

Paul's letter to the Corinthians moves on from the factions and immoral brother to another sign of their spiritual immaturity: the way in which they handle material disputes. In this passage we are told how to handle disputes that are bound to arise between members of a church body. We would naturally want to use someone in the church when doing business because we expect them to be honest. But sometimes there are unspoken expectations and misunderstandings. The differences can be financial or unmet expectations. In most cases, each side is sure they are in the right.

The passage deals specifically with going to civil court against a fellow believer, and it gives us general principles of how we should handle disputes within the church family. It is these disputes that drive some people away from being part of a church body. The closer we are to people the deeper the emotional wounds that can result. We don't expect those we love and trust to treat us unfairly. But that is true with any gathering of people, whether blood relatives, or clubs, or friends.

The church, however, should learn to resolve differences in love and gentleness, seeking God's will in the situation. This is not to say that there are not cases when the authorities are to be involved. If there is criminal activity such as embezzlement, sexual misconduct of an illegal nature, or abuse, civil authorities should be contacted.

¹ When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? 1 Corinthians 6:1 We are supposed to be a spiritual family who love the Lord with all our hearts and one another as ourselves. How then can we go to court against a brother? What does that say to the world? How can they see any difference in us if we act just like them? That is why Paul uses the word "dare." He is asking how they can have the audacity to do such things. *"God views us one way, but we choose to reshape our own identities around the things that please, comfort, and excite us. There is a crisis of identity—a case of gospel amnesia—which leads to us acting like non-saints/unrighteous."*ⁱ When the world sees that kind of behavior, they conclude that the church has nothing to offer.

Jewish communities always judged their own affairs because their law is Torah. Our law is love (Galatians 5:14ⁱⁱ), and in this passage, Paul is telling us the church should judge between fellow believers. The Qumran community and Jews in general had their own courts even when living in Roman or Greek cities.

Why not follow Matthew 18? Go to the one who has offended you alone and try to resolve the issue. If the person will not hear you, take another person as a witness, preferably someone that person respects. If the person still will not listen, take it to the church elders. Most of the disputes are as Paul describes here, trivial! They happen when we are too focused on this world and not on things above (Colossians 3:1,2ⁱⁱⁱ).

I have witnessed believers go different ways so they would not have to compromise or agree to differ and still love each other. It is very sad. **We insist on having our own way to our detriment.** As mentioned in the last few weeks' sermons, we just look for another church because we weren't committed to the people we worshiped with or serious about the commitments we made. The persons who leaves will be the same with the next church they attend. Where is the spirit of Jesus who preferred us above Himself (Philippians 2:3^{iv})? If His Spirit is in us, certainly we can die to ourselves and take a loss for the sake of unity. Jesus gave up heaven and submitted to abuse and a torturous death

that we might be one (John 17:11^v). Can't we give up our rights to see His wishes fulfilled? If we are indeed saints, why do we act like the world?

That does not mean that we become a doormat, but rather that we submit to the decision of the elders after they have prayerfully considered the matter. Humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God that He might exalt us in due time (1 Peter 5:6^{vi}). As the following verses point out, one day we will judge the world (Daniel 7:22^{vii}), and angels (presumably the fallen ones), so why would we let a worldly judge decide a trivial matter within the church? Do we have such a lack of trust in our elders that we would prefer a secular judge? What kind of message does that give to the world around us?

² Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ³ Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! 1 Corinthians 6:2,3 This is the third time Paul asked, "Do you not know?" He will ask the same six times in this chapter. The truths we know about the future kingdom should affect our behavior today. When we possess the coming kingdom, we will judge the world. Because that is our certain future, why shouldn't we be the ones who help fellow believers resolve their differences?

"Do you not know" number four asked if they knew we will judge angels, as we are only for a little time lower than them (Psalm 8:5^{viii}; Isaiah 24:21^{ix}; Jude 6^x; 2 Peter 2:4^{xi}), how much more then our earthly matters? That is a typical rabbinical argument of greater to lesser. If this great thing is so, then certainly this lesser thing also.

