

THE WRONG WAY TO RIGHT WRONGS

1 Corinthians 6:1–11

Dr. George O. Wood

1 Corinthians 6:1–11 (NIV)

“If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? 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? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers! The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? 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. 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.”

A few years ago, Jewel and I had the opportunity of being in Greece for a couple of days. We decided to spend one day in Athens and we would take the other day and spend it in Corinth. We could have caught a special tour bus, which would have visited a number of places including Corinth, but since they only spent one hour in Corinth, we decided not to catch the tour bus and

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see all the other stuff. “Let’s just take the whole day for Corinth because it would be kind of a highlight to take the whole day and see Corinth.” So we caught a regular Greek passenger bus out of Athens to New Corinth, changed buses at New Corinth, caught the older bus to Old Corinth, got to Old Corinth and—my!—what a disappointment. We didn’t even need an hour to see old Corinth. I was so disgusted because I could have seen all those other places and, stupidly, had spent the whole day on the rattletrap buses, changing buses, because I knew I’d need lots of time in Old Corinth.

I thought, in regard to the Corinthian letter, how much my experience at Corinth must have been like Paul’s experience in Corinth in regard to the church. He expected so much and there were such great problems in the church. Great division, boasting in wisdom and boasting about how spiritual we are, and yet being tolerant of sexual immorality. And in the passage today being intolerant toward brethren by taking them before pagan law courts and suing them.

Unlike me, Paul didn’t walk away from Corinth. And that’s good because, while we can walk away from places, God never walks away from people. Isn’t that a great comfort to realize God just doesn’t say, “What a disappoint he or she is to Me. I’ll just walk away from them”? But He doesn’t. And His people don’t, either. His apostles don’t. And He doesn’t walk away from the Corinth church while they’re facing this problem of lawsuits.

I think some introductory words about lawsuits ought to be in order before we look specifically at the verses before us. Sometimes, persons put more weight on this particular paragraph of Scripture than it can bear. That is, they try to make this passage fit every possible conceivable circumstance. One of the rules that we have in interpreting the Scripture is that Scripture must be compared with Scripture. When we’re talking about the whole subject of going to law, we need

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to take into account the totality of what the Scripture says. When the Scripture is specifically talking about believers suing other believers, then we have this specific passage to relate to.

We ought to acknowledge some things in general, though, on lawsuits.

We still have the problem today of believers suing believers. Do you remember, in the paper, several months ago, the news of a church that had a split and was fighting for control of the church. They went to court and one group tried to get the other thrown out. Finally, they wound up with split services. One part of the congregation met Sunday morning and the other part met Sunday afternoon. I grieved inside as I saw that. I just wish one group would have given up.

I know of a situation, recently, where a denomination wanted control of the building and the pastor said, “We are not going to get involved in a lawsuit over this. If you want the building, fine, you can have it.” The people, in a very gentle spirit, left. And God has prospered them and the church has almost doubled in the six to eight months since this has happened. The spirit was right, they refused to get into a lawsuit over the matter.

I think that some of you too may be aware of two Bible-smuggling groups in Pasadena, two non-profit corporations who recently got involved in a lawsuit with one another. They finally settled it out of court. But it was like—have they been reading the Bibles they were smuggling? You sort of had that question, as you looked at that situation.

We recognize that does happen between institutions. It does sometimes happen when Christians take other Christians to court.

Another thing that we must understand is that at Corinth there was some very special nature of the whole problem of lawsuit. A better understanding the culture would show what was going on. Sometimes, we need to look at the culture because our culture is not-identical. The way we prosecute lawsuits is not the way Greeks prosecuted lawsuits.

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William Barclay, in his little daily Bible study, notes how lawsuits were characteristic among Greek people of that day. Law courts were a chief amusement and entertainment. Not a whole lot to do. You couldn't turn on television. Where do you go to get entertained? To hear some argument somewhere. I can remember this, before the days of TV, some entertainment we used to enjoy, that nobody likes anymore. Going to law was intricately bound up with Greek life.

