

United in Christ: Overcoming the Challenges of Diversity
Studies in 1 Corinthians
Judging Between Brethren

Intro: After dealing with the problem of the church not judging the incestuous brother among them, Paul turns his attention to another issue involving the need for the church's judgment. Some of the members of the church at Corinth were taking each other to court because of perceived wrongs against each other. Their conduct revealed another division, one in which the competitive attitudes and methods of the world were favored over the unifying attitudes and methods of the people of God.

The Problem Stated and Rebuked

Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints?

Was the problem here merely that one Christian was taking another Christian to court? Classical scholars like Bruce Winter and Ben Witherington can offer helpful insight into what was happening at Corinth by telling us more about legal proceedings in the Greco-Roman world.

The Roman legal system favored the rich and powerful.

An inferior could not typically sue someone of higher social status than himself.

Legal battles were often used to enhance one's social position as well as denigrate and shame an opponent.

Moreover, they could become a convenient and socially accepted way to consume those of lesser power and station in life.

In Petronius' "Satyricon" a character speaks: "Of what avail are laws to be where money rules alone, and the poor suitor can never succeed?...So a lawsuit is nothing more than a public auction, and the knightly juror who sits listening to the case approves, and with the record of his vote, something bought (Satyricon, 14) (Quoted by Hays, 93).

How this might apply to Corinth (Two possible scenarios)

It is most likely that the people Paul rebukes were people of wealth and power in the congregation. The lawsuits involved civil litigation and not criminal matters.

Some suggest that the rich and powerful were taking the poor to court. Others suggest that those of equal wealth were using the courts to shame those who disagreed with them. (Remember that we've already seen that there were internal conflicts in the church that might have resulted in animosity outside the church setting.)

Paul's response to the situation is to strongly rebuke the church.

Paul's contrast between the "unrighteous" and "the saints" suggests not only a distinction based on salvation, but also on character.

Would God's people dare take a problem to those who had a reputation for injustice rather than before those of holy character?

Witherington quotes the Roman writer Dio Chrysostom who said about Roman Corinth about AD 100 that there were “lawyers innumerable perverting justice.” (Witherington, 164) Not only this, but such actions were a violation of the essential unity of the church and its communal responsibility to take care of its own business by judging its own members. (This theme connects this paragraph with the preceding section.) Consequently Paul rebukes the practice on a number of grounds.

The Grounds of Condemnation

It revealed a lack of perception of the role of God’s people at the final judgment

Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, matters of this life?

How the Corinthians should have known that they would after the Last Day judge the world and angels, I’m not sure. But for Paul this was reason enough for Christians to settle their own problems. His argument is from the greater to the lesser. If Christian shall some day judge the world, can they not now be a smaller court room for settling disputes among themselves?

Moreover if they will some day judge angels (and their conduct), can they not judge the relatively trivial matters of this life?

It honored those who were despised in the church.

If then you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? I say this to your shame.

The argument seems to be this: If it is necessary to have a court to settle a dispute, do you make as judge someone who has no standing in the Lord’s church?

But Paul uses a stronger word; he refers to those who because of their misconduct are rightfully despised for it.

It implied that there was no one in the church wise enough to decide between two brothers at odds.

Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers?

This must have really stung. For all their professions of “wisdom” mentioned earlier in this book, Paul now asks, “Is there not one wise man among you?”

For Paul these legal cases involved two issues.

First that the unjust and unbelievers were being asked to arbitrate in their disputes.

Second that there should be lawsuits at all was a disgrace!

It revealed an unwillingness to suffer wrong for the sake of Christ and His gospel.

Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?

The question is, “Why would it be preferable to be wronged or defrauded?”

First it would be so because of the impact that such things would have upon the unbelieving world. How could these Christians have any credibility with the world and proclaim a message of love, while they were fighting with and wronging one another?

Second, such an action was inconsistent with the example and teaching of the Lord who endured the evil of others rather than seek revenge or just repayment.

Moreover it manifested evil attitudes toward a brother in Christ

On the contrary, you yourselves wrong and defraud, and that your brethren.

Paul chose his words carefully. It was “brother” against “brother.” Instead of manifesting a selfless and sacrificial love, their actions revealed a desire to wrong and defraud another. (Perhaps this is a reflection of the unjust verdict that would come out of the legal ruling. Often the person who “won” was given far more than justice would have required.)

It revealed a lack of understanding of the behaviors that will keep people out of the kingdom

Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

The very attempt to exact from others what was not due them was contrary to the teaching of the gospel. To seek not merely justice, but what rightfully belonged to another was both stealing and swindling—two things that would keep people out of God’s kingdom.

And it should be noted that here again in Scripture we have a complete statement of the sinfulness of homosexuality. The two expressions “malakoi” and “arsenokoitai” refer “to the leading and following partners in a homosexual pederastic tryst.” (Witherington, 166).

It is inconsistent with the new way of life the disciples were called to live.

And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor. 6:1-11)

Finally Paul makes the point that such behavior was supposed to have ended when the Corinthians became disciples. It was these sins that had been washed away. It was these sins that Christ had forgiven. It was to a different lifestyle that they had been consecrated.

Making An Application Today

Paul's teaching to the church at Corinth should continue to instruct us in our attitudes toward fellow-disciples.

The church is a world where all believers stand in equality before God.

In Christ social stratification of the world is removed. As sinners forgiven by grace, there is no such thing as privilege for the rich and powerful, nor is there justification for the abuse of those of lesser power or material standing.

The church presents a message of unity and love that our conduct should always reflect.

All our conduct should reflect an appreciation for our message and nothing should be done that undermines the principles we are teaching.

The church is a body of wise people that can monitor itself and solve its own problems.

The people of God should be competent to solve their own problems and not have to resort to the arbitration of unbelievers.

The church is a body of believers who in following Christ seek the good of others even if at their own expense.

The true disciple respects and emulates the sacrificial mindset of Jesus that seeks what is best for another rather than selfishly pursue what will harm others.

Conclusion: It is tempting to seize upon the statements of 1 Cor. 6:9-10 and launch an attack on the sins of unbelievers; but in so doing, we miss the real thrust of these verses to the church. I've tried to avoid doing that tonight.

However, they do speak powerfully to the issue of who can be saved. The practice of these sins (any and all of them!) will keep us out of heaven; but also those around us who practice them. Those in the world surely need to understand this, and to hear and obey God's message of forgiveness in Jesus Christ!