⁴ So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? 1 Corinthians 6:4 Since God has chosen those the world despises (1:27,28^{xii}), call on one of them to judge the matter. Paul again uses irony to make the contrast even clearer. Anyone in the church would be better than a secular judge (1:20^{xiii}), so why would we turn to them to settle a dispute?

The NIV and a few other translations render this as a command that when a case arises appoint men of little account in the church to judge. I won't get into the Greek as to why they translate it that way, but if that is a correct rendering, Paul would be using sarcasm. In other words, even the least mature would be better than unbelieving judges.

⁵ I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, ⁶ but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? 1 Corinthians 6:5,6 How shameful that we would sink so low and be so like the world! Where are the elders, among you, you that set yourselves up to be so wise and so sophisticated, who will step in and help the brothers resolve issues? Do we really think civil judges will be fairer or have greater wisdom? In the closing of the letter Paul names a number of people who could have arbitrated a dispute. *Paul says, "I beseech you, brethren (ye know the house of Stephanus, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and that they have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints,) that ye submit yourselves unto such"* (16:15,16^{xiv}). *He goes on to mention Fortunatus and Achaicus, whose ministries were a benediction (16:17,18^{xv}). And what about Lucius and Jason, Sosipater (Paul's own kinsman) or Tertius, who acted as Paul's personal secretary at times, or Gaius, famous for his generosity, or even Quartus "a brother" (Romans 16:21-23^{xvi})? Evidently Paul is being sarcastic when he challenges the Corinthians who were "unable to find" (eni) one man capable of arbitrating between the disputing parties. He could name a dozen.*^{xvii}

Disputes are often from misunderstandings that fester and turn into animosity. Finding common ground and areas of compromise on demands can usually restore unity. When I first came to Wayside the church was in the midst of divisive quarrel about the way the last pastor was let go. I set both sides down at a table and asked them how Jesus would want them to resolve the difference. I challenged them with Jesus' demand that we forgive one another if we want to be forgiven (Matthew 6:14,15^{xviii}). Sadly, nothing made any difference. They did not go to court, but some who were involved broke fellowship.

It gets back to the issue in last week's lesson. Many church members have no commitment to one another. They do not see themselves as a family that needs one another. It is easy to pick up and move down the street to another church. And sadly, it is too often the case that if they disagree with us, we don't mind seeing them go. That is not the attitude of the early church! Paul's greeting was ² *To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:* 1 Corinthians 1:2 People with that description are those who love one another, which is the main outward indication that we are indeed saints. 1 John 4:20 reads ²⁰ *If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.* If love does no ill to his neighbor (Romans 13:10^{xix}), how can we cause harm to our brother or sister in Christ?

⁷ *To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?* ⁸ *But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers!* 1 Corinthians 6:7,8 We don't know what the dispute was about, but it is enough to know that a person was or claimed to be wronged or defrauded by a brother in Christ. By taking the issue to the city court which would have been in the marketplace, they are testifying to the city that Christians don't walk the talk. In the last chapter they wouldn't judge incest, but in this chapter, they took a trivial matter in front of the whole city. No wonder Paul is concerned that he had labored in vain! There are many churches that act in similar manner today.

Paul's suggested response is very informative. He has already asked where the elders are and why they haven't stepped in. But when that doesn't happen, he addresses the victim and asks why he didn't just allow himself to suffer wrong and be defrauded. Is a financial loss worth putting a bad testimony out to the city? Jesus suggested something similar in Matthew 18:15-17^{xx}. He asks the offended party to reach out to the offender. **It is the person who is wronged who must take action to remedy the situation.** The person who commits the wrong is either an immature believer or has not yet come to know Jesus. That means the one offended is usually the more spiritually mature and therefore should be the one who acts to resolve the situation, either by going to the person and talking it through or by suffering the loss and forgiving the offender.

That doesn't sound fair, and to our carnal reasoning it isn't! But it is the freedom wherewith Jesus has set us free. He is our provider (Philippians 4:19^{xxi}). He will deal with the offender. We only need be concerned about the person's salvation. Jesus suffered great loss for our salvation. **Can't we put up with these minor things for the sake of unity and possibly the person's salvation?**

To make it even clearer why Paul objected to going to court, we should understand the Corinthian legal system had little to do with right or wrong. It was more about who had a higher standing in the society, who had the most influence. The courts were a way

to beat up on those who had a lower standing in society. How could a Christian do this to his brother?