Barclay says that we note the details of Athenian law, and when we study the details of Athenian law, we have a good idea of how Corinthian law worked. If there was a dispute in Athens, the first attempt to settle it was by a private arbiter. In the event that one arbiter was chosen by both parties, he had to be an impartial person. But if he failed to settle the situation, then there was the court known as the "court of the forties." The forty referred the matter to a public arbiter. Public arbitrators helped Athenian citizens to adjudicate matters. These public arbitrators had to be sixty years of age. If, when they got done, the situation still wasn't settled, then it was referred to a jury court, which consisted of two hundred and one citizens for the purpose of solving cases that were under a hundred and twenty-five dollars. Then a jury of four hundred for solving cases of more than a hundred and twenty-five dollars. That was in the day when people earned twenty cents, today you have to translate that a little bit upwards. There were indeed cases where juries could be as large as a thousand to six thousand citizens. It was plain to see in a Greek city where there was this litigious tendency and it was sort of the center of amusement that many, many people—in fact, Barclay said practically everybody, specialized in being a lawyer—deciding, listening to a case, arguing how it would be prosecuted.

The Corinthians had begun to participate in this whole litigious kind of tendency as well, getting involved in going to pagans who were setting up their court system and being a part of this argumentative process.

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When it comes to appealing to the courts, this passage in 1 Corinthians 6 does not rule out all appeal to the courts. For example, this Scripture does not say anything about when an issue is of such a nature that it cannot be arbitrated by the church. For example, it may be an issue that does not involve a dispute between two believers. It may be an issue that has to do with the settlement of an automobile accident or it may be an issue which involves recourse to a law court. We need to recognize, in Romans 13, that Paul said that government is servant of God to uphold its purposes of justice.

Paul himself did not hesitate to appeal to a law court when he was faced with the matter that the church couldn't arbitrate at all, when he was a prisoner and the governor wanted to send him back to Jerusalem. He said, "No. I appeal to Caesar." He used a formal legal appeal to the law court in order to advance his case and to protect his life. So, in a matter which the church couldn't adjudicate, the church couldn't make any sort of decision, whether Paul would be released or not. Paul had the freedom to appeal to the proper court of law using the proper kind of legal appeal that was given to advance his case.

Also, when a decision has been arbitrated within a church and the church, in order to uphold justice, requires the legal enforcement powers of the court, it may be appropriate to go to court. I think, for example, that all disputes between believers ought to be settled among believers. We'll look at that as we look at 1 Corinthians 6 today. But suppose that after there has been an arbitration of that dispute and sound brothers and sisters have sat in judgment and rendered a decision on that matter, and one person says, "I'm going to do it my own way, whether you like it or not," then that person ought to be treated as a non-believer. And perhaps the option ought to be kept open. Not necessarily pursued, but the option ought to be kept open. One of the functions

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of government and society is to maintain justice and to bring the wrongdoer to recognize that he has done wrong and execute a penalty as an enactment. That ought to be held as an option.

Paul says, “Rulers hold no terror for those who do right but for those who do wrong, for he is God’s servant to bring punishment on the evildoer” (Romans 13:4). Some examples of this might be in the area of child custody or spousal support or the like, where there has been an involvement of believers and one person is clearly, decidedly in the wrong and is not acting like a Christian at all. It may be that, in order to uphold justice, the church as a body or the group of leadership within the church, will appeal then in court. That way, Christians are not set against Christians, but the church as a whole has taken a united stand and brought a witness of justice to the world.

We could spend a lot more time in that matter, but I wanted to talk, first, of the exceptions to 1 Corinthians 6, and not trying to put everything on that text that maybe sometimes doesn’t fit. The wrong way to right wrongs.

Paul gives three arguments against taking believers to a court of law. This, by the way, is going to be, even if you’re not thinking about suing somebody. Just stay with us.

