

# 1 CORINTHIANS 6:2

May 8, 2022

Brad Norman

Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 6. Two weeks ago we finished looking at chapter 5, which is focused on the theme of church discipline. There was a man in the Corinthian church who was committing incest with his stepmother. And so Paul commanded the believers to remove the man from the church. But sexual immorality is not the only sin that Paul mentioned in chapter 5. In verses 10–11 he listed a few other types of sinners, including the greedy and swindlers. And in verse 11 he mentioned the swindlers last because he was preparing us for his discussion in chapter 6. So this chapter flows directly from chapter 5, and together they form a section on the need for church purity.

Last week we started chapter 6 by looking at verse 1. In this verse Paul wrote, “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 the beginning of this chapter 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 disputes in court. And these disputes were apparently motivated by greed and involved swindling others.

Now the Greek word for dispute usually refers to a matter or concern of any kind. And so normally it’s translated with the word “matter.” 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 that Paul used here often referred 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.

But most Bible scholars are in agreement that Paul was talking about some kind of civil lawsuit here. I seriously doubt that Paul was telling us not to report criminal behavior by a Christian to the governing authorities. If anyone breaks a law that isn't opposed to God's law, then we need to let the governing authorities punish the evildoer as God has appointed them to do. But Paul didn't want Christians taking each other to civil court when they have a dispute. In verse 1 Paul said, "How dare you take it to court." Paul used very strong language here. The word "dare" expresses Paul's horror at this situation. He was absolutely shocked at what was taking place. He was appalled that the Corinthian believers were taking each other 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 saw three times at the end of chapter 5. 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 the Corinthian believers were not doing the judging; instead they were being judged by others. But this doesn't mean that they were helpless in the matter. They deliberately put themselves in a position where they would be judged in court by the unrighteous. The Greek word for unrighteous just refers to acting in a way that is not right. It's a general reference to unbelievers, but it also points more specifically to their unjust judicial decisions. 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.

So in verse 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 refers to being holy or consecrated to God. Now 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. Paul already used it to describe all the Corinthian believers back in chapter 1 and verse 2. But he also used this word to refer to his readers in five other New Testament letters as well.

So the point here is that all Christians are saints and 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. And 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.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 6:2. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "Or don't you know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the trivial cases?" So we just saw in verse 1 that Paul asked the Corinthian believers a pretty pointed question. And he didn't ask this question because he was uncertain about what was happening. Instead he wanted them to think more deeply about their situation. Now we're seeing in verse 2 that Paul asked two more questions. And both of them are rhetorical questions that have obvious answers. He was using them to show his readers why they should have taken their disputes before the saints and not the unrighteous.

So let's take a closer look at the first question in verse 2. Notice first of all that Paul began with the word "or." This conjunction normally introduces an alternative. For example, if you go out to eat for breakfast, you might be given the choice to have either bacon or sausage with your meal. But this doesn't mean that Paul was giving an alternative approach in verse 2 compared to verse 1. He wasn't saying in verse 1 that we should take our disputes to the saints and then telling us in verse 2 that we could also take our disputes to other people. Instead he was giving us a question in verse 2 that supplements the question in verse 1. He was just showing us the situation from a different angle.

Then Paul added the words "don't you know" in verse 2. The Greek phrase here is actually very common in 1 Corinthians. We see it a total of 10 times in this letter. We've already seen it back in chapter 3 and verse 16 and again in chapter 5 and verse 6. Then it appears a total of six times in chapter 6 and two times in chapter 9. Now what's interesting is that Paul used this phrase only once outside this letter. So why did he use it so many times in 1 Corinthians? I think the reason is that he was trying to teach the Corinthian believers a lesson. They thought too highly of themselves and boasted in their knowledge and wisdom. So Paul knocked them off their pedestal and brought them down a few notches. He showed them that they still had much to learn. And even when they did actually have knowledge, they often weren't living in accordance with that knowledge.

So I think that the obvious answer to Paul's question here is yes. The Corinthian believers knew what Paul was talking about in this question. They knew that the saints will judge the world. Most likely Paul himself had taught them this truth when he was with them for a year and a half. But the problem was that they weren't applying this knowledge to their situation. And so Paul had to remind them that the saints will judge the world. The Greek word for saints here is the same one that we just saw in verse 1. It doesn't refer to just a few important Christians like many people think today. Instead it's a reference to the fact that all Christians have the status of being holy in God's sight. And because of this special status that we have, Paul said that we will judge the world.

