

1 Corinthians: A Letter to a Troubled Church

A Discerning Church (1 Corinthians 6:1-11)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on February 26, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ The 1st-century church in Corinth was severely troubled. As we've seen over the past few weeks, factions had formed, pitting members of the church against each other. The underlying cause of all these divisions was pride – spiritual arrogance. But the specific occasion where pride manifested itself – leading to greater division – was varied and numerous. Sometimes the occasion related to sharing a meal in a pagan temple (chapter 8) or sharing the Lord's Supper in church (chapter 11). Or it had to do with the exercise of spiritual gifts in corporate worship (chapters 12-14).
 - ▶ Or it related to lawsuits being filed against each other. That's what chapter 6 is about. **Lawsuits, in that time and culture, were never a merely private matter.** In 1st-century Greco-Roman society, there was a clear class structure where you had a master and his slaves or a patron and his clients. And you had no right to sue someone socially superior to you. You can only sue a social equal or someone below you. So most lawsuits in those days were initiated by people of a higher social class.
 - So imagine a legal dispute between two men in the Corinthian church. If either one is a patron, that socially obligates any of his clients, who happen to be in the church, to side with him in this dispute (whether they want to be involved or not). **So any kind of personal legal dispute between two church members would typically result in greater division, involving more church members, and pulling them apart from each other.**
- ❖ So that's how this passage on lawsuits between church members fits within the larger context of the letter. Now obviously, today we don't have the same patron-client relationships in the church. But that doesn't make things any better. In fact, you could argue things are worse.
 - ▶ **We live in a highly litigious age – meaning we are overly prone to rely on the legal system to settle any dispute.** Lawsuits are so common that many Christians don't think twice about turning to secular courts to sue each other. Instead of turning to the church – looking for wise, discerning counselors and mediators from within the congregation; relying on the resources we have as Christians to resolve conflict – we shamelessly air out our disputes before the watching world.
 - It's like an episode of *Judge Judy*. If you watch that show, you come away thinking, "These people are crazy! What are they arguing about? It's so trivial. So ridiculous. It's so comical that it must be staged, right?" **The point of our passage is that that's what the world is saying about the church when they see Christians going to court to settle our personal disputes.** "Are you guys for real? This must be staged, right? I thought you were the church."
- ❖ It was the late Supreme Court Justice Antony Scalia, commenting on the litigious nature of modern society, who once said, "*I think we are too ready today to seek 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.*"

- ❖ As a devout Catholic, Scalia would've been familiar with 1 Corinthians 6. He was certainly appealing to the spirit of our text. **We are too quick to prove ourselves right; to seek to be vindicated; to get what we think we're due.** That spirit of vindication and vengeance doesn't seem to match "*the message of reconciliation*" that we've been entrusted with as "*ambassadors for Christ*" (2 Cor 5:19-20).
 - ▶ **Our King – who laid aside his own rights; who, for our sake, wrongly suffered injustice – he is the One who has commissioned us to proclaim a message of forgiveness and reconciliation.** And yet, to have lawsuits with one another would suggest that we don't really believe our own message. Apparently, we don't believe forgiveness and reconciliation, through a shared hope in the gospel, is possible.
- ❖ Church, do you believe the gospel? **Do you believe the message of reconciliation is not just wishful thinking – but the actual power and wisdom of God to save? To restore our broken relationships with God and with each other?** Then it's time we turn to the resources we already have in the Lord, and it's time we accepted our role as judges within his kingdom. As we consider the text, I want to highlight three points: (1) Our delinquency to judge, (2) Our destiny as judges, and (3) Our disposition in judgment.

