

Sermon 19: 1 Corinthians 6:1-8: Christians in Court

OUTLINE

Dare Christians go to court?
Why reconcile out of court?
The Christian alternative to court

INTRODUCTION

'By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' Our love community is intended to be a demonstration that God saves selfish sinners and makes them willing servants. The grace that forgave us and made us a united family is to be put on display by the love we now show one another. We are to love as we have been loved. The Corinthians are failing abysmally on this front. The reason Paul writes the famous love chapter to the Corinthians is because they are a divided and loveless people. They are loveless in their divisions against each other; they are loveless in their being stumbling blocks to one another; they are loveless in how they use their spiritual gifts; and here we see that they are loveless by the way they are willing to drag one another to court, 1 Corinthians 6:1-8. The severity of this matter is emphasized by the fact that it is dealt with between the matter of incest and visiting prostitutes. This is one of three disasters that Paul feels he must take head on.

Clashes between believers in the local church are inevitable, as sinners we will upset each other, sin against each other, and some of those actions can be serious enough to warrant legal action. This is merely one of the arenas where the gospel is to be put on display to demonstrate to the world that God's grace and truth are what the human race needs to resolve these inevitable difficulties. That the changes God has made to us, and the principles by which He guides us are the solution to the sin that tears us apart. The gospel that saves us teaches us to be reconciled to one another, Matt. 5:23-24, 'So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.' Rom. 12:18, 'If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.' The salvation by which we are saved remakes us and our purpose, Matt. 5:9, "'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.'" Being saved by a Savior who has loved His enemies, we are to love our enemies as well, and instead of returning evil for evil, we are to return good for evil. If this is how we are to treat our enemies, you can feel why Paul is confounded as he comes to this problem of Christians in the Corinthian church taking each other to court.

Paul's tones continues to be strong in rebuke. As we go through this section we want to note some key questions and truths that Paul lays forward. Here are our three points: Dare Christians go to court? Why reconcile out of court? The Christian alternative to court.

Dare Christians go to court?

V1, 'When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?' As we begin we have some big questions to answer. Firstly, can a Christian go to court at all? It should be noticed that Paul in v1 is dealing with the particular instance of one member of

the Corinthian church taking another member of the Corinthian church to court. Does Paul saying that Christians should not take other Christians to court mean that all legal redress is wrong? The answer to that is no. Paul in Rom. 13:1-5 upholds the God given authority of the state to administer justice as God's servant and that we are to submit to the government on that front. In fact it should be noted from Paul's own life that Paul when his life was threatened appealed to Caesar and availed himself of the Roman legal system and his rights as a Roman citizen to save his life when it was going to be unjustly taken. So technically speaking Christians can in some instances go to court.

There are a few details that we need to lay out before we can get at the heart of what Paul is telling us to do. Firstly, Paul is addressing the matter of civil cases not criminal cases like murder or treason. The language of grievance in v1; trivial cases in v2; dispute in v3; and defrauding in v7, all point to civil matters. In ancient Roman law civil law dealt with matters like inheritances; dowries; business payments; succession rights; guardianship; and suing for theft, fraud, damage to property, duress, injury, etc. Most civil cases were settled with a debt for damages so that most of the time there would be a financial settlement against the guilty.¹ This will explain all the talk around economic gain and sins related to it in this context. Roman court rooms were open to the public² and many would attend as a form of entertainment. This public aspect could be leveraged by those who would use the courts to humiliate their enemies and gain status. In a shame and honour culture one would often settle out of court to avoid the scandal.

Added to this there was corruption in the judicial system. One commentator sheds light: 'Dio Chrysostom (*Or.* 8.9) complains that in Corinth there were "lawyers innumerable perverting justice." Cicero (*In Verrem* 1.1.1) opens his speech to the jury (and judges) in the prosecution of Verres by citing the rumors throughout Rome and foreign lands that "the courts will never convict any man, however guilty, if only he has money." Apuleius (*Metam.* 10.33) derides judges as "gowned vultures" and claims that "all our judges nowadays sell their judgments for money."

The wealthy were able to take unfair advantage of this judicial system by exercising their prestige and influence. One's breeding, social standing, and reputation for character—one's persona—also tilted justice in favor of the elite. The poor always had the cards stacked against them in the courtroom. Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 9.5) commends the new governor of Baetica in Spain regarding his administration of justice for "maintaining consideration for the best men." He advises him to continue to "maintain the distinctions between ranks and degrees of dignity." Social standing weighted the scales of justice; and if that did not work, bribery could tip the balance.³ Paul may have been concerned that poor Christians would not get a fair trial, but this would not be his primary concern for Christians not going to court against each other. He is not only worried about the poor; nor only about corrupt court cases.

So what we see is Paul saying that Christians should not go to court against Christians; that believers should be settling with one another without having to resort to the law courts. Let's look at how Paul motivates this.

¹ <https://www.unpredictableblog.com/blog/rome> accessed 6/20/2024

² Ibid.

