

Order in the Court
I Corinthians 6:1-11

This morning, in our study of First Corinthians, we come to the topic of lawsuits. Now, you may be wondering: “Why in the world would Mark preach on the topic of lawsuits on Mother’s Day?” Good question! But perhaps after you see this Mother’s Day video clip, you’ll understand, because this is a family lawsuit waiting to happen.

Video Clip: *A Mother’s Day Moment*

The topic of lawsuits is pretty easy to find some humor for. So, I couldn’t resist. From a book titled *Disorder in the American Courts*, these are things people actually said in court, word for word, taken down and now published by court reporters.

Attorney: What gear were you in at the moment of impact?

Witness: Gucci sweats and Reeboks

Attorney: Now, doctor, isn’t it true that when a person dies in his sleep, he doesn’t know about it until the next morning?

Witness: Did you actually pass the bar exam?

Attorney: The youngest son, the 20-year-old, how old is he?

Witness: He’s 20, much like your IQ.

Attorney: She had three children, right?

Witness: Yes.

Attorney: How many were boys?

Witness: None.

Attorney: Were there any girls?

Witness: Your Honor, I think I need a different attorney. Can I get a new attorney?

Attorney: Is your appearance here this morning pursuant to a deposition notice which I sent to your attorney?

Witness: No, this is how I dress when I go to work.

Attorney: Doctor, before you performed the autopsy, did you check for a pulse?

Witness: No.

Attorney: Did you check for blood pressure?

Witness: No.

Attorney: Did you check for breathing?

Witness: No.

Attorney: So then, it is possible that the patient was alive when you began the autopsy.

Witness: No.

Attorney: How can you be so sure, Doctor?

Witness: Because his brain was sitting on my desk in a jar.

Attorney: I see, but could the patient have still been alive, nevertheless?

Witness: Yes, it is possible that he could have been alive and practicing law somewhere.

Last week, in chapter five, we looked at a very disturbing situation in the church at Corinth. A man, a Christian, a member of the church was living in a sexual relationship with his step-mother. And the church was doing nothing about it.

Paul calls the church to task over their boasting in their wisdom, something he has already done because of their disputes and divisions, but now because they still consider themselves so wise, so enlightened, and yet allow this open sin to remain in their midst.

Paul is going to go on later in chapter six to address again the issue of wrong sexual behavior. But in between these two passages, he talks about lawsuits between members of the church. On first blush, it almost seems out of place.

But when you step back and look at this entire letter, Paul is merely addressing another problem here in keeping with his concerns about the church. At the base of each of these problems lie three issues, three reasons why he feels it is necessary to take them on.

In each case he appeals to the believers, saying that they must be mindful of:

- 1) Preserving their unity
- 2) Protecting their witness
- 3) Practicing their position

This was true of their internal fighting and division: it was destroying their unity, discrediting their witness, and disconnecting with their position. It was true of their failure to address the open, public, habitual sin of a member which was destroying their unity, discrediting their witness, and disconnecting with their position.

And in the case of a member suing another member in the secular courts, Paul is concerned about them destroying their unity, discrediting their witness, and disconnecting with their position.

These same concerns will be at the foundation of other problems Paul will address with the church. So, keep those in mind throughout our study of this letter.

Turn in your Bible to the book of First Corinthians, chapter six. I'm going to read the passage and then go back and take a look at the situation in Corinth and then seek to make some application for today.

I Corinthians 6:1-11

Here's the situation: someone in the church has taken another member to court to be judged by non-believers. Paul scolds them for looking to the secular court to resolve their difference rather than dealing with the case before other members of the church.

He is probably talking to Gentiles here, most likely Greeks. Jews were forbidden from using heathen courts. So, it is less likely that those involved in this court case are Jewish Christians. Greeks, on the other hand, loved to be part of the judicial system. William Barclay writes about the major place that law courts played, for example, in the Athenian society.

In the event of a dispute, an attempt would be made to settle the issue with a private arbitrator. If that failed, the case went to a court called *The Forty*. This made it a public case. If there was no resolution at that point, it went to a jury court which, Barclay says, "consisted of 201 citizens for cases involving less than about 50 pounds (Barclay is British) and 401 for cases involving more than that figure."

He says we have records of some cases being tried before juries of between 1000 and 6000 citizens. So, Greeks loved judicial intrigue.

There is a member of the church at Corinth who had cause for legal action against another member. The term Paul uses indicates that this is a civil matter, not a criminal matter. The issue might be akin to what we would see in small-claims court today.

What has Paul up in arms is that the case is being taken before a secular court to be judged by those outside the faith. Because the intent of ancient lawsuits was usually to damage the character of one's opponent, Paul points out the incongruence of Christian pitted against Christian for one's gain and another's loss. To have a non-believer sitting in judgment over two Christians was an abandonment of the exercise of love among brothers.

Another factor which plays a role is that the secular courts were extremely susceptible to bribery and, most often, biased towards the wealthy, the powerful. Those with the power and the money used the courts to improve their social and financial standing on the backs of the poor.

It is possible that this is what is happening with the case in Corinth. The case might have had to do with a dispute over some business deal. After all, Corinth was a major business center of Greece. It could also been about some argument over inheritance matters. Do you remember the incident when a man said to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me?” This was a very common dispute in the first century.

