forgiven and declared forever righteous in the sight of a sovereign and holy God. Christ had come into their lives and revolutionized them for His own glory.

Notice carefully how Paul makes mention of the Spirit of God. The Corinthians had God the Holy Spirit living in them. The Spirit had brought them to washing, sanctification and justification but now lives in them to give them the power to live a different kind of life. What Paul is trying to show us is how we can tell if a person is a true believer in Christ. For a professing Christian to go on living a lifestyle of premarital sex, extramarital sex, idolatry, adultery, homosexuality, thieving, greediness, alcoholism, gossiping, stealing, robbing or whatever, is entirely incompatible and inconsistent with the kingdom of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. Those who go on living this way are simply giving testimony that they have never become Christians. For them, Christianity is only a religion but not a living, vital, personal relationship with the resurrected Christ!

CONCLUSION

Are you guilty of premarital sex, extra-marital sex, homosexuality, lesbianism, alcoholism, stealing, vicious gossip or any other gross sin? If you are, I have good news and bad news for you. The bad news is that all these things are sin and God will judge you for them, and unless you get forgiveness you will spend an eternity apart from Christ in a place called hell. The good news is there is hope. You can be forgiven. You can be washed clean. You can be declared righteous before God. You can be set apart to God for worship and service. You can have a new life in Christ.

How is this possible? Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved. Jesus Christ can take the vilest offender and make him or her as pure as the driven snow. Trust Christ and He will change your life and start you on the exciting adventure of the Christian life.