Justice Anthony Scalia wrote, *I think that this passage 1 Corinthians 6 has something to say about the proper Christian attitude toward civil litigation. Paul is making two points. Paul says that the mediation of a mutual friend, such as the parish priest, should be sought before parties run off to the law courts... I think we are too ready today to see vindication or vengeance through adversary proceedings, rather than peace through mediation... Good Christians, just as they are slow to anger, should be slow to sue.*

Fraud is always wrong but doing so while calling yourself a brother is doubly wrong. When I was building my house, I tried to use Christian subcontractors. The cement contractor claimed to be a prophet, had a fish on his business card, but after an advance he left the job and didn't finish. I thought about taking him to the board of contractors if just to protect the next customer. In the end I decided to leave him to the Lord and prayed for him. The roofer helped me finish the driveway. Later, I heard of another job in which he walked away leaving a pile of concrete in the customer's driveway. Then the board of contractors did go after him. He left the state. I heard he has since passed away. People may think they get away with fraud, but God balances the books with the blood of Jesus or with what we deserve.

⁹ Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 1 Corinthians 6:9,10 Paul concludes the issue with a harsh warning to those who harm others within the body. It's not that they just get away with defrauding someone. The frightening conclusion if they continue in such a way of life, it may be to their eternal damnation. We should be more concerned about that than we are with what we have lost.

You can't be too bad for Jesus to save you, but once you are born-again, life has a new direction, a new source and power. We are ashamed of the things we once did. **Continuing in the old pattern, unchanged, is an indication there was no conversion of the heart.** The fruit our lives bear is the result of the inner life. If the inner source is the flesh, you will have carnal fruit. If it is the Spirit, you will have spiritual fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit. Nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. By their fruits we will know them (Matthew 7:20^{xxii}).

Paul gives some clarification of behavior that, along with defrauding your brother, indicates a bad tree: sexually immoral such as the case in chapter 5, idolaters which means putting any object before God, adulterers you understand, nor men who practice homosexuality. Our culture is telling us this is normal, and it may be normal for this fallen world, but it is not the fruit borne by those who will inherit the kingdom of God. All these sins seem natural to the fallen man and we should not expect otherwise. Our culture excuses sin as a natural inclination. That does not make something right before God. God gives us boundaries for our good (Deuteronomy 10:13^{xxiii}). We love the sinner but hate the sin and watch our own lives to see that we are not tempted.

He goes on in verse ten to add thieves (taking what God has given to someone else), the greedy (which the Bible also says is idolatry in Colossians 3:5^{xxiv}), drunkards

(those whose lives are given over to drugs), revilers (those who constantly speak evil of others), and swindlers (which are those who con people out of their money).

If the friction in the church resulting in court cases was over someone defrauding someone else in the church, Paul is lumping such a person in with those who do these things that are indications that they will not inherit the kingdom of God. That is why in verse 7 he said they are already defeated. Satan has plucked up the seed that was sown so they are not growing up to produce good fruit (Matthew 13:4^{xxv}). That should have put the fear of God into those who were doing such things.

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. 1 Corinthians 6:11 Paul is reminding them how the power of God took them out of those chains and gave them new life. As someone has said, “From the guttermost to the uttermost” (Hebrews 7:25^{xxvi})! It is not about who we were, but who we are now in Christ. Hallelujah! We were all by nature vessels of wrath (Ephesians 2:1-4^{xxvii}), but God... but grace... but love... but the Word... washed us clean of all that filth -sanctified us - which is to say He set us apart for His glory. We were justified - just as if I'd never sinned. It is a term used for an acquittal. He had been addressing going to court but there is a much higher court. In the court of heaven, we have been acquitted before God because of Jesus' payment on our behalf and the work of the Spirit of God in our hearts. So, if these behaviors are still in the lives of some individuals in the fellowship, they need the same transforming power that changed us: salvation and transformation - not condemnation.

