

1 CORINTHIANS 6:1

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 6. Last week we finished looking at chapter 5, which is focused on the theme of church discipline. We saw that the Christians in Corinth were tolerating sexual sin among them. Paul said that a man in the church was sleeping with his stepmother. And so he said that they should have removed this man from the church. But apparently they were confused by a letter that Paul had already written to them. In verse 9 he said that he had told them in that letter not to associate with sexually immoral people. But we can see in verse 10 that they thought he was talking about unbelievers. And so he clarified in verse 11 that he was actually talking about anyone the church recognized brother or sister in Christ. He was saying that we should not associate with anyone we believe to be a Christian who is living in some kind of habitual sin.

You see, Paul wasn't just focused on sexual sin here. He gave us a list of six different types of sinners in verse 11. He started the list by talking about a sexually immoral person. But then he went on to mention a greedy person, an idolater, a verbally abusive person, a drunkard, and a swindler. And Paul didn't create this list out of thin air. These different types of sinners were not chosen randomly. We can see from this letter that the Corinthian believers were struggling in all these areas. In fact, I believe he mentioned the swindler last because he was preparing us for the next chapter. We're going to see in chapter 6 that he proceeded to rebuke believers who acted like swindlers by taking each other to court. But his point here was that we are not to associate or even eat with any recognized believer who is living in unrepentant sin. We should do anything we can that's permitted by God to motivate this person to return to the Lord.

Then last week we looked at the last two verses in chapter 5. In verses 12–13 Paul wrote, “For what business is it of mine to judge outsiders? Don't you judge those who are inside? God judges outsiders. Remove the evil person from among you.” So in verse 12 Paul asked two rhetorical questions, and then in verse 13 he made some follow-up comments. In the first question he basically said that it wasn't his responsibility to judge people who are outside the church. Now he wasn't saying that we should never evaluate unbelievers or speak out against their sins. His point here was simply that we don't have jurisdiction over them. And so we shouldn't take any action against them when they sin. God hasn't given the church any authority to judge unbelievers during this present age.

So in the first question Paul basically said that we are not responsible to judge unbelievers. But then in the second question he switched from talking about outsiders to those who are inside the church. He essentially said that we do have a responsibility to judge believers. That's what Paul did back in verse 3 when he pronounced judgment on the man who committed incest. And that's what he wanted the Corin-

thian believers to do as well. Then in verse 13 Paul made two statements that match the two questions in verse 12. The first statement corresponds to the first question, and the second statement corresponds to the second question. Paul was building on the obvious answers to his rhetorical questions.

So in verse 13 Paul started by saying that “God judges outsiders.” And the Greek word for outsiders is the same one that Paul used in the first question in verse 12. Once again he was talking about unbelievers. Now it’s certainly true that God will judge unbelievers in the future. In fact, we’re going to help him with that task. After all, Paul said a little later in chapter 6 and verse 2 that “the saints will judge the world.” But in chapter 5 and verse 13 I believe Paul was focused on the present age, just like he was in verse 12. He was saying that God judges outsiders right now. Now this doesn’t mean that God is currently righting all the wrongs of unbelievers. But he does use the governing authorities to bring about some justice on the earth. And sometimes he even acts directly to bring judgment on unbelievers. But in God’s plan ultimate justice will take place in the future.

Then at the end of verse 13 Paul followed up on his second rhetorical question in verse 12. He said to the Corinthian believers, “Remove the evil person from among you.” The original Greek here is taken directly from the book of Deuteronomy in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament. This statement is actually used six times in that book, and usually it refers to the death penalty. Now it was appropriate for the Israelites to punish certain kinds of sinners with death. After all, Israel was both a spiritual community and a physical nation. But the church is just a spiritual community and not a physical nation. And so Paul was using this statement to refer to excommunication and not death. But the result was the same either way: the sinner was no longer part of the community. The evil person was removed from among the people.

And of course the evil person for the Corinthian believers was the man who committed incest. He was under their jurisdiction because he was inside the church. And so they needed to remove him and preserve the purity of their church. Paul wanted them to be protected from temptation and avoid falling into sin. And this passage still applies to us today. Whenever a professing believer in our church is living in unrepentant sin, we need to excommunicate that person. Now we should certainly follow the church discipline process that Jesus laid out in Matthew 18. I believe the Christians in Corinth did that, but they failed to finish the process and complete the fourth and final step. Church discipline is not an easy thing to do, especially since the world attacks us for doing it. Many churches avoid it completely for that reason. But we need to follow God’s Word even when it’s unpopular.

