

## **Getting First Things First** **1 Corinthians 6:1-11**

Joe Smith's a member of Raglan Baptist Church. Henry Jones is a member of the Kelso Presbyterian Church. They're the only two partners in a Bathurst architectural firm. They have several employees.

One day, Joe discovers Henry's siphoned off money from the partnership's bank account. It hasn't affected their ability to pay their creditors. Nor has it affected their ability to pay their employees. In fact, the only one to lose out is Joe. Joe's talked to Henry about the situation, but Henry says he's unable to pay the money back. What should Joe do?

- Should Joe call the police and have Henry arrested for embezzlement?
- Should Joe take Henry to court and sue him for what he's stolen?
- Should Joe have a chat with the minister of Kelso Presbyterian Church and ask him to sort it out?
- Should Joe just forget all about the money and go on with life as if it never happened?

### **The Surface Problem**

The next issue Paul deals with in this letter to Corinth is to do with at least one church member taking another church member to court. Verse 1:

*If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints?*

A similar sort of thing is said in verse 6:

*But instead, one brother goes to law against another – and this in front of unbelievers!*

Why's Paul deal with this issue next? What's it got to do with the issue of the man sleeping with his stepmother? The connection's in 5:12-13

*What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."*

It's another example of the fact that the church should be involved in judging those inside the church.

- Just as they should judge the man sleeping with his stepmother and expel him from the church;
- So also they should judge disputes among their own members rather than going off to the secular courts.

What can we work out about what's actually going on in this lawsuit? It seems this particular lawsuit involves a Christian defrauding another Christian of property. The second half of verse 7:

*Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?*

The word translated *wronged* is quite general. It covers many different activities that injure or cause injustice for another person. The word translated *cheated* contains the idea of robbing or defrauding another of something rightfully theirs. That suggests the lawsuit's about property of some kind, or maybe a business dealing. Ultimately, in terms of Paul's response, I suspect it doesn't matter one little bit what the actual case was about.

It may be there's more than one case involved. Some suggest the Greeks loved going to court – they used it as a form of entertainment. And so this would be another example of the Corinthians bringing their pagan lifestyle

and values into the church – of worldly thinking infecting the church. But it's not certain that more than one case is on view here.

### **The Underlying Problem – Church**

So the surface situation concerns one Christian taking another Christian to court, probably over some property dispute. That seems simple enough, doesn't it? All Paul has to do is to tell the one who took the property to give it back. The matter can be settled fairly and everyone can get on with their lives.

But Paul doesn't do that – for that's not the primary issue for Paul. It's not the issue he deals with first. Paul first deals with the fact that they've taken the matter to a non-Christian court. He will get to the actual disagreement in verse 7 – he doesn't totally ignore that – but, for Paul, that pales into insignificance compared to his main concern. Paul's more upset about the fact they've gone to non-Christians to get them to settle their dispute.

Why? Because such action shows they haven't fully grasped what they've become as Christians and what their future is. It's their existence as God's people who populate God's kingdom that should determine their thinking. In relation to this law court matter, this should affect their thinking in two ways.

First, Paul reminds them, because they're God's people they'll be involved in various aspects of the future judgment. There are two parallel sets of questions, although I think the way the NIV translates verse 4 obscures the parallel. The first set of questions comes in verse 2:

*Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?*

*And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases?*

Paul picks up on Daniel 7 which speaks of the saints, along with the Son of Man, being involved in the future judgment of the world. It's a theme reinforced by other Jewish literature. Now that Jesus is identified as the Son of Man of Daniel 7 – the One given the kingdom by the Ancient of Days – so Jesus' followers are identified with the saints who'll be involved in that future judgment. Paul doesn't give the details of what this judgment's about or how it's conducted or exactly what our role in it is. That isn't necessary for the point he makes.

The second set of questions comes in verses 3 and 4 (and here I depart from the NIV's wording):

*Do you not know that you will judge angels, not to mention everyday affairs?*

*If therefore you have such disputes, how can you entrust them to outsiders who are of no account within the church?*

This idea of judging angels doesn't seem to have any Old Testament background – that is, there's no passage in the Old Testament which talks about humans judging angels. And again, Paul doesn't provide the details of what's involved.

- Is it all angels, or only evil angels?
- What is it about angels that we'll judge?
- What hangs in the balance for these angels?
- What will be the results of our judgments?

We aren't told the details – just this tantalising statement that it will happen. Again, it isn't necessary for Paul to provide those details for the point he makes.