David Garland writes about the use of civil courts in the ancient world. He says:

Persons of high status were prone to settle disputes through litigation. They had the upper hand in the courts because they could capitalize on their influence and wealth and could enhance their own reputation by injuring their opponent’s or increase their wealth with legal conquests. The lower classes were restricted from doing so since they were unlikely to win against stacked odds....Such a suit against someone of higher rank would also show an unwelcome lack of respect for one’s “betters.”

James takes the early church to task on this very point. In chapter two of his letter, writing about the sin of showing partiality towards the rich, says:

But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? – *James 2:6-7*

Once again, as we considered the identity of the man in chapter five, the suing party in chapter six might have been one of the wealthy members, a financial patron of the church. Maybe that’s why the church kept their “hands off” the situation and why Paul had to step in with his admonitions.

This man might either be taking a peer to court to enhance his own standing and position, or perhaps he is “grinding down a weaker member of the church who was lower in rank” (Garland).

In chapter four, Paul says that he didn’t write to the Corinthians about certain things to shame them. But here, he emphatically says he did want to shame them. Verse five: “I say this to your shame.”

Paul begins his confrontation with these Christians by arguing from the greater to the lesser. Christians, he says, are one day going to judge the world. If so, shouldn't they be able to judge the lesser things of this world without going to those who have no faith in God? If you are going to be involved in judging even angels, are you incapable of resolving, in comparison, trivial matters.

Remember that the Corinthians boasted of their great wisdom. Paul turns this back on them, asking: "If you are so wise, can you not judge simple disputes between Christian brothers?"

Let's look at the three issues, the three things Paul says are at stake.

First of all, what is at risk here is the unity of the body of Christ. By insisting on one's rights or by seeking to take advantage of another, they were destroying, rather than preserving, their unity. We have already seen the effect of this in their choosing up sides and aligning themselves behind various teachers, elevating their favorite and putting down all the others.

The church in Corinth, as a result, had become an armed camp. This fostered an atmosphere of "us against them." And so does this case of one brother suing another. Paul doesn't really get into the issue of whether one was right and other wrong. It was in how they were going about resolving the disagreement.

The lawsuit had the impact of pulling the church apart, and of not dealing with the situation with those who shared a fear of the Lord and a respect for true justice.

The second issue is the impact and witness of the church in the larger pagan world around them. This relatively small island of believers, surrounded by the sea of pagans, diminish their witness when this legal matter is pursued in the secular courts – particularly if this is a case of the stronger attacking the weaker.

The world would sit in judgment on the church as incapable of dealing with their problems. Paul says it would be better to suffer wrong than to make a spectacle before the world. It would be better to be defrauded than to bring the name of Christ into disrepute in publicly fighting over a trivial matter.

In what they were doing, they were acting just like the unbelieving world. There was no discernable difference between those who were followers of Jesus and those who followed some other god of the Greco-Roman pantheon of deities.

Lastly, from Paul's point of view, they were not practicing their position. From the very beginning of his letter, Paul reminded the believers of their position in Christ:

they were chosen by God, they were set apart as saints. They had been delivered from God's judgment and were to be a unique, holy people.

I think that is why he goes on in this passage to talk about the prior lifestyles of many of those whom God had saved. Among those in the church were those who formerly were known as "sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, and swindlers.

Paul describes these folks in a way that indicates their prior lifestyles – lifestyles of habitual sin that characterized their lives. David Prior notes:

Paul is not talking about isolated acts of unrighteousness, but about a whole way of life pursued persistently by those who thus indicate that they would be aliens in the kingdom of truth and light.

He then explains how they are now different. In the Greek text, each is introduced with the strong conjunction *but*. The purpose is to provide contrast between who they once were and who they had become in Christ.

- But you were washed;
- But you were sanctified;
- But you were justified.

Being "washed" probably refers to the cleansing work of God in salvation. Paul writes to Titus and says:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. – *Titus 3:4-5*

Paul goes on to say they had been sanctified, that is, set apart for holiness, for holy living. And they had been justified, acquitted. This is a legal term indicating God's action of declaring the believing sinner "not guilty."

Garland writes:

The implication is that Christianity not only offers a completely new sexual ethos and a new ethos regarding material possessions but also brings about a complete transformation of individuals. God's grace does not mean that God benignly accepts humans in all their fallenness, forgives them, and then leaves them in that

fallenness. God is in the business of not whitewashing sins but of transforming sinners.

Paul says to these believers: “Watch how you live in community. Preserve the unity of the body. Think about how you resolve your differences. Protect your witness for Christ in the world. Remember who you were before God saved you and who you are now in Christ. Practice your position.”

Today, we should be mindful of these same three things. It is a different world, a different setting. But we should be careful how we live in community so that we preserve the unity of the body, that we protect our witness before an unbelieving world, and that we practice our position in Christ.

In relation to disputes we might have with another member of the body, are we willing to allow wise believers in our midst to settle the matter without going to a secular court? We are not talking about a criminal matter here but a civil one.

Are we even willing to lose for Christ’s sake if fighting the issue would damage our witness for Christ in the world? There are times and issues that do require a pursuit of truth, even if in the courts. But how many petty arguments among Christians blow up into a huge fight, played out publicly in the courts and brings shame upon the church, those called to live lives in holiness and peace.

Paul argues for a transformation of our lives to the extent that we live differently than we did apart from Christ. Whether it is in the realm of sexual ethics or legal ethics or community ethics, we should be striving to live holy lives, set apart for God’s purposes and his glory, not our own.