Now we’re ready to move on to chapter 6 and look at some new material. This chapter flows directly from chapter 5, and together they form a section on the need for church purity. Look at what Paul wrote in chapter 6 and verse 1: “If any of you has a dispute against another, how dare you take it to court before the unrighteous, and not before the saints?” So in chapter 6 the focus shifts from sexual immorality to disputes in court. And so we might think that Paul was no longer focused on the need for church purity. But the word “purity” isn’t limited to just sexual purity. It can refer to purity from any kind of sin. Now we’re going to return to the theme of sexual sin later in this chapter. But at this point Paul wanted to focus on the attitude of greed and action of swindling, which he mentioned at the end of chapter 5.

So let's dive into chapter 6 and take a closer look at the first verse. The Christian Standard Bible gives us the word "if" at the beginning of the verse. Now there is no Greek word here that means "if," and that's reflected in our more literal Bible translations. You won't find the word "if" in the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, or the New American Standard Bible. However, we do have a participle in the Greek text, and sometimes Greek participles imply a condition. We have a clear example of this nuance in Galatians 6:9. Listen to what Paul said in this verse: "Let us not get tired of doing good, for we will reap at the proper time if we don't give up." There is no Greek word that means "if" in this verse, but every major conservative Bible translation has this word. That's because there's a participle here that implies a condition, and I believe we have the same thing in 1 Corinthians 6:1.

So the Christian Standard Bible is giving us a sound interpretation in this verse with the word "if." Paul was talking about the possibility that any of the Corinthian believers would have a dispute against another. The Greek word for dispute is used 11 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote four of them. It usually refers to a matter or concern of any kind. And so normally it's translated with the word "matter." For example, in Romans 16:1 Paul commended a Christian woman named Phoebe to his readers. Then in verse 2 he said, "You should welcome her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints and assist her in whatever matter she may require your help." That word "matter" comes from the same Greek word that we have in 1 Corinthians 6:1. In fact, the King James Version and the New King James Version even have the word "matter" in this verse.

But most Bible translations have a different word here. The English Standard Version has the word "grievance." The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have the word "case." And the NET Bible, the New International Version, and the New Living Translation have the word "dispute," just like the Christian Standard Bible. These Bible versions are all telling us that Paul was talking about a specific type of matter. He was referring to a matter of contention or a dispute. And the key to this interpretation is the word "against," which comes right after the word "dispute." It shows us that Paul was talking about something negative here. In fact, I think we can get even more specific. In extra-biblical Greek the terminology here was used to refer to taking someone to court. That's why the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible give us the word "case."

Now we don't know many details about what kind of case Paul had in mind. But he did say that the dispute was against another. And this word "another" clearly refers to one of the Corinthian believers. So Paul was talking about a dispute between Christians here. He wasn't addressing the possibility of a believer taking an unbeliever to court. I doubt he would have had a problem with that action in general. But he clearly didn't like the idea of a Christian taking a fellow believer to court. And I think it's pretty clear that this was happening in Corinth. Now we don't know how prevalent it was. Maybe it was a widespread problem, but some Bible scholars think that there was just one dispute in court between the Corinthian believers at that time. In the end we just can't say for certain.

We also can't say for certain how Paul learned about this troubling situation in Corinth. But most Bible scholars believe that he received a report about it. After all, that's how he learned about the factions in the church. In chapter 1 and verse 11 he said, "For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers and

sisters, by members of Chloe's people, that there is rivalry among you." Paul also learned about the incest in the church through a report. In chapter 5 and verse 1 he said, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and the kind of sexual immorality that is not even tolerated among the Gentiles—a man is sleeping with his father's wife." So it seems likely that Paul also received a report about at least one dispute in court between the Corinthian believers.

Now some Bible scholars think that this dispute was somehow connected to the incest in the church. But in verse 2 Paul talked about trivial cases, and we know he most certainly did not believe that incest was a trivial matter. After all, he told the Corinthian Christians to remove the man who was committing incest from the church! But most Bible scholars are in agreement that Paul was talking about some kind of civil lawsuit here. We certainly shouldn't conclude that we can't report criminal behavior by a Christian to the governing authorities. If anyone breaks the law and deserves to be punished, then we need to let the governing authorities do the job that God has appointed them to do.