Our Delinquency to Judge

- ❖ Let's begin by looking at our delinquency (or failure) to judge. Now last week's chapter ended with an exhortation to not judge outsiders but to judge those inside the church. Now that was a specific case of a particularly egregious sin. It was a situation where the church needed to step up and put into practice corrective church discipline.
 - ▶ And now Paul expands this principle of judging insiders to matters of everyday life. Which includes the grievances we have against each other in the church. **And what shocks him – as much as their failure to deal with sin among them – is their failure to deal with interpersonal conflicts among them.** Listen to v1, "*When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?*"
- ❖ Apparently, a Christian had defrauded another brother in the church. We don't know the exact nature of the offense, but v7 would suggest that one brother must have defrauded another. **He cheated him out of money in one way or another.**
 - ▶ Instead of resolving this personal spat within the church, the aggrieved brother takes the matter to the civil magistrates. In those days, you'd take the matter to the judgment seat located in the marketplace (*agora*). The point being that it was a very open and public space. **So what started as a personal dispute between two brothers in the church would become a very public matter.**
 - The English translation of v1 has a hard time capturing Paul's disgust. The word "dare" is emphatic in the Greek. It's the first word in this rhetorical question. **It's as strong as if he said, "How dare you!?"** How dare you go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?

- ❖ **Now it's difficult for modern readers to share Paul's disgust since going to court is so common in our litigious age.** What's so bad about it? What's Paul's concern? Some point to his description of pagan judges as "*the unrighteous*" and suggest that he's concerned with their corruption. So Paul is saying don't go to the courts because you won't find justice there.
 - ▶ But notice how, at the end of v6, he substitutes "*the unrighteous*" with the term "*unbelievers*". So it's likely that he's using "*unrighteous*" to simply describe those outside the kingdom of God (like he does in v9). Paul's concern is not the judge's integrity. It's not even the judge's faith. The judge could be a Christian, and Paul would still feel the same. **The concern is that you're not bringing these grievances to the church. You're not seeking the counsel and mediation of your fellow saints.**

- ❖ I think it's important to stress that Paul is *not* suggesting that Christians should avoid the courts altogether. He's *not* categorically opposed to Christians going to court to seek justice. **Sadly, this text has been misapplied to discourage Christians from relying on the legal system altogether.** Which has resulted in attempts to cover up criminal behavior within the church. Just think of all the sex abuse scandals in both Catholic and evangelical circles. We say it's because we don't want to tarnish the name of Christ by airing out our dirty laundry, but we've misread this text and misapplied it to cases involving criminal behavior.
 - ▶ **The language Paul uses in this chapter makes it clear that he was focused on personal disputes between individuals.** He calls it "*a grievance*" in v1; "*trivial cases*" in v2; "*a dispute between two brothers*" in v5. We're dealing with civil litigation – not criminal cases. Paul has made it clear elsewhere that the state is ordained by God to handle matters of criminality (cf. Rom 13:1-5; 1 Pet 2:13-14).
 - **But here we're dealing with a personal dispute, likely over money or property.** The plaintiff is suing in civil court to rectify the wrong through some sort of financial compensation.

- ❖ That's what we're dealing with in the text. And notice how Paul's concern is not with the courts per se. It's with the church. **It's with any church that shirks its own responsibility to judge personal disputes between its own members.** The rest of the rhetorical questions in vv2-6 are directed – not at the man bringing the lawsuit – but at the church for not handling these matters internally.
 - ▶ Listen to vv4-6. "*4So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? 5I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, 6but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?*"

- ❖ **Paul is shaming them for their failure to resolve these disputes within the church.** These Corinthians were arrogantly boasting in their spiritual maturity. But what does it say about you if no one in the church is "*wise enough to settle a dispute*"? **A church's inability to resolve disputes between two members exposes the immaturity of all members.**

- ❖ So we should be ashamed of what lawsuits among us would say about us – about our immaturity as a church. But notice how Paul is particularly concerned about the fact that these lawsuits are brought before unbelievers. Look at the end of v6.
 - ▶ **Why would it be shameful to lay out these kind of cases before unbelievers?** It's not for reasons you might think. Yes, it has to do with shame. It has to do with saving face. **But it's not our face we're trying to save.** It's not our name or reputation we're worried about. It's Christ's. **We're trying to save *his* face.** We're worried about *his* reputation. We're concerned for *his* name.

