

## “And Such Were Some of You”

### The Tenth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

*Texts: 1 Corinthians 6:1-11; Deuteronomy 1:9-18*

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Only Americans could love Judge Judy—the uni-mom, as I call her, because of her matronly ability to make grown men look like disobedient children. Yet I’m sure that if the Corinthians had the technology we have, they would love Judge Judy also. The public airing of personal disputes makes for great theater. This explains Judge Judy’s huge audience in contemporary America. In Corinth, legal disputes were aired in large public buildings known as basilicas which were part of the city’s forum. Whenever the court met, the public gathered around to take in the spectacle of well-known townsfolk accusing each other of all kinds of wrong-doing before the court, while a leading citizen who served as judge made his ruling. Although the public airing of personal disputes attracted large audiences in cities like Corinth, the Apostle Paul sees this as yet another manifestation of the wisdom of this age. Christians are to settle their disputes based upon the wisdom and power of God as revealed in the cross. Those who will judge the world, need to learn to settle their disputes in a God-honoring manner, and not resort to a public spectacle like that in the courts of Corinth.

We are continuing our series on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. We have made our way through the first five chapters of this letter in which Paul is dealing with a number of problems facing this congregation. Because of their lack of maturity and love of Greek wisdom, the church has divided into factions. Paul reminds them that the wisdom and power of God is revealed through the message of Christ crucified, even though the Greeks regarded this message as foolishness. Paul has told them that the foundation of this church is the gospel, and that the members of the church compose a living temple in which dwells the Spirit of God. This is why the church must not be torn apart by divisions, and explains why those who are engaging in scandalous behavior—like the man who has his father’s wife—must be removed from the church.

Yet another indication of the spiritual immaturity within the Corinthian church can be seen in the fact that members of this congregation were taking each other to court to engage in civil litigation. Having spoken of the judgment to come upon those excommunicated in the previous chapter (v. 12), this brings to the apostle’s mind the situation reported to Paul by members of Chloe’s family (or others) regarding the fact that church members were suing each other in the city’s courts.<sup>1</sup> In verses 1-6 of chapter 6, Paul rebukes the Corinthians for this immature behavior, while reminding them that Christians ought to be able to settle their own disputes without such litigation. Paul then goes on to point out in verses 7-8 that church members were actually defrauding each other and cheating, a practice which Paul says must stop. Finally, in verses 9-11, Paul sets forth that conduct which excludes people from the kingdom of God so as to contrast that prior conduct with the current status of sinners who are trusting in Jesus Christ. Once again, it is important to note that Paul does not focus upon the particulars of these lawsuits, nor does he name any of the individuals involved. In fact, the focus really hasn’t changed much from chapter 5. The issue in chapter 6 is still the failure of the Corinthian church to be the church.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 134-135.

<sup>2</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 230; cf. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 93.

Paul now takes up the problem of civil litigation among church members. Apparently, the Corinthians were settling their disputes by suing each other in the civil courts of Corinth.

Paul spells out the particulars in verse 1. “*When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?*” Paul is a realist—he knows full well that sinful people are going to have disputes with one another. The issue is how should Christians settle these disputes when they arise? Paul is emphatic that any personal disputes arising among members of Corinthian church must be settled within the church, and not in the civil courts outside the church.

Some of the terminology Paul uses here is not only interesting, but very helpful in understanding Paul’s concerns. The word translated as “dare” (*tolma*) could be rendered something like “has the audacity.” Paul is referring to conduct which is completely unacceptable for a Christian. The word for dispute or grievance (*pragma*) is a word which means “lawsuit” throughout secular Greek literature. The word translated “ungodly” is not *asebae* (Romans 4:5), but *adikone*, which means “unrighteous” (not justified).<sup>3</sup>

Paul never says nor even implies that secular courts have no authority. But he does say they are composed of “the unrighteous” who do not consider matters affecting Christians from the perspective of God’s word. It is not as though Christians cannot obtain justice in civil courts. Rather it is that Christians have no business taking their personal disputes before such courts in the first place.<sup>4</sup> Paul’s point is that these disputes need to be settled in the church along the lines prescribed set forth by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20, where Jesus prescribes that if a brother sins against you, you seek him out personally so as to solve the matter before it goes any farther. Should that fail, Jesus prescribes additional steps.