The point Paul makes is this: it's inappropriate for Christians to go to non-Christian law-courts to get the non-Christians to judge their disputes.

- Who's involved in the ultimate judgments – Christians or non-Christians? Christians will be involved in judging the world. Christians will be involved in judging angels. The only role the non-Christians will play on that day is to be judged.
- So, who has the better competency to make important judgments – Christians or non-Christians? It's Christians. Because they're involved in end-time judgments, they have the more important qualifications. Because they know where the world's heading, they should be able to determine what is and is not important now.
- So, who should you get to decide your current disputes – Christians or non-Christians? The answer's obvious, isn't it?

You'll sit in judgment on these non-Christians when God brings this world to a close. They won't be making the judgments – rather, they'll be the ones judged. So, if you're going to judge them in the future, what's the point taking your cases to them now? Why do you think these people with their wrong world-view are more competent to judge your disputes?

That's the first reason Paul gives for them not going off to non-Christian judges. He hints at the second reason in verse 1, but it comes out more clearly in verse 6:

*But instead, one brother goes to law against another – and this in front of unbelievers!*

As God's people, they're God's alternative community in the city of Corinth. They should demonstrate how God's

people should live. Their lifestyle should differ from the people around them. They should express their unity. They should show love and forgiveness to each other. They should handle disputes in a godly way. To put it bluntly: it's the issue of them airing their dirty Christian linen in front of the non-Christian public (both the judges and those who observe the public dispute).

By going to pagan courts, it demonstrates to the pagans that these Christians still haven't got things together. Just like the pagans, they defraud one another. Just like the pagans, they fight over property. Just like the pagans, they want their own personal rights. The way of the cross hasn't seeped into their inner beings.

Two things to note about both these reasons:

- First, for Paul the reality of who they now are in Christ is to influence what they do. Because they are God's new community who'll judge the world when Jesus returns, they should be able to handle these disputes in-house. Their Christian world-view should enable them to do this.
- Secondly, what Paul addresses here is the failure of the church to be the church. So far, Paul hasn't really addressed the two Christians who've gone off to the pagan law-court. Instead, he addresses the church as a whole. The church allowed these two men to go off to court. That's a failure at a church level. That's the failure Paul addresses.

What would happen today if we had two Christians with a dispute? Suppose two members of a church lived next-door to each other and they argued over their boundary line. What would churches today do about it? Would we

say:

That's too technical for us. We aren't competent to handle such matters. And besides, if we handled that in-house, it has the potential to split the church. You'd better go off to the secular courts and get it settled.

How's that fit in with what Paul says here? Is this an area we tend to shy away from? Are we brainwashed by our society into thinking people have to have a certain expertise in various technical areas in order to solve disputes between people?

Now, I should say that I'm not aware today of Christians taking other Christians to secular courts. Perhaps I'm just ignorant of what's going on. Perhaps we've generally paid attention to what Paul writes here. If it's the latter, then that's a good thing. On the other hand, I'm not aware of churches setting up their own tribunals (either as a permanent thing or on a case-by-case basis) to deal with disputes among members. So maybe it's simply that we don't have disputes on that level – and that also is a good thing.

It's important to emphasise what Paul isn't saying here.

- First, he isn't having a go at the Roman legal system. He doesn't suggest the system itself is corrupt or evil or misguided. He isn't putting down the system at all. That legal system is part of the good order God allows for the governance of sinful people.
- Secondly, Paul isn't saying the Roman legal system has no use whatsoever for Christians. As we read through Acts, we find times when Paul used the system – when he used his rights as a Roman citizen; when he appealed to Caesar to have his

case heard. But he doesn't use the pagan system to decide a dispute between two Christians.

### **The Underlying Problem – Personal**

In the second half of this passage, Paul does address the two individuals involved in the dispute – yet, still in the context of the church as a whole. Verse 7:

*The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already.*

The issue is no longer the question of taking their lawsuits before the pagan courts. Now Paul challenges the concept of them having lawsuits at all. In a community that should be characterised by love and forgiveness and harmony, the very existence of a dispute reaching this proportion is a problem.

Within this world, we'll always have disagreements of various sorts. Maybe even in the final state of God's kingdom we'll have differences of opinion based on different personal preferences. I don't know. God made us all different in so many different ways. It's difficult to imagine all those differences disappearing. The differences of opinion aren't the actual problem – it's how we handle them that has the potential for problems.

