

# 1 CORINTHIANS 6:3

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 6. We're slowly working our way through the second major section in this letter, which is found in chapters 5–6. The focus here is on the need for church purity. In chapter 5 Paul confronted the Corinthian believers for failing to remove a man from the church who was committing incest with his stepmother. But he also mentioned several other types of sinners in verses 10–11. And two of them are the greedy and swindlers, which prepare the way for his discussion in chapter 6. In verse 1 we can see that some of the believers were taking each other to court. The idea seems to be that their disputes were motivated by greed and involved swindling others.

Now it was bad enough that these Christians had disputes against each other. But Paul's big problem here was that they were taking these disputes to civil court before the unrighteous. He used the word "dare" here to express his shock and horror at this situation. They were deliberately putting themselves in a position where they would be judged in court by unbelievers. Many of these judges were corrupt and reached unjust decisions that favored those who were wealthy and prominent in society. And so Paul gave a better approach than going to court before the unrighteous. Instead he said that we should go before the saints. Now many people have used this term to refer to just a few extraordinary believers. But the Bible does not reserve this term for people who seem to be extra holy. Instead it refers to all Christians. Paul already used this term to describe all the Corinthian believers back in chapter 1 and verse 2. And he also used this word to refer to his readers in five other letters.

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.

So in verse 1 Paul asked the Corinthian believers a pointed question to make them think more deeply about their failure in this situation. And then in verse 2 he followed up with two more questions. He said, "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 in these questions Paul was showing his readers why they should

have taken their disputes before the saints and not the unrighteous. He reminded them in the first question that the saints will judge the world. The Greek word for world can refer to a place, to people, or to a set of principles that are opposed God. And sometimes a writer might even be using a combination of these nuances. That's what I believe Paul was doing in this verse. He was talking about people who hold to principles and values that are against God's Word.

So when Paul said that the saints will judge the world, he wasn't referring to everyone on the planet. 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. In other words, he was talking about unbelievers who haven't made a profession of faith and aren't part of the church. Now at the end of chapter 5 we saw that it isn't our job to judge outsiders right now. But when we're reigning with Jesus in the future, we will have the privilege of helping him pass sentence on unbelievers. 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!

Then in the second question Paul built on the foundation of the first question. 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 this time Paul changed how he used the Greek verb for judge. In the first question he used the future tense, but in the second question he switched to the present tense. So 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. It's so certain to happen that he could speak of it as though it was already happening.

So this conditional clause is true; we are definitely going judge the world in the future. And Paul proceeded to draw a conclusion from this fact. But he did so in the form of a rhetorical question: "Are we unworthy to judge the trivial cases?" And 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. The Greek word for trivial here refers to something that's little in importance. These cases were insignificant in light of the church's mission to tell people about the good news of Jesus and what he has done for us. Now this doesn't mean that these trivial cases should have been ignored. But they were to be handled internally by the Corinthian believers. As God's holy people they were competent to judge these disputes.

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. And he's given us the Holy Spirit to help us understand and apply his Word.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 6:3. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "Don't you know that we will judge angels—how much more matters of this life?" So in this verse we have yet another question. We're already seen three questions in the first two verses of this chapter. Now we're seeing a fourth question in verse 3. Paul was really on a roll here! But there is some disagreement about how many questions are in this verse. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible actually have two questions here. Other translations like the English Standard Version and the New International Version have only one question, but it's shorter than the one in the Christian Standard Bible. Those translations take the question in the Christian Standard Bible and turn the end of it into a statement. But that statement is not even a full sentence, and so it should probably be viewed as part of the question. I believe the Christian Standard Bible is accurate here to give us one long question.

So let's take a closer look at this question. Paul began with the phrase "don't you know." And that phrase should sound familiar, because we just saw it in the previous verse. As I told you last week, this phrase is pretty 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. That's what I believe was happening here.

So I think that the implied answer to Paul's question here is yes. The Corinthian believers knew what Paul was talking about in this question. They knew that they would judge angels. 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 we will judge angels. Now at the end of verse 2 Paul used second person pronouns. But here in verse 3 he switched to the first person and included himself with his readers. Many people in the Corinthian church didn't think very highly of Paul. And so he emphasized that he was going to judge angels along with them.