- ❖ **If we, as a church, can't resolve our own disputes, what does it say about our message of reconciliation?** What does it say about our gospel? To our shame, it would suggest our gospel is ineffective. That it's incapable of resolving conflict. Powerless to forgive.
 - ▶ That's what's at stake. **We don't want to bring our disputes before secular courts because we don't want to tarnish our gospel witness.** We'd rather show the world that we're not perfect; we've got our disagreements; we've got our share of conflict. **But we've also got a message of reconciliation that can bring disputing parties to the table – and not just come away with an agreed upon settlement – but to come away with relationships healed and fellowship restored.** That's the power of the gospel, and as a church, that's what we want to demonstrate to the watching world.
 - Church, my point is that Paul is less concerned with what you shouldn't be turning to (courts) and more concerned with what you should be turning to – to each other and to the resources we have in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

- ❖ **But I realize, while you get that point in general, some of you are still wondering if it's wrong to ever file a lawsuit.** Because you're facing an unresolved situation right now that has escalated to the point where seeking legal relief seems to be the logical next step. **Can a Christian ever sue? Or is it always forbidden according to Scripture?**
 - ▶ Let's be careful not to create more restrictions than what God's Word prescribes. Otherwise we'll make the mistake of the Pharisees. **So I wouldn't make a blanket prohibition against any Christian being involved in any lawsuit.** That's too broad for this text. **But what we can say is that Christians in the same church should not rely on lawsuits for relief. They should rely on the church and its right exercise of corrective church discipline.** That would fit the context of our passage.

- ❖ Now let's say the dispute is between two Christians that have no personal relationship and are in two different churches where there is no recourse to church discipline, then in that situation, it could get to the point where a lawsuit might be the best way forward. And I'm sure there are other unique situations where a lawsuit may be justifiable. That's where you'll have to rely on godly wisdom to determine the best way forward.
 - ▶ The particulars of every case are going to be different, but the overriding principle stays the same. **Keep asking yourself: Will Christ still be honored and will his gospel still be magnified if I were to pursue this matter in court?** Have I exhausted all other options? Be quick to forgive and slow to sue.

Our Destiny as Judges

- ❖ So we've seen how the church in Corinth was shirking responsibility. They were delinquent in their duty as judges. But they were also relinquishing authority. The church has been entrusted with an authority to speak on behalf of the King and his kingdom. That's what Paul is keen to remind them of – their destiny as judges.
 - ▶ Look back at v2. **His point is – if one day you'll judge the world, then surely you can handle cases dealing with worldly matters.** *“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?”*
 - **This is what we call an argument from the greater to the lesser.** If you have figured out calculus, then surely you're competent enough to handle arithmetic. That's Paul's logic here.

- ❖ What he's referring to when he says that *“the saints will judge the world”* is the Bible's teaching that – at the end of this age – the Lord will return to judge the living and the dead. **And at that time, the saints – that's referring to any of us who are in Christ – we will join him in exercising that judgment over the world.**
 - ▶ Listen to Daniel 7:22 which describes the struggles the church will face, *“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.”* What that exactly is going to look like is unclear. **But if we are going to one day judge the world, then we are more than competent to adjudicate personal disputes between us.** Disputes that are, in the end, trivial compared to the eternal matters we'll be dealing with later.

- ❖ **And what's more – the Bible also teaches that the people of God will one day participate in the judgment of angels.** Listen to v3, *“Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!”* He's likely referring to judging fallen angels. There are a few places in Scripture that describe these angels that fell with Satan – during his rebellion at the beginning of creation. And now they're being held in captivity awaiting a judgement to come at the end of history (2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6).
 - ▶ And as before, the details of our involvement are unclear. **But Paul's point is this – if you're going to one day judge angels, then you can certainly judge your fellow church members.** If we're going to judge matters pertaining to the next life, then how much more competent are we to judge matters related to this life?