I. “Lawsuits in court don’t make sense,” Paul says.

They simply, among believers, do not make sense. That’s the message of verses 1–3. How could believers have the audacity to take a believer to court?

A. He says that the first reason why they don’t make sense is that disputes among believers ought to be settled among believers.

It doesn’t make sense for them to be settled by someone who is not a believer. We’ve had an interesting time negotiating this complex land lease with Southern California College. We have faced the fact that the current administration of the church and the current administration of the

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college will not always be in existence. If the Lord tarries and time takes its toll, someday down the road, thirty-five to forty years, there's possibly going to be a change. What if somebody sneaks into this whole arrangement down the road and they have a real mean spirit? They're marked more by the works of the flesh than the fruit of the Spirit. They begin to say, "Somebody hasn't kept their part of the deal and we're going to sue them and get them out of here." Or, "We're going to do something to somebody through a court of law." We have been so concerned about upholding this matter of 1 Corinthians 6 and have provided, in our arrangement and our relationship with the two institutions, that any disputes are to be settled by a group of arbiters who are mutually appointed, by agreement of the church and the college, and that those arbiters always exist, even if they are not used. We will agree upon those at the outset, and periodically, every three years, renew our agreement on who will be the arbitrators. So we have committed ourselves to not seeking redress in a court of law if there's ever a dispute.

Believers ought to make that kind of commitment to one another. It doesn't make sense to have the matter judged by someone in the world when it can be judged by someone in the church.

B. The second reason that Paul says lawsuits don't make sense among believers is that believers are going to judge the world (verse 2). He says, "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?" (NIV). It's very interesting, in chapter 6, he asked the question "Do you not know...?" six times. It's as though he is giving a theological test to the Corinthians. Like "Don't you know this? This is elemental doctrine. The first elemental doctrine that he gives in this "Do you not know?" is: "Do you not know the saints will judge the world?"

I have a very dear friend who used to look at the text, throw up his hands in horror and say, "The saints are making such a mess of things now. What's it going to be like when they rule the world?"

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We have to recognize that God is giving us a redeemed nature. He wants us to get on living with that redeemed nature now and stop acting so crazy. Do you not know that the saints are going to judge the world? That's a very clear indication from the Scripture. Jesus says to the disciples, in Matthew 19:28, "I tell you the truth. When the Son of man sits on His glorious throne you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:12, "If we endure, we will also reign with him." Revelation 5:10 says, "You've been a king and priest to serve our God, and they will reign on earth."

We are not told how the saints will judge, whether it's going to be deciding cases or whether it's going to be a judge in some places in the south, where the judge is the county administrator. But we know that they'll judge. Paul says, "If you're getting ready for your future role of being the judge over the world in the era in which the Messiah brings in its finality, how come you can't judge even the simple things now? Don't you know that someday you're going to have more responsibility to judge?"

C. The third reason he gives for lawsuits not making sense among believers is: "Do you not know that we will judge angels?" (verse 3, NIV). If we're going to judge something as complex as an angel...can you imagine seeing yourself in some eternal forum, impaneled as a judge? Your first case is brought before you and it's some great, mighty angel. I feel inferior just thinking about it—thinking about judging an angel. Yet the Scripture is very clear: "Do you not know...?" to believers.

You say, "I didn't know that. I didn't know I was going to judge angels someday." Here's the witness of the Scripture. Yes, we are. We're not told which angels we're going to judge. We're not told whether we're going to judge good angels or bad angels. Or both. We do know, from the Scriptures, certain things about evil angels. 2 Peter 2:4 says, "If God did not spare the angels

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when they sinned but sent them to the lowest hell, putting them in gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment...” Jude 6 says, “The angels that did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own homes, these he has kept in darkness bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great day.” There seems to be a hint here that one of the functions of believers will be to judge evil angels.