³ David E. Garland, [*1 Corinthians*](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 197.

Why reconcile out of court

Paul having made his statement that Christians should be helping one another sort out their differences and not go to court now lays out some reasons.

V2-3, '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!' These verses have led to a myriad of questions. We will judge the world? How will we judge the world? How will we judge angels? Is this referring to the good angels and the bad angels? Paul who has seen things in the third heavens that we have not is really teasing us here with these statements. Sadly, we do not know much more than that. We can say that Jesus talks about the saints sharing His throne in Rev. 3:21, 'The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.' And He makes the promise to those who overcome, 2:26-27, 'The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, ²⁷ and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father.' We recognize that there will not be an independent judging on our part, but that we by virtue of our union with Him will be co-heirs and co-rulers and co-judges with Him. We will no doubt be the minor party, but we will be there.

The point of Paul here is not to give us a complete breakdown of eschatological events. He is employing a logical device where he is arguing from the greater to the lesser. If God will so equip His saints to be able to judge angels with Christ on the final day; how much more should we expect God to equip saints to be able to handle the daily trivial affairs of this life, like handling conflict situations. Although it was common in the ancient Roman world for cultures like the Jews to have their own legal courts within the Roman Empire, I do not think that Paul is advocating for an independent Christian with all the legal force and equipment to act like an independent arm of government. The implication here is not that we should be setting up our own kangaroo courts but rather that we should be availing ourselves of the truth and wisdom of God to deal with these problems between brothers, for what we have in the Spirit; the scriptures, in the example of God's grace is sufficient for us to love one another well. 2 Tim. 3:16, 'All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.'

I want to stop here and make a real point of this. Do you believe that the Bible is sufficient to equip you for every good deed; that it can instruct where there is ignorance; correct where there is error; confront where there is stubbornness; humble where there is pride? I do. Today as Christians we have been intimidated out of looking to the word of God to be our help in times of need. Sadly, I know of couples that have visited a divorce lawyer before they have visited their pastor. Unsavvy psychologists have been consulted before asking what the bible may say about a particular mental disorder. Secular counsellors and the latest parenting theory is preferred to the timeless word of God when parents are struggling with their kids. In every area of life we are made to feel like there are specialists that have replaced the truth of God's word and the support of God's people. We are told to stay in our lane. Well here is an excellent example of Paul not staying in his lane. He says take it to the church not the world, v4-5, 'So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? 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.' Here is a legitimate case of someone breaking the law in a minor matter and having legal grounds to win a legal case and Paul is saying that we must deal with the matter first as Christians before we resort to the world to resolve this issue. Now let me be very clear, Paul is addressing a matter of civil law not criminal law. In the case of murder or sexual abuse or a major crime it is vital that the government is brought in to do their job. Sadly there have been situations where cases of sexual abuse have been reported to the elders and they have kept those matters quiet. This is not what Paul is advocating here. But in the instance of a grievance between two members of a church, Paul is saying deal with this as family first. We recognize that things can get very heated very quickly, that a lot of emotion can enter into a dispute and things can quickly spiral out of control so that the parties involved feel tempted to get their justice; to get their revenge; to get their vindication by involving the law. Paul is reminding us that our relationship to one another as Christians is a priority that must shape all of our dealings including our obligation to sort things out and be reconciled without resorting to getting our pound of flesh through the law courts.

Friends we have resources to help us deal with these matters. Take a situation where one spouse has cheated on another; or someone has been short changed on a service they have paid for from a fellow church member; or if someone is arguing about who should rebuild a fence, think of any situation where you have an innocent party and a guilty party, a clear case of offense, a true grievance. As Christians our first duty is to glorify that God who has saved us by imitating Him before others, manifesting His beauty and ways by how we treat others. Eph. 5:1-2, 'Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.' We are to ponder Christ dying on the cross for those who were murdering Him and we are to be challenged by His prayer to forgive those who were deliberately being wicked, deceitful and unjust. His example reminds us that more important than being right and getting justice is loving and saving the soul of the one who has wounded me. Think about the anger that we hold onto. We tell ourselves the story about how we have been wronged, we tell ourselves over and over again about how wicked, how ungrateful, how spiteful they have been. We remind ourselves over and over again about how unjust it is, and how guilty they are, and how hurtful they have been, and we stoke our anger by dwelling on how unjustly we have been treated. And then we go to the cross and all the wind is taken out of our sails. Because He the most innocent person, who has never done anything wrong He asked for mercy not justice. This does not mean that the truth of the matter is irrelevant, of course it is. But as Christians we have an opportunity the world does not have. When we come together with an elder or a mature saint, and we two Christians who have a grievance are reminded of our sinfulness and unworthiness, of His grace and willingness to forgive, both the guilty and the innocent are humbled, are quieted, and brought to the place of being willing to correct wrongs and forgive wrongs. And through hearts that have been melted by the beauty of God's grace we choose to own up and make reparations; and we choose to forgive and not push for full justice, we show His grace. We have not been forced by law to 'do the right thing' but by being confronted with Christ we have wanted to do the right thing and we have been changed to do it. Forcing the law between those whose hearts have been changed by grace is so wrong Paul speaks boldly of it being their shame.