- ❖ Friends, I get it if you don't feel competent to judge. You don't enjoy mediating. It feels more like meddling. You don't like getting into the middle of an argument. **So when Paul points to your destiny – your future vocation as cosmic judges – I'm not surprised if that intimidates you more than it inspires you.**

- ❖ But this is the advantage of preaching through the whole book of 1 Corinthians versus just randomly jumping into 1 Corinthians 6. Because the chapters we covered earlier provide the necessary context to understand and appreciate Paul's attempt to encourage believers to embrace their calling as judges.
 - ▶ Remember how, in chapters 1-2, Paul insisted that true power and true wisdom is found in the message of Christ Crucified. **And as believers in Christ *that wisdom and that power is at your disposal through the Holy Spirit in you.*** Paul says at the end of chapter 2 that, as Christians, you have the mind of Christ (2:16).
 - So friend, don't shy away from that conflict brewing in your small group – that spat between your friends. Don't shirk your responsibility. Don't second guess your ability. **In Christ, you do have what it takes to handle disputes in your church – both now and in the future.**

Our Disposition in Judgment

- ❖ So we've considered our delinquency to judge; our destiny as judges; and now let's consider our disposition in judgment. In other words, the heart attitude you should have when you've got interpersonal conflict with anyone in the church. This is mentioned in v7.
 - ▶ **Paul is rebuking the Corinthians for their disposition to want to win.** They want to be vindicated, to be proven right. And they're willing to take their opponent to court to seek that win. But Paul says that, whether you win or lose the case, you've already lost by sheer force fact that you sued a fellow church member. Listen to v7, *“To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?”*
- ❖ You're so keen on winning, and yet you've already lost. **You've allowed your self-concerned disposition to win to bring shame upon yourself, upon your church, and upon Christ and his name (which the two of you bear).** Why not rather suffer the wrong? Wouldn't that be the better approach? Wouldn't that be the more Christlike disposition? To refuse to retaliate? To willingly be defrauded?
 - ▶ **Paul is channeling the ethical teachings of Christ – to turn the other cheek.** Jesus said if anyone sues you and takes your tunic, let him have your cloak as well (Mt 5:39-40). Whenever you suffer evil, you have a choice – to not be overcome with evil but to overcome evil with good (Rom 12:21).
- ❖ **That's the Christian ethic of non-retaliation. And let's be honest, it can feel unrealistic. It might even come across as naive.** It's perpetuating our victimhood. In this day and age, even Christians are largely driven by a self-serving, self-protecting ethic. “You don't know what he did to me.” “I can't let her get away with that.” “He needs to learn his lesson.”
 - ▶ Friend, I may not know what that person did to you. **I may not grasp the wrong you've suffered. But Paul's point is that there is Someone who does.** Someone who suffered the greatest wrong, the highest injustice, and yet he never sought to get even. *“When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.”* (1 Pet 2:23)