Then this would make sense from the standpoint that angels who sinned against God, sinned against Him in the first instance, that is, they had known God face to face and sinned against Him actually by deliberately rebelling against someone they knew face to face. Whereas, we as mortals have never seen God face to face. We have received Him by faith. Believing Him in faith and laying aside our rebellious will, it would seem appropriate that those who have trusted in God in faith would then be in a position to judge those who rebelled against God who had a face to face relationship with Him.

Paul is pointing out that it’s ridiculous for us not to judge matters now when there are some great matters that lie ahead of us in the future age. The first thing is that lawsuits among believers don’t make sense.

II. The second thing he says about lawsuits in courts among believers is that they bring shame to Christ’s body (verses 4–8).

Earlier in the Corinthian letter, in 1 Corinthians 4:14, Paul had commented on the poor treatment given to him by the Corinthians. He wrote at that time, “I’m not writing this to shame you but to warn you.” Now he changes tactics. “Now I am going to write to shame you. I’ve found something that’s really shameful.” He says this about bringing shame to Christ’s body.

A. In verses 4–5, he indicates that lawsuits bring shame in that they express a complete lack of confidence in the body of Christ. If you had confidence in your brothers and sisters in the body

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of Christ, you would have brought it to them for judgment. The fact that you brought it to an outside court of law means you don't trust those in the body. You don't trust their judgment, you don't trust their regenerate spirit and wisdom, which the Holy Spirit has equipped them with, to judge your situation. If you really trusted them, then you wouldn't have gone to the world.

Verse 4 can be translated in one of three ways. In the New International Version, "Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church." It could be translated in several ways. It could be saying, "Do you appoint as judges men of little account in the church?" Meaning, "Are you appointing people who aren't held in much account in the church? Is this what you're doing?" Or it could be saying, "Do you appoint as judges men of little account in the church?" If you do that, why go to someone in the world who is of even less account. Most probably, he's saying, as the NIV has it here. "Appoint as judges men [or people] of even little account in the church." Naïve nobodies, appoint them.

That's real irony. You Christian Corinthians, you have prided yourself in wisdom and in how wise you are. Do you not even have one wise man? Take the stupidest one from your midst and let him be your judge.

You express complete lack of confidence in the body of Christ when you go outside the body of Christ to adjudicate a personal matter.

B. He also says that lawsuits among believers in the courts are a shame to the body of Christ because they defeat the witness of the Christian faith in the eyes of unbelievers. Verses 6–8 say, "The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged?" (NIV). Paul advances the argument that, even if you win in court, you have lost the bigger battle. Better be wrong than to show the world that you've never been changed by the love of Christ.

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What we should never forget is that, as believers, we're called to demonstrate a different lifestyle to the world. One in which we are ready to surrender personal rights for the cause of Christ. Paul is going to develop more of this later on in the letter to the Corinthians. There is nothing more characteristic of a believer than his or her willingness to surrender, even at one's own hurt and cost of personal rights, so that the cause of the gospel may prevail. Paul says, "Lawsuits among believers are shameful."

III. A third thing he says about suing another believer in a court of law is that lawsuits in court among believers are evident of an unredeemed life (verses 9–11).

"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived" (NIV). Then he goes on and gives a list of ten sinful lifestyles that are excluded from the kingdom of God. Initially, this looks like it doesn't fit the passage on lawsuits. What do sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, homosexual offenders, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanderers, and swindlers have to do with those who execute lawsuits against one another?

There is a very close connection. This may be one of the areas where the English translation could be greater strengthened in seeing the play on words that Paul does in the Greek. In verse 8, he says, "Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong" (NIV). Circle "wrong." Then, in verse 9, "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God?" (NIV). Circle "wicked." The word "wrong" and the word "wicked" are from the same root. What he's doing is connecting the two. He's saying you who prosecute lawsuits on one another are in the wrong. And you are joining in your wrongness with those other lifestyles, which are also in the wrong, namely...and then he goes on to name ten lifestyles that are in the wrong.