If we meet with believers and we discover that someone is genuinely sinning and ruining someone else's life and will not repent, we then also have the

opportunity to apply church discipline and the pressure that this can bring before going to court. At least by going through this process if necessary it can become clear that the sinning party is not living like a Christian, and clarity about their Christian identity can be given through the process of Church discipline.

Let me articulate the principle plainly, when it comes to a conflict between two Christians, the most important thing is not your rights but whether you are glorifying God. The Corinthians were living like they used to before they got saved, driven by the same priorities and methods they used to employ. Paul is telling us that the gospel is supposed to change all that.

V6, 'but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?' Here Paul tells us two more reasons for why we should avoid going to court. Firstly, our relationship as family in Christ. Part of the horror of the first murder of Cain killing Abel is that they were brothers. Sins against family members violate the natural order of things. Brothers ought to back one another, help one another, be there for one another not throw one another under the bus. Well, we are family in Christ. Secondly, we should not air our dirty laundry before unbelievers. We have a gospel witness where the world is supposed to want to join our family because of how well we treat each other, like in Acts. Who wants to join a family that abuse one another? Is this a family where we are gentle with one another, forbearing, kind, where we have glad and generous hearts, who willingly and humbly serve each other?

The Christian alternative to court

V7-8, '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!' Paul goes for the jugular as he lays out his final statements on this matter. Firstly, he tells them that to have gone to law at all and not have been able to resolve their differences privately show that sin has dominated their hearts, that it is not the gospel which reign supreme and is guiding how they treat each other but their sinful insistence on their own way. In this he says that have already been defeated, no matter if they win the court case and get 'justice' to pursue justice at the expense of Christian fellowship, in denial of the gospel we ought to be living by, is a genuine defeat. An unbeliever won't get this. To them seeking justice is a win, a good. But for those who have received mercy and not justice and not emulated that most beautiful grace that saves sinners, we know what a loss it is.

Paul then says something else that only those who have tasted grace can understand, 'Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?' If you are worldly minded; if you are set on your rights; if a cold hard use of justice serves you getting your own way; if you have been taken in by the victim mentality this is dominating our age; if you buy the communist idea that you are a persecuted minority that needs to get justice by overthrowing the oppressor, and that true salvation can only come by being set free through this process of overthrowing power structures and speaking truth to power. If you have believed the lie that you can create utopia through legal or political action, then suffering wrong in this life and tolerating injustice is only going to seem immoral never mind weak. But this is the folly of the cross to the world's wisdom; this is the weakness of the cross to the world's power. This is the fellowship of Christ's suffering as we walk in His footsteps where we pursue love at a cost to self to

save others from the justice they deserve. Where like Christ we absorb the loss so that we can show love and mercy. Paul maps out this love ethic in relation to those who are our enemies who do us harm. Rom. 12:19-21, 'Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.' Paul is saying rather suffer the wrong than act in this way against a brother. Rather be defrauded than act against a brother by dragging them before a court. Now Paul is not encouraging a defeatist mentality but as a last resort, if you cannot reconcile, if they will not change, after exhausting all options of mediation within the church, why not rather take the hit than pursue them in this way?

I don't know about you but it is here that all my protestations are silenced. How can I demand my rights when He who has every right gave them up so that His enemies would become His children? And there is more. Think about Paul's letter to the Corinthians and his own example in suffering for the sake of the church. Paul says several things where he who is willing to suffer all things for the sake of Christ's elect gives us an example. He is not merely telling us to face suffering nobly and quietly as some philosophers would even teach, but to act like Christ. Rom. 8:13, 'Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.' 10:31-11:1, 'So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. ³²Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, ³³just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.'

There are many things that need to be said about this matter of how a Christian ought to pursue justice in a godly way. And I am sure I have raised questions for you that I have not addressed that may be pressing for you. If you have questions about how this bears upon the question of the court cases raised against GV, if you are still confused please come and speak to me; the point I want to leave with you is this one: Christians should be sorting out their problems in the church and be reconciled to one another, the gospel has disrupted our selfish ways and made us one, we cannot deny this by insisting on our rights.

One final word. You may think that Paul does not take the matter of these civil cases seriously enough; that what he is saying is problematic and will cause trouble. To show you that Paul is not letting those who are sinning off the hook, whether it is the person taking others to court, or the one who is being dragged to court for genuine sins look at v9-11, '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, ¹⁰nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹And 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.' He warns of a justice more severe than any human courtroom can administer, God's final justice against sin. Those Christians who claim to be Christian who persist in thievery and greed and swindling by taking other Christians to court, they cannot be Christian and will finally suffer God's final judgement.