- ❖ **Jesus could suffer the greatest wrong, dying on the cross in our place, because he trusted God the Father to be a just Judge – who will vindicate the righteous in his timing and in his way.** That’s why Christ felt no need to defend himself before his accusers. He felt no need to vindicate himself before the civil magistrate (Pontius Pilate). He had the strength to silently suffer because he entrusted his life in the hands of Him who judges justly.
- ❖ **Friends, this is the gospel hope and power that no human court could ever offer.** Civil courts can make legal rulings. They can award monetary damages. They can resolve a dispute. But they’re powerless to restore a relationship. They’re incapable of addressing the heart issues behind your conflicts. **Courts can’t help you break free from the very sin patterns that led to the conflict in the first place. But the church can.** Because we’ve been entrusted with this gospel – with all of its promises and demands.
 - ▶ Paul makes the gospel’s demand clear in vv8-10. The gospel calls all sinners to repent of their sin. To turn away from it and no longer be defined by it. In v8, Paul directs attention to the brother who did the defrauding – and by extension, to anyone in the church who continues in sin without repentance. *“⁸But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers! ⁹Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?”*
- ❖ Paul then goes on to offer another vice list. *“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.”* There are ten types of sinners listed here. It’s not an exhaustive list. It’s not even particularly clear why he highlighted these ten.
 - ▶ Mentioning thieves, the greedy and swindlers may relate to this case of defrauding. The mention of drunkards might relate to what he’ll say later in chapter 11 about their abuse of the Lord’s Supper. And the first five sinners in v9 all seem related to sexual sin, which will flow into what Paul will bring up in the second half of chapter 6. **Bottomline, don’t be deceived into thinking you can live in unrepentant sin and still be in the kingdom of God.** By consistently behaving like an outsider (like the unrighteous) you’re signaling that you’re still outside the kingdom.
- ❖ **I think the point is to keep our focus on the sin lurking behind our interpersonal conflicts.** If you’re only concerned with what you’re owed or with defending your name in court, then you’ll likely ignore what’s going on in your soul. That’s why your church is better equipped to handle this kind of conflict. Because – not only can we help you pursue righteousness (a just outcome) – more importantly, we can address the matters of the hearts beneath the conflict and call all parties involved to repentance and reconciliation.
 - ▶ **A gospel-centered community can remind two disputing church members of their shared hope in the gospel.** We can remind you of the gospel promises that Paul recounts in v11, *“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.”*

- ❖ Paul is motivating us similarly to last week's text. There he said to remove the sinful leaven from out of their church – not so that they could become unleavened (holy) – but because they already *are* unleavened in Christ. In the same way, he's saying that those, who willfully persist in the sinful behavior he just described, won't inherit the kingdom. "And that would've accurately described some of you. But not anymore!"
 - ▶ **You are not what you once were.** You're now in Christ. You're something different. So you can start living like who you are! Friends, the hope of genuine life change can't be found in the law – by going to court. It can only be found in the gospel of grace, which is the business of the church.

- ❖ **And now let's think about how that gospel hope would make all the difference when trying to reconcile two disputing members in the church who both claim that shared hope.** You can remind each of them that – in the name of your common Lord Jesus Christ and by the regenerating power of the Spirit of God – the two of you have been equally washed clean from the sins that marked your former life. You've been equally sanctified and set apart to be holy witnesses for Christ in a pagan world.
 - ▶ **And you've been equally justified in Christ.** That means, in your King's eyes, both of you are looked upon as equally righteous – not by your own achievement – but by the free gift of Jesus's own righteousness counted as yours.

- ❖ **Christian, if that gospel promise is your only hope in life and death, then why would you withhold that same hope from a fellow Christian – whom you happen to be in a disagreement with?** By resisting the efforts to get the two of you to reconcile; by holding onto your bitterness and resentment; by weaponizing their faults so you can use it against them – do you see what you're essentially doing?
 - ▶ You're taking their sinful offenses – those sins that Jesus died for; that he washed clean with his blood – **and it's like you're trying to wipe off his blood so you can use that sin in your argument with a fellow Christian.** It's like you're telling Jesus, "Sorry but can you take your blood off this sin because I need to throw it back at them. I need to use it in my effort to prove myself right, to vindicate my name."
 - Do you see how selfish that is? It's borderline blasphemous. **It's like you're denying the blood of Christ and its power to forgive – specifically to forgive your opponent's sin.**

- ❖ This is why two Christians at odds with each other need to bring their disagreement to the church – and not simply turn to the courts for relief. Because only the church has the authority and the answer you two need. **Once you realize that your opponent is washed and sanctified and justified just like you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God, then it changes the dynamics of the conflict.** Because it changes you and your disposition towards your opponent. You're no longer enemies. Such were some of you. Now you're fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.