The Greek word for judge here was also used in verse 1, just like the Greek word for saints. But there are some differences in how Paul used this verb. In verse 1 this verb was in the present tense and the passive voice. He was saying that some of the Corinthian believers were being judged by the unrighteous at that time. But in verse 2 Paul switched to the future tense and the active voice. He was saying that the saints will do the action of judging down the road. Now technically the form of the verb in verse 2 can be either present tense or future tense. In our language we distinguish pretty carefully between different tenses. But

with some Greek verbs there was no difference between the present tense and the future tense in certain combinations of person and number. We already saw this issue back in chapter 5 and verse 13.

So in these cases we need to rely on the context to help us choose between the present tense and the future tense. And in verse 2 it's very clear that Paul intended for us to see the future tense here. After all, if he was using the present tense, then he was contradicting what he just said at the end of chapter 5. In verse 12 he said, "What business is it of mine to judge outsiders?" Then he said in verse 13 that "God judges outsiders." Paul was basically saying there that it's not our responsibility to judge unbelievers right now. So in chapter 6 and verse 2 it would make no sense for Paul to say that we're judging the world right now. Instead he must have meant that we will judge the world in the future. That's why every major conservative Bible translation gives us a future tense verb here in English.

So we need to ask a question that we asked all the time as kids: "What time is it?" If the answer is before Jesus returns, then we are not judging the world. If the answer is after Jesus returns, then we are judging the world. But let's talk more about this key term "world." The Greek word here is used 185 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 47 of them. But 21 or almost half of them occur in 1 Corinthians. And so it's an important term in this letter. Now this Greek word can be used in three major ways. The first one is the physical world. For example, John 1:10 says that Jesus "was in the world, and the world was created through him." The second nuance for this word is the world of humanity. This is how the word is used in John 3:16, which says that "God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."

But there's a third meaning for this word: the evil world system. The first one is a place, the second one refers to people, and the third one is basically a set of principles. Now certainly these principles are believed by many people who live on the earth. But the main focus with this nuance is on a system of values that are opposed to God. And we see the word used with this meaning throughout the New Testament. James 4:4 tells us "that friendship with the world is hostility toward God." In other words, as Christians we shouldn't align ourselves with principles and values that are opposed to God. In Ephesians 2:2 Paul said that we used to live "according to the ways of this world." But then God saved us from the penalty of our sins by his grace.

However, even as Christians the allure of the evil world system can be very strong and hard to resist. In 2 Timothy 4 Paul mentioned some of his ministry companions, but in verse 10 he said that Demas deserted him because "he loved this present world." Even a man who served alongside Paul ended up giving in to worldliness! This is why the apostle John warned us in 1 John 2:15 not to "love the world or the things in the world." He said that "if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." It's really quite simple: if we love the evil world system, then we don't love God. And we know from 1 Corinthians 16:22 that "if anyone does not love the Lord, a curse be on him."

So worldliness is very serious business! We need to guard ourselves against the evil world system and resist the desire to indulge in even a little worldliness. Paul talked about this principle in Titus 2:11–12. Listen to what he wrote in these verses: "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,

instructing us to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way in the present age.” So we need to fight back against the desires we experience to live according to the evil world system. We experience pressure all around us to conform to the world’s way of thinking. Most of the media and entertainment industries are pushing principles and values that are opposed to God. But we need to follow the instructions that we’ve been given in God’s Word. We must strive to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way.

But sadly the Corinthian believers were indulging in worldliness. We’ve already seen in the first four chapters of this letter that they were enamored with the eloquent wisdom. But in 1 Corinthians 3:19 Paul told them that “the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.” In chapter 1 and verse 20 Paul went even further and said that God has “made the world’s wisdom foolish.” Then in chapter 5 and verse 10 Paul referred to the “immoral people of this world.” But we saw that he wasn’t talking about anyone on the planet who were sexually immoral. He was only referring to people who belong to this evil world system. In other words, he was talking about unbelievers who haven’t made a profession of faith and aren’t part of the church.

And I believe that Paul was referring to the same kind of people in chapter 6 and verse 2. He wasn’t saying that we will get to judge all people in the future. Instead we will get to judge those who belong to the evil world system. That’s going to happen when we reign with Jesus. In 2 Timothy 2:12 Paul said that “if we endure, we will also reign with him.” In Revelation 3:21 Jesus said, “To the one who conquers I will give the right to sit with me on my throne.” And in Revelation 20:4 John said that he “saw thrones, and people seated on them who were given authority to judge.” Now Jesus certainly doesn’t need our help to judge the wicked. But he’s going to give us the privilege of assisting him during the future time of judgment. We will help him pass sentence on unbelievers and announce their punishment. We will assist him in proving that they deserve eternal condemnation. It’s going to be a tremendous honor to serve the Lord in this way!