But Paul obviously didn't want Christians taking each other to civil court. And that fact is clear in the rest of verse 1 in chapter 6. He said, "If any of you has a dispute against another, how dare you take it to court before the unrighteous, and not before the saints?" The Greek word for dare is a very strong word, and it actually comes first in this verse for emphasis. The King James Version and the New King James Version preserve that emphasis, but they're not giving us very smooth English. And so most Bible translations give us the word "dare" later in the verse. But either way the word clearly expresses Paul's horror at this situation. He was absolutely shocked at what was taking place. He could hardly believe his ears that a Christian was taking a fellow believer to court. And I think that's why he rebuked his readers in the form of a question. He wasn't saying that he was uncertain about what was happening. Instead he wanted them to think about the situation.

Now this Greek word for dare is a verb that appears 16 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote eight of them. It basically refers to showing boldness in the face of danger or opposition. So this word can actually be used positively. For example, in Philippians 1:14 Paul said, "Most of the brothers have gained confidence in the Lord from my imprisonment and dare even more to speak the word fearlessly." So Paul took comfort in the fact that his Roman imprisonment gave some believers the boldness to proclaim God's Word. But the Greek word for dare can also be used negatively. In Matthew 22 the Jewish religious leaders tried to trap Jesus with a series of tricky questions. But he handled each question very skillfully, and then he asked them a tricky question of his own. But verse 46 says that "no one was able to answer him at all, and from that day no one dared to question him anymore." So none of the religious leaders had the boldness to ask Jesus any more tricky questions.

And of course Paul was using the Greek word for dare negatively in 1 Corinthians 6:1. He was basically saying that no Corinthian believer should have had the boldness to take a dispute with a fellow Christian to court. Now the phrase "take it to court" actually comes from the Greek verb that means "to judge." It's the same word that we just saw three times in the last two verses of the previous chapter. But this time Paul used the verb in the passive voice, which means that the subject receives the action of the verb. So the idea here is that these Corinthian believers were not doing the judging; instead they were being

judged by others. But this doesn't mean that they were helpless in this matter. They deliberately put themselves in a position where they would be judged in court.

And Paul said that they were being judged before the unrighteous. The Greek word for unrighteous just refers to acting in a way that is not right. But Bible scholars disagree about how Paul was using this word here. Was he just referring generally to the fact that these judges were unbelievers? Or was he talking more specifically about how they were unjust in many of their judicial decisions? I personally don't see how we can disconnect these two concepts. The fact that these judges were generally unrighteous means that they often would have been unrighteous specifically in court. And we have plenty of extra-biblical evidence to support this conclusion. A number of writers complained about how corrupt the courts were at that time. Many judges would reach unjust decisions that usually favored those who were wealthy and prominent in society.

We can even see evidence of this fact in Scripture. In James 2:1 the apostle James commanded his readers not to show favoritism. Then in verses 2–4 he gave them the example of treating a rich person more favorably than a poor person. And apparently that's what his readers were doing, because in verse 6 he accused them of dishonoring the poor. Then at the end of the verse he said, "Don't the rich oppress you and drag you into court?" The idea here seems to be that the rich expected to get favorable decisions in civil court. That's why they would often take people to court who were not as wealthy as they were.

So I think it's pretty clear that the judicial system was corrupt in Corinth and many other places at that time. This situation was so widespread that Jesus could tell a parable about an unjust judge in Luke 18. Paul even experienced this problem personally. After he was arrested in Jerusalem, he made his defense before Governor Felix in Acts 24. But Felix didn't release him, and verse 26 tells us why. It says that he was "hoping that Paul would offer him money. So he sent for him quite often and conversed with him." Then verse 27 says that "after two years had passed, Porcius Festus succeeded Felix, and because Felix wanted to do the Jews a favor, he left Paul in prison." So Paul's case was horribly mishandled by Governor Felix. First he wanted a bribe from Paul, and then he showed favoritism toward the Jews, who wanted Paul to stay in prison and be sentenced to death.

Now I'm not saying that no one ever received justice in the Roman court system during New Testament times. I'm sure that there were some judges who were decent and tried to do the right thing at least sometimes. But most of them were unrighteous and gave favorable decisions for the wealthy in return for bribes. And this has happened throughout history in many places. No country has ever had a perfect justice system. That's because the courts are run by sinful human beings. Even righteous judges who fear the Lord are going to make poor decisions every once in a while. But most judges in history have not known the Lord or had respect for his laws. Even today in our country we have a number of unjust judges.