Recall too that throughout the Book of Acts, Paul repeatedly appealed to Caesar (and to the court) to protect him from physical harm from the Jews. In Romans 13:1-7, Paul speaks directly to the divine authority which underlies civil government, as well as the limitations God places on civil government. But Paul will not condone Christians taking other Christians to court over personal disputes. This was something Jews were particularly adamant about, and they avoided pagan courts altogether following the instructions given by Moses in passages such as Deuteronomy 1:9-18 (our Old Testament lesson). Christians are to bring such disputes before the saints (the leaders of the church), not the pagans. In order to live in peace within the church and be a beacon to those outside the church, Christians must not air their dirty linen in public, so to speak.<sup>5</sup> No appearances on Judge Judy.

There are a number of obvious parallels between Greco-Roman culture and our own. Civil litigation was common in Paul’s time because the paganism of that age did not acknowledge transcendent absolutes; they believed in fate, or the arbitrary will of the gods. Just as in our own society, those of higher social standing took advantage of the courts since the judges were men from the same high strata of society. Those of the lower social status were at a decided disadvantage. In fact, one first century writer speaking about problems with the Isthmian Games, notes that Corinth and the surrounding area was filled with

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<sup>3</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 90.

<sup>4</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 90.

<sup>5</sup> Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 135.

“lawyers innumerable perverting justice.”<sup>6</sup> Since many in the Corinthian church were also from a lower social rank, no doubt, they too would have been at a decided disadvantage in the courts, should they be forced to litigate with someone of standing.

The same is true in our own day and age. The denial of moral absolutes produces a corresponding decline in personal moral responsibility. Given the vacuum regarding ethical and moral absolutes and personal responsibility, we see a corresponding increase in courts and lawyers, government power and intrusion to our private lives, and an increased emphasis upon managers, mediators, etc., who become the means of keeping order, since individuals have become increasingly incapable of keeping order themselves.<sup>7</sup> If people won’t behave, the police, the state, the courts will make them behave, and so we drown ourselves in a sea of laws, regulations and litigation. Just as our culture is highly sexualized as was Corinth, so too we live in a litigious society, as did the Corinthians.

In verse 2, Paul now asks the first of six very pointed questions. “*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?*” The implication of Paul’s question is simply that the Corinthians should know better than to do those things they were doing—going to civil court, many times over trivial matters. Paul begins the series of questions by reminding the Corinthians that the reason they should take their disputes to the saints, rather than unbelievers, is simply the fact that “*the saints will judge the world.*”

This certainly is an echo, in part, from our Lord’s words in Matthew 19:28: “*I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, 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.*” This particular judgment may refer to the present reign of Christ (cf. Revelation 20:4), or more likely to the final judgment. Paul’s point is that if Christians are competent to assist in the judgment of the world on the day of judgment, are they not competent to judge in less weighty matters like disputes among Christians?<sup>8</sup>

But there is more in view here. “*Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!*” Not only will the saints participate in the judgment of the world, they will even participate in the judgment of angelic beings—a statement found nor implied anywhere else in Scripture. This may fit with subsequent comments Paul will make in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 to the effect that all things are to be subject to Christ, “so that those who are in Christ will be placed over even the angels.”<sup>9</sup> And if this is true, how much more should Christians be able to judge the things of this life. Given the glorious final destiny of the church, the judgments we make about things in this life must be made in light of our participation in the age to come.

The solution is as follows: “*So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church?*” Although this sounds like a hypothetical situation, the use of “if” carries with it

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Hays, First Corinthians, 93.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the discussion of this in David F. Wells, No Place for Truth (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 53-92.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Hays, First Corinthians, 94.

the implication that such lawsuits should never arise in the first place.<sup>10</sup> The point is that the Corinthians are submitting their personal disputes to those who are outside the church, who do not have the mind of Christ in such matters. It is not a question of whether or not the secular judiciary is incompetent to judge.<sup>11</sup> The fact of the matter is that Christians have no business taking their personal disputes outside the church. If we are suited to judge the world with Christ, then shouldn't we be able to settle our personal disputes apart from a secular court? Of course, we can and we should.

Paul raises this point for the following reason: *"I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers."* In 1 Corinthians 4:14, Paul stated that he did not want to shame his readers—*"I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children"*—but now the story is different, at least when it comes to those who are suing each other. The Corinthians prided themselves upon their great wisdom, now Paul sarcastically points out that given their attitude there may not even be one wise person in their midst.