Now let’s look at the second question in 1 Corinthians 6:2. In the first question Paul asked, “Or don’t you know that the saints will judge the world?” Then in the second question he asked, “And if the world is judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the trivial cases?” Notice that Paul began the second question with the word “and” instead of the word “or.” He switched conjunctions because he wanted to link these two questions closely together. In the second question he was building directly on the first one. He began with a conditional clause that has the same key terms that he used in the first question. He used the same Greek words for world and judged that we just saw.

But once again Paul changed how he used the Greek verb for judge. In verse 1 he used the present tense and the passive voice. Then in the beginning of verse 2 he switched to the future tense and the active voice. Now at the end of verse 2 he switched back to the present tense and the passive voice. Now the switch back to the passive voice is not a big deal. Most likely Paul was just making a change for stylistic reasons. But the switch back to the present tense is harder to understand. Was Paul saying here that we do get to judge the world right now after all? That just doesn’t make any sense. And so I think we should conclude that Paul was still referring to something that will happen in the future. But he used the present

tense to stress the certainty of it. That's why Jesus used the present tense in Revelation 22:20 when he said, "I am coming soon." He was emphasizing that he will definitely return in the future. We can take that promise to the bank!

So in the second question in 1 Corinthians 6:2, Paul was drawing a conclusion from the first question. Based on the fact that we're definitely going to judge the world, are we unworthy to judge the trivial cases? The obvious answer is no. Paul was arguing from the greater to the lesser here. If one day we're going to do something as important as judging the world, then certainly we are worthy right now to do something as simple as judging trivial cases. Now the Greek word for unworthy is used only here in the New Testament. But Paul used an adverb that comes from the same root as this adjective later in the letter. In chapter 11 and verse 27 he said that "whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sin against the body and blood of the Lord." He was talking about participating in the Lord's Supper in a careless way.

But in chapter 6 and verse 2 Paul's point is that we are not unworthy to judge trivial cases. He was basically talking about our competency in this area. In fact, there are several Bible translations that actually use the word "competent" here, like the New American Standard Bible and the New International Version. Paul was saying that we're competent to judge trivial cases. Now there's actually no Greek word for judge here. A more literal translation is the phrase "unworthy of the trivial cases." But Paul was clearly talking about judging in this context, and so I think that idea is implied here. He was saying that we're worthy to judge trivial cases.

Now the Greek word for cases is used only two other times in the New Testament. One of them is in verse 4, and the other one is in James 2:6, which we looked at last week. In that verse James asked his readers, "Don't the rich oppress you and drag you into court?" As I mentioned last week, the idea here seems to be that the rich expected to get favorable decisions in civil court. And so they would often take people to court who were not as wealthy as they were. But the Greek word for court in that verse is the same one that Paul used in 1 Corinthians 6:2. And so there are several translations that give us the phrase "law courts" in this verse, including the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. But scholars have found several places in extra-biblical literature where this Greek word can refer to a lawsuit or a court case. And that interpretation seems to be the better approach here. Paul was not saying that we should set up some kind of formal court system in the church. His focus was on court cases that should have been handled by the church.

And Paul referred to these cases as trivial here. The Greek word for trivial can be used with a variety of nuances. In James 3:4 it refers to "a very small rudder." So it can refer to something that is little in size. But this word is also used in 1 Corinthians 15:9, where Paul said that he was "the least of the apostles." So in this verse it refers to someone who is little in status. But this term can be used with a third and final nuance. In 1 Corinthians 4:3 Paul said, "It is of little importance to me that I should be judged by you or by any human court." So in this verse our word refers to something that is little in importance. There is no Greek word for importance in that verse, but the translators added this term because it accurately conveys Paul's meaning.

And this is the nuance that Paul intended in chapter 6 and verse 2 as well. He was talking about court cases that were unimportant and insignificant. They were trivial in light of the church's mission to tell people about the good news of Jesus and what he has done for us. Now we shouldn't conclude that these trivial cases should have been ignored. Paul was clearly referring back to the disputes between believers that he mentioned in verse 1. These issues needed to be addressed, but not in court. Instead they should have been handled by the Corinthian believers. As God's holy people they were competent to judge these trivial cases. After all, one day all of us are going to judge unbelievers!

Now it's true that we're going to have new resurrection bodies when we reign with Jesus. We're going to be sinless at that time, and so we will be much more qualified to help Jesus pass judgment on the world. But God already views us as holy in our position. And we've already started moving toward holiness in our practice as well. So there's not a complete disconnect between the way we are and the way we will be in the future. We've already started moving toward sinless perfection, and so we don't need to wait to start judging. We can handle the more trivial and insignificant matters of this life. We are competent to judge disputes between believers. And if we're feeling unworthy, all we need to do is turn to God's Word for help. He has already taught us in Scripture how to be wise and just in our decisions. So let's close in prayer and thank him for his help in this area.