The Greek word for judge here is the same one that we saw in the previous verse. Paul was asking parallel questions in these two verses. In verse 2 he asked, "Don't you know that the saints will judge the world?" And then in verse 3 he asked, "Don't you know that we will judge angels?" In both verses Paul started with the phrase "don't you know" and then used the word "judge." But there are a few differences between these two questions. And the first one is not very significant. Paul switched from saying in verse 2 that the saints will judge to saying in verse 3 that we will judge. He was basically taking a broader statement about all Christians and making it more personal for himself and the Corinthian believers.

But the more significant change here is that Paul switched the object of the judging. In verse 2 he said that the saints will judge the world, and then in verse 3 he said that we will judge angels. The Greek word for angels is pronounced *angelos*, and so you can hear that the English word sounds a lot like the Greek word. Now when we hear the word "angels," we tend to think of spirit beings who were created by God to

serve him. But the Greek word for angels just refers to messengers. And sometimes those messengers are human beings. For example, Luke 9:52 says that Jesus “sent messengers ahead of himself, and on the way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make preparations for him.” Every Bible translation that I looked at has the word “messengers” in that verse instead of the word “angels.” That’s because it’s pretty obvious that these messengers were human beings.

But most of the time this Greek word does refer to spirit beings in the New Testament, and in those cases it’s normally translated with the word “angels.” For example, when Zechariah was burning incense in the temple sanctuary, Luke 1:11 says that “an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense.” This messenger was clearly a spirit being, because he appeared out of nowhere. Now angels are normally invisible to us unless they choose to make themselves visible. And sometimes they reveal themselves in splendor. After Jesus was born, Luke 2:9 tells us that an angel appeared to some shepherds. That verse says that “the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” But sometimes angels take on ordinary human form and blend in with us. That’s why Hebrews 13:2 says that “some have welcomed angels as guests without knowing it.”

Now these verses are talking about angels who serve God. But did you know that there are also angels who don’t serve God? We usually refer to them as demons, but demons are really just fallen angels. They were originally good when they were created by God, but then they fell into sin. And they were led by Satan, who is also a fallen angel. Unfortunately many Christians think of Satan as being on God’s level. But Satan is not omnipotent or omnipresent like God is. He’s no match for God. Now it’s true that Satan and the other fallen angels roam the earth and tempt people to sin. But all of that happens under God’s sovereign rule. In 1 Corinthians 10:13 Paul said that God “will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide a way out so that you may be able to bear it.” God is in complete control of everything that happens to us.

We can see an illustration of this principle in the life of Job. When Satan came into God’s presence in Job 1, God pointed out to him that there was no one like Job on earth. He was a man of perfect integrity who feared God and turned away from evil. But Satan claimed that Job only feared God because God protected him. He said that if God stretched out his hand and struck everything he owned, then he would curse God. And so God said that everything Job owned was in Satan’s power. The only thing Satan couldn’t do was lay a hand on Job himself. So Satan arranged for Job’s children and animals to be killed. And Job certainly mourned, but he also worshiped God and didn’t blame him for what had happened. So Satan tried again in chapter 2 and got permission to strike Job’s flesh and bones. God just said that Satan couldn’t kill Job. So Satan afflicted Job with terrible boils, but he still refused to curse God. He accepted both good and adversity from God.

Now we should be careful not to apply this story improperly. We should not assume that every time a Christian faces some kind of adversity, Satan is the one behind it. We should not think that he’s the cause of every sickness or disease that we experience. We should not think that he’s always behind any loss of money or possessions. We should not think he’s the cause behind any harm that comes to our family. If any of our friends turn against us, we should not assume that Satan was responsible. The problem with all

these assumptions is that they're viewing Satan too highly. Satan is not waiting behind every bush to attack us. That's beyond his capability. Sometimes we suffer simply because we live in a fallen world that's full of sin. But what we can learn from the story of Job is that God is still in control when bad things happen. And he's working all those things together for our good and his glory.