So in 1 Corinthians 6:1 Paul gave a better approach than going to court before the unrighteous. Instead he said that we should go before the saints. The Greek word for saints is used 233 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 76 of them. It refers to someone or something that is holy or consecrated to God. And it's used in a variety of ways in the New Testament. For example, in Matthew 4:5 this word refers to

the Jerusalem as “the holy city.” But in Acts 6:13 it refers to a specific place in Jerusalem. In this verse the temple is called “this holy place.” So this term can refer to places, but of course it can refer to created beings as well. In Mark 8:38 Jesus mentioned “the holy angels,” and in Luke 1:70 Zechariah talked about God’s “holy prophets in ancient times.”

But usually this term refers to New Testament believers. Paul was especially fond of using the word in this way. He described the Christians in Corinth with this term in chapter 1 and verse 2. Then he did the same thing again in the first verse of 2 Corinthians. He also used this word to describe his readers in Romans 1:7, Ephesians 1:1, Philippians 1:1, and Colossians 1:2. But this term is especially prominent in three of Paul’s letters. It’s used 20 times in Romans, 15 times in Ephesians, and 12 times in 1 Corinthians. And in many of these places it’s translated with the word “saints” in the Christian Standard Bible. Next week we’re going to see in 1 Corinthians 6:2 that one day “the saints will judge the world.” Then in chapter 14 and verse 33 Paul referred to “the churches of the saints.” In chapter 16 and verse 1 he talked about “the collection for the saints.” Finally, in chapter 16 and verse 15 he said that members of the household of Stephanas “devoted themselves to serving the saints.”

But unfortunately the English word “saints” has not been generally understood in a biblical way for a long time. Many people today, especially Roman Catholics, use this term to refer to an elevated status within Christianity and to a few extraordinary believers. They use it as a title and talk about Saint Peter, Saint Paul, or Saint Patrick. But the Bible does not reserve this term for people who seem to be extra holy. Instead this word refers to all Christians. Unfortunately because of this confusion some Bible translations avoid using the word completely, like the New International Version and the New Living Translation. But I believe that we should try to reclaim this word from its misleading connotations. And so I’m glad that the Christian Standard Bible and many other translations continue to use it.

But we should make sure that we understand the background for this term. The Greek word for saints is used over 800 times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. We see it first used in Exodus 3:5, where it refers to the holy ground where Moses was standing when God appeared to him through a burning bush. Then in Exodus 19:6 God referred to the Israelites as his “holy nation.” And in Deuteronomy 7:6 Moses said to them, “You are a holy people belonging to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be his own possession out of all the peoples on the face of the earth.” In 1 Peter 2:9 the apostle Peter quoted both of these passages and applied them to Christians. He called them “a holy nation” and “a people for his possession.” Just like the Israelites had the status of being a holy nation belonging to God, so also as believers we have the status of being a holy people belonging to God.

But the Israelites had to live up to their status of being holy and behave as holy people. In Leviticus 11:44 God commanded the Israelites, “You must consecrate yourselves and be holy because I am holy.” We see the same thing in Leviticus 19:2, where God said, “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.” Peter also quoted these passages and applied them to Christians. In 1 Peter 1:15–16 he wrote, “As the one who called you is holy, you also are to be holy in all your conduct; for it is written, Be holy, because I am holy.” So God is the standard for our holiness; he is perfectly sinless. This is why the angels keep saying “holy, holy, holy” in his presence, according to Isaiah 6:3 and Revelation 4:8.

So the Bible refers to all Christians as saints and says that we have the status of being holy. And as our practical holiness begins to match our positional holiness, we become more equipped to serve as judges for our fellow believers. So we shouldn't be taking each other to court before unbelievers. Instead we should find mature Christians who can help us resolve our disputes. But unfortunately there weren't many mature believers in the church at Corinth. And that's why they were having so many problems. In chapter 5 they failed to judge the man who was committing incest. And now in chapter 6 we can see that they also failed to judge each other when they had disputes. Paul said in chapter 5 and verse 12 that Christians are supposed to judge those who are inside the church. But the Corinthian believers were not doing their duty in this regard.

However, I don't believe that Paul's primary motivation here was to get justice for his readers. Instead I think his main focus was on their testimony before the world. That's why he said in verse 7 that "to have legal disputes against one another is already a defeat for you." Then he asked two pointed questions: "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?" Paul was basically saying that it would be better to be wronged and cheated by another Christian than to take the matter to court before unbelievers. We shouldn't be airing our dirty laundry before unbelievers. We really shouldn't have much dirty laundry in the first place! But when we do have disputes among us, we need to handle them internally. Then we can show the world that we're the disciples of Jesus by our love for each other. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help in this area.