By going to the secular courts, the Corinthians were subjecting themselves to judges who imbibed deeply from the well of the very same wisdom of this age which Paul is exhorting the Corinthians to reject.<sup>12</sup> The word to "settle" (*diakri'na*) means something like "render a decision," and implies arbitration among believers not litigation.<sup>13</sup> Paul is referring to arbitration (and not lawsuits) among "brothers," because he stresses the organic unity within the congregation, as in the next verse: *"but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?"* For Paul, it is simply shocking that a brother would bring another member of the church family into a secular court to sue them. How can a Christian even bring such a matter out into the open in front of unbelievers? Paul is not asking us to hide our sins from unbelievers. He is asking us to demonstrate that the cross of Christ is God's solution to all of the problems associated with human sinfulness, including our disputes with one another.

Paul sternly admonishes the Corinthians that this must stop. In verse 7, the apostle puts this matter very directly: *"To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?"* To take a brother into a secular court is already a defeat, whatever the outcome of the legal process. In fact, the outcome before the court really shouldn't matter. There are no winners in such cases—one party loses the lawsuit, one party wins, but both parties end up bringing shame to the church. In fact, the real damage occurs not as result of the court's decision, but as a result of taking the matter outside the church itself. For Paul it would be better for an individual to be wronged or cheated than to risk dividing Christ's body, and by taking personal disputes before pagans.

But the Corinthians never considered this because so many of them were involved in shady business dealings with each other: *"But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers!"* Not only were members of this church engaging in wrong-doing, many were also the victims of cheating and fraud. The real scandal associated with the matter is that other church members were the ones inflicting the wrong-doing upon their fellow Christians! Christians should expect this of those outside the church, but

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<sup>10</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 92.

<sup>11</sup> Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Hays, First Corinthians, 95.

<sup>13</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 92.

certainly not from those within the church. Again, Paul does not give us the particulars of various situations nor does he mention the individuals involved, but he does give us a general principle to follow—Christians must settle personal disputes with other Christians without going to court.

In verses 9-10, Paul makes a rather pointed statement, speaking in such a way as to imply that the behavior he's about to mention as excluding people from the kingdom of God, was common knowledge in the church. "*Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.*" This fits with our assertion that the issue in this church is not confusion over the gospel, but with the inability to filter out pagan ways of thinking and doing.

Paul's use of the word "unrighteous" points to the status before God of the individuals involved. People who engage in such behavior without repentance will not inherit the kingdom of God. This list does not refer to Christians ("righteous") struggling with these particular sins as will become clear in the next verse (v. 11). But this list does indicate that this is the characteristic behavior of those outside the church, so the defrauding and cheating reflects behavior typical of pagans, not Christians. These are the same sins listed by Paul back in 1 Corinthians 5:11: "*But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.*" As I mentioned last time, the items on this list are taken from the "exclusion texts" in the Book of Deuteronomy. The conduct God expects of the covenant community in the Old Testament, he still expects of his covenant people in the new.

The linkage of various sexual sins with idolatry reflects the likely association of these practices with pagan worship, something typical of Greek religion and widespread throughout Corinth. But this is not the final word for the Corinthians. The final word is given in verse 11. Because the gospel has been preached to the Corinthians, the power of God has been manifest in their midst. The grace of God has wonderful results. "*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's language suggests that there is a dramatic contrast between what the Corinthians *now are* because of the gospel, in light of what they *once were* before the gospel had been preached to them (when they were still pagans).

Some of the Corinthians *were* sexually immoral idolaters. Some *were* adulterers, and prostitutes. Some *were* homosexual offenders. Some *were* greedy, partiers, drunkards, liars and swindlers. Based upon this list, these people may have been deeply involved in paganism, either as practitioners or even as workers in the pagan temples. Some went before the courts, suing fellow church members to defraud them. Now these same people *have been* washed. They *have been* sanctified, they *have been* justified, in the name of Christ (the preaching of the gospel), through the power of the Holy Spirit manifest in that gospel. Paul's focus is on the contrast between what the Corinthians were and what they are. And since this is what they are, how can they continue to act like those who will not inherit the kingdom of God, by engaging in immorality (5:1-13), taking disputes before pagan courts (6:1-11), and engaging in fornication and adultery (6:12-20)?

The theological significance of this verse should not be overlooked. Although there is some discussion whether Paul sets out an *ordo salutis* (order of salvation) which places sanctification before justification,

which is contrary to the order Paul sets out in Romans 8:28-30 which does not mention sanctification,<sup>14</sup> the fact is that Paul is probably not speaking of a precise order of salvation, but has listed some of the many benefits which result from embracing the gospel by grace alone through faith alone.