This difference in Corinth got out of control. Both sides have dug their heels in and insisted on their own rights (although it's hard to imagine someone who'd defrauded another having any rights – perhaps he totally denied the charges against him). Because they insisted on their own rights, the situation escalated to a lawsuit. In that, they're defeated – the two parties and the church as a whole. In the following verses, I think Paul addresses both sides of the actual dispute in turn.

The One Defrauded

In the second half of verse 7, Paul addresses the one who initiated the lawsuit (the one who feels defrauded):

*Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?*

They're hard words, aren't they? Instead of insisting on my rights – even instead of insisting on justice for myself – I'm to allow myself to be wronged and cheated. Yet doesn't that reflect Jesus' words in Matthew 5:38-42

*You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.*

Jesus talks about people in general. How much more does that apply to brothers and sisters in the church?

Does this mean Paul says this man shouldn't have raised this issue at all? A big part of me wants to say no.

- Surely it's right to challenge the man doing the wrong thing rather than allow him to continue in his wrongness.
- Surely it's right to bring it to the church and allow them to exercise their competence in judgment.
- Surely it's right to bring sin out into the open so it can be dealt with.
- Surely it's OK to deal with this matter so long as it's kept in-house.

That's what I'd want to argue if I was the defrauded man. I'm not sure that Paul would agree. It's hard to be certain at this point, because Paul's words are so brief. But I

think Paul's saying that this man's attitude shows his defeat: He has an attitude that demands justice for himself. He wants to get what's due to him.

How's that compare with the gospel? In the gospel we're reminded that God deals with us on the basis of grace, not justice. We don't get what we deserve. We deserve God's severe judgment. Instead, we're given forgiveness. And that attitude should work its way throughout our beings. That attitude should impact on the way we relate to others. As God's gracious and merciful to us, so we also should show grace and mercy to others.

The One Defrauding

In verses 8 to 10, Paul addresses the one alleged to have defrauded (yet, still in the context of the whole church):

*Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers. Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? 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.*

This person's also defeated. They're defeated in the sense that, if they're guilty of defrauding, then they aren't living consistent with being a member of God's kingdom. That is, their lifestyle looks more like those outside the kingdom. And if that's the case, then there's the very real danger the reason for that is the fact they are outside the kingdom.

Paul addresses the church at this point, rather than simply the individual, because the church has the same problem

as in chapter 5. If this supposedly Christian brother is guilty of defrauding and refuses to repent of it, then he should be treated the same way as the sexually immoral brother. The passage is very similar to 5:11.

It's not that Paul thinks this sin of defrauding doesn't matter. That, perhaps, would be the impression if we stopped at the end of verse 7. This sin does matter very much – but it still doesn't justify going off to pagan courts to sort it out.

### The Still Deeper Issue

Verse 11 finishes on a more positive note:

*And that is what some of you were. 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.*

Paul reminds them of the impact of the gospel in their lives. Before they became Christians, some of them were involved in the sort of things Paul mentions: sexual immorality, adultery, prostitution, homosexuality, idolatry, theft, slander, drunkenness, greed, and so on. This is the sort of people they were.

But then they heard the gospel. They accepted the message about Jesus dying on the cross for their sins. As a result, these three things happened.

- They're washed. The filth of their previous lifestyles has been washed away. They're forgiven for all their wickedness.
- They're sanctified. They're set apart for God and God's purposes. They're set apart to live godly lives in sharp contrast to their former lives.

- They're justified. They're now made right with God so they can inherit God's kingdom.

It's always important to get this the right way round. It's not because they cleaned up their lives that they became Christians. It's not because they made themselves good and thereby qualified to be Christians. It's always the other way round. God made them Christians through the message of the gospel – now, because they are Christians, they're to live like Christians. God's helping them become what He's already made them.

Your conversion removed you from being among those people who are wicked and won't inherit God's kingdom. Since you've been removed from amongst those people, you should stop being like them and live out the new life you're given in Christ.

### Conclusion

So what should Joe do? Remember him? He's the architect swindled by his Christian brother. It seems Joe has to be *prepared* to take no action against Henry. Joe has to be prepared to forgive Henry unconditionally – just as Joe himself received God's forgiveness.

This isn't to say Henry shouldn't be held accountable for his wrong actions. Nor that Henry shouldn't be disciplined by his church if he refuses to repent and take responsibility for his wrong actions. But if Joe takes the initiative in causing those things because he wants justice for himself, then Joe's defeated.