When the devil reminds you of your past, remind him of his future. Jesus' nature and authority did all that for us in His life, death, and resurrection. The Holy Spirit is seeing to our daily transformation and salvation from this present evil age (Galatians 1:4^{xxviii}). *It is not by virtue of our own resolve and effort that we become new creatures in Christ. Salvation is imputed to us through the saving name of the Lord Jesus (Matt. 1:21^{xxix}; Acts 4:12^{xxx}). It is implemented in us by the indwelling Holy Spirit. The believer does not willingly or habitually disgrace the name of the Lord Jesus or distress the nature of the Holy Spirit.*^{xxxi} In Christ we can suffer loss and yet know that we possess all things (3:21,22^{xxxii})! That is why we can forgive and move on in grace, love, and joy. We were once in the offender's shoes, but God predestined us, called us, justified, and glorified us (Romans 8:30^{xxxiii}). That is the liberty that is ours in Jesus. Glory to God!

Questions:

- 1 Why shouldn't we take a matter with a brother in Christ to a civil court?
- 2 What is the alternative?
- 3 Why is it a better path to take?
- 4 What is the Matthew 18 solution?
- 5 What is the greater to lesser argument in verse 2?
- 6 Why is it easier today to just go to another church than to reconcile?
- 7 What does Paul suggest that seems unfair? Why?
- 8 What are the two ways God can balance the books?
- 9 What does habitual sinful behavior indicate?
- 10 How can we be changed?

ⁱ Stephen Um, Preaching the Word, 1 Corinthians

ⁱⁱ **Galatians 5:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

ⁱⁱⁱ **Colossians 3:1-2 (ESV)**

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

^{iv} **Philippians 2:3 (ESV)**

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

^v **John 17:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

^{vi} **1 Peter 5:6 (ESV)**

⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you,

^{vii} **Daniel 7:22 (ESV)**

²² until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom.

^{viii} **Psalms 8:5 (ESV)**

⁵ Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.

^{ix} **Isaiah 24:21 (ESV)**

²¹ On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth.

^x **Jude 1:6 (ESV)**

⁶ And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day—

^{xi} **2 Peter 2:4 (ESV)**

⁴ For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment;

^{xii} **1 Corinthians 1:27-28 (ESV)**

²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,

^{xiii} **1 Corinthians 1:20 (ESV)**

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

^{xiv} **1 Corinthians 16:15-16 (ESV)**

¹⁵ Now I urge you, brothers—you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints— ¹⁶ be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer.

^{xv} **1 Corinthians 16:17-18 (ESV)**

¹⁷ I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, ¹⁸ for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such people.

^{xvi} **Romans 16:21-23 (ESV)**

²¹ Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen. ²² I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord. ²³ Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.

^{xvii} Phillips, J. (2009). *Exploring 1 Corinthians: An Expository Commentary* (1 Co 5:1–6:20). Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp.

^{xviii} **Matthew 6:14-15 (ESV)**

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,

¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

^{xix} **Romans 13:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

^{xx} **Matthew 18:15-17 (ESV)**

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge

may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

^{xxi} **Philippians 4:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

^{xxii} **Matthew 7:20 (ESV)**

²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

^{xxiii} **Deuteronomy 10:13 (ESV)**

¹³ and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?

^{xxiv} **Colossians 3:5 (ESV)**

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

^{xxv} **Matthew 13:4 (ESV)**

⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them.

^{xxvi} **Hebrews 7:25 (ESV)**

²⁵ Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

^{xxvii} **Ephesians 2:1-4 (ESV)**

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins

² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—

³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,

^{xxviii} **Galatians 1:4 (ESV)**

⁴ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,

^{xxix} **Matthew 1:21 (ESV)**

²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

^{xxx} **Acts 4:12 (ESV)**

¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

^{xxxi} John Phillips, [*Exploring 1 Corinthians: An Expository Commentary*](#), The John Phillips Commentary Series (Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp., 2009), 1 Co 5:1–6:20.

^{xxxii} **1 Corinthians 3:21-22 (ESV)**

²¹ So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours,

²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours,

^{xxxiii} When the devil reminds you of your past, remind him of his future.