The first of these benefits is “*you were washed.*” The prefix (*apo*) points to the completeness of the act, while the aorist tense indicates that this is a completed and decisive act.<sup>15</sup> Many take this to refer to baptism since elsewhere the author to the Hebrews says “*let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water*” (Hebrews 10:22). Baptism is the sign and seal of regeneration and the forgiveness of sins and echoes what Paul says in Titus 3:5 “*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.*”

But Paul does not mention baptism specifically. When he does in other contexts such as Romans 6:1 ff, Paul refers metaphorically to washing with the blood of Christ (cf. Romans 3:35, through faith in his blood, 5:9, justified with Christ’s blood).<sup>16</sup> In any case, the point is clear: The Corinthians were washed (completely and definitively), and so now are clean. God no longer treats them as he did before this definitive act took place. His wrath no longer abides on them. Now they are righteous and holy.

The second benefit listed by Paul is sanctification. Here too, Paul uses the aorist tense, meaning that all Christian believers have been set apart as God’s for his own purposes. This is what is known as definitive sanctification and is so defined because on the basis of God’s call of an individual to faith, that individual is now united to Jesus Christ, who is our sanctification. Recall, that in I Corinthians 1:30, Paul writes “*And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.*” In other words, a believer in Jesus Christ receives all of Christ’s saving benefits and has the guilt of their sin forever removed. They have been declared righteous because Christ’s perfect righteousness has been freely credited to them. Therefore, they are holy [*hagios*] by virtue of their union with Christ. They have received the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ himself. Can someone become “holier” through their own works after they already possess the perfect righteousness of Christ? The answer, of course, is no! Christians are [*hagios*], they are “saints,” or “holy.” This is definitive sanctification. Progressive sanctification is defined in terms of mortification and vivification, the daily dying to sin and rising with Christ to newness of life (Romans 6:11).

The third benefit Paul mentions is justification. It too is spoken of in the aorist tense, meaning that all believers are now restored to a right-standing before God and regarded as righteous. Something definitive has already taken place which has restored sinners to a right-standing before God. It is unusual for Paul to speak of justification following sanctification. Perhaps the best way to explain this is that offered by Calvin. The reference to washing, sanctification and justification may be a reference to the same thing from three different angles.<sup>17</sup> In any case, it is clear that all three of these blessings are associated with the “name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” In other words, all of these blessings come to us by

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<sup>14</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, Faith and Justification (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 94.

<sup>16</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 94.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, 126.

virtue of our union with Christ “*and by the Spirit of our God*” who effects a bond between all believers and their living head through faith. Those who were Gentile sinners, are now the people of God who compose the living temple of the Holy Spirit. It no longer matters what they once did. What now matters is they are “in Christ.”

**W**hat should we take with from this passage by way of application?

When Paul tells the church in Roman that even the Roman government is a minister of God (Romans 13), Paul is informing us that there is a divinely-appointed role for both the civil and criminal courts. Yet, when writing to the Corinthians, Paul is dealing with a church composed of new Christians who are struggling to learn how to live as Christians. The Corinthian Christians were spiritually immature and still enamored with Greco-Roman wisdom. Many in the church had not yet learned one important aspect of biblical teaching—personal accountability for one’s own actions. Like their contemporaries, many of the Corinthians had shady business practices and thought nothing of dragging people into court for the most trivial of reasons. Those who could afford a good lawyer (actually a skilled orator) could use the courts for personal gain by suing people for just about anything hoping to prevail in court. Paul insists that the Corinthians cease defrauding one another, and that they follow the teaching of Jesus set out in Matthew 18 by settling personal disputes within the church, and not taking these personal matters out into the public courts before the pagans.

In a litigious society such as ours, Paul’s words reminds us the importance of settling our disputes in the appropriate way. Yes, the courts have their place. But when personal disputes arise Christians need to seek resolution with each other first, and then take these matters before the church. No appearances on Judge Judy or in the People’s Court. Christians are to settle their disputes among themselves.

Finally in verses 9-11, Paul contrasts what the Corinthians were (sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, temple prostitutes, homosexuals, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers) with what they now are washed (forgiven), sanctified (holy), and justified (reckoned as righteous before God). The reason why this is the case, is because the death of Jesus removes the guilt of our sin, and Christ’s perfect righteousness is imputed to us through faith. This means there is no sin and no sinner so vile that they cannot be redeemed by the blood and righteousness of Christ. This means that when we are in Christ, we must break away from our pagan past.

And such were some (all) of us. But we have been washed. We have been sanctified. We have been justified, through faith in Jesus Christ and through the manifestation of the Spirit’s power.