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We could take some degree of time looking at each of these ten characteristics that are given here. I think I'll not look at each of the ten characteristics because of the time. We'll talk more about sexual immorality next week. I'm fascinated by the word "idolatry" this week. What does the word "idolater," in its root meaning, really mean? I thought and couldn't figure out what it means. I went to a lexicon. The word is really a combination of two words—one, meaning "an appearance, picture or a copy." And another, from the word "serve." It means, "to serve a copy, to serve a picture." It's someone who is giving themselves to serving or worshipping something other than the real, only an imitation.

In looking at all the words used here in this text, every one of them illustrates a self-centered life. That is, what the lawsuit-minded Christian has in common with these ten lifestyles. Every one of them is self-centered. Regardless of any restraints that morality or society or God places upon them, "I've got to do my thing or else." Against that self-centered kind of lifestyle, the apostle Paul says, "If you are going to be a lawsuit-minded believer, then you might as well make up your mind that you belong with that company of persons who are excluded from the kingdom of God. That sort of mentality excludes you from the kingdom of God. It is evidence of unredeemed living. It is evidence of the sense of Jesus Christ in your life. We ought always to be willing, as Christians, to lay the matter before trusted brothers and sisters in the Lord if we can't settle the matter between two of us. Select some panel. If any of you has a dispute and you can't solve it, come to me. There are capable people in this church who are given wisdom, naturally and by the Spirit of God, who can help you arbitrate that matter.

Paul says, in verse 11, he reminds the Corinthians, "Such were some of you." Some of you had that tremendously wrong lifestyle. That means that not every believer in Corinth started out with these same kind of sins. Maybe they had other sins, more quiet in nature. Some of you were this

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way. Thank God for the power of the gospel. I would have hated to have been in a nest of people that hadn't been changed by the gospel and bore those characteristics. Can you imagine sitting down in a small group fellowship meeting with people who bore these characteristics? Just the thieves and swindlers alone would have plucked you clean every time you walked out of the group. "Such were some of you. But you were washed."

Perhaps Paul's referring to the symbol of baptism here. Most likely, he's referring to the inner cleansing that baptism represents outwardly. We are washed of our sins by the Lord, washed by the speaking of His Word. Jesus said, "I have washed you with My word. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you" (John 15:3). Paul says, "Not only were you washed but you were set apart. You were sanctified. You were made holy. You were consecrated. That kind of lifestyle no longer describes the purposes the Spirit has for you. You're justified. You're free in the presence of God. Why revert to that kind of behavior?"

It's very fascinating to me that Paul, in correcting this lawsuit situation, simply reminds them of what they've come into. Then he goes on to lay the law upon them in the sense of "Now you've got to do this, this, and this next." Paul says, "The way to correct this thing is to begin to remember who you are. You're believers. And believers don't act that way."

Remember who you were. You don't act like that anymore. You don't need the law. You need to recognize what grace has brought you. You are washed, justified, sanctified.

Psalm 116:16 says, "I am Your servant. You have freed me from my chains."

Closing Prayer

Thank You, Lord, for Your Word, which causes us to look at our own motivations in life. And to look at believers with whom, from time to time, we have disputes. We thank You that You have provided a way for us to get our wrongs righted, and that You correct us regarding the wrong

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way to right them. We thank You for the grace into which we've been brought, for this community of believers, with whom we share life with. We thank You, Lord, that You have placed maturity and responsibility into this body, even so that we may be participators, together, in some of the difficult issues which afflict our lives. Lord, may Your Spirit always have Jesus lifted up and exalted in our life, so that we avoid those tendencies to revert back to old ways of doing things. You've brought us into this beautiful experience of life in You, and changed our lives. And we thank You. We worship You this day and honor You and pray that, as we now depart from one another for a season, that Your grace and peace will be upon us all. In Christ's name. Amen.