Now we should certainly be careful not underestimate Satan. He's nowhere near as powerful as God, but he's far more powerful than we are. And he's very clever as well. Normally he doesn't bother attacking people physically like he did with Job. Instead his focus is on getting people to doubt God's Word and disobey it. That's exactly what he did with Eve in the Garden of Eden. But one day God is going to totally defeat Satan and throw him and his demons into hell. Listen to what Jesus said about himself in Matthew 25:41: "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels!'" Notice that Jesus referred to Satan's angels in that verse. So in that verse the word "angels" does not refer to good angels but to fallen angels or demons.

And in 1 Corinthians 6:3 I believe that Paul was talking about fallen angels as well. He was referring to the future time of judgment when all the fallen angels will be sentenced to eternal punishment in the lake of fire. Jude referred to this future judgment in verse 6 of his letter. He said that "the angels who did not keep their own position but abandoned their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deep darkness for the judgment on the great day." Now Jude wasn't talking about all the fallen angels here. Otherwise Satan and his demons wouldn't be active today, because they would be in chains! Jude was talking about just a select number of fallen angels. He was probably referring back to Genesis 6 and the sons of God who took daughters of mankind as wives for themselves. These sons of God were probably angels who abandoned their proper dwelling. And so God has been keeping them locked up until judgment day when all the fallen angels will be judged.

So what Paul was saying in 1 Corinthians 6:3 is that one day we're going to judge fallen angels. According to Revelation 20, this judgment will take place right before we judge unbelievers. After we reign with Jesus for a thousand years in verses 1–6, there will be a final rebellion led by Satan in verses 7–9. Then in verse 10 Satan will be thrown into the lake of fire right before unbelievers are judged in verses 11–15. Now there is no direct reference in verses 10–15 to our participation in these judgments. But the apostle John already said back in verse 4 that he "saw thrones, and people seated on them who were given authority to judge." And so this statement seems to be pointing forward to our involvement in the time of judgment mentioned later in the chapter. We are going to help Jesus pass sentence on fallen angels as well as unbelieving human beings.

But Paul's main point in 1 Corinthians 6:3 was not to emphasize that we will judge angels. Instead he was using this fact to teach the Corinthian believers about their present lives. That was his focus at the end of the verse. He concluded his question with the phrase "how much more matters of this life." Now there are many translations that have the phrase "how much more," including the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, the New American Standard Bible, and the New International Version. But this is not a very literal translation. The Greek text actually has a word here that means "not." The old Holman Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "not to mention," which is a more literal translation.

Now this phrase “not to mention” is rather interesting when you stop to think about it. Let’s say that I want to tell you about some of my favorite desserts. I could say, “I really like apple pie and cheesecake, not to mention ice cream.” But I just mentioned ice cream, didn’t I? It’s kind of strange to say that you’re not mentioning something, because when you do that, you’re mentioning that very thing! So I think it’s safe to say that this phrase shouldn’t be understood literally. Instead it’s just idiomatic expression that brings emphasis. You’re basically saying that you hardly need to mention something because it’s so obvious. Everyone in my family knows that I love ice cream, especially in the summer. I would eat it every day if I didn’t care about my health.

So in verse 3 Paul was certainly talking about the fact that we’re going to judge fallen angels. But that wasn’t what he was emphasizing here. Instead he was focused on the matters of this life. That should have been obvious enough by this point that he almost didn’t need to mention it. Now the phrase “matters of this life” comes from just one word in the Greek text. It’s used only two other times in the New Testament, and one of them is in the very next verse. The other one is found in Luke 21:34. Listen to what Jesus said here: “Be on your guard, so that your minds are not dulled from carousing, drunkenness, and worries of life.” There our Greek word is simply translated with the word “life.” But it refers generally to the things that are part of our daily lives. And so the phrase “matters of this life” is a good translation in 1 Corinthians 6:3.

But of course we know from the context in verses 1–2 that Paul has been talking about trivial disputes between believers that were being taken to civil court. And so that’s probably what he was thinking about in verse 3 when he referred to matters of this life. He was saying that these disputes involved relatively insignificant things in our daily lives. But what was Paul trying to say about these things? At first glance we might think he was saying that we will judge matters of this life in the future when we judge fallen angels. After all, there’s no obvious shift in the time frame when we move from the beginning of the verse to the end of the verse. We just have one verb in this verse, and this future tense verb seems to govern the whole verse.

But once again we need to let the context inform our interpretation. Paul has been making a distinction between the judging that we’re going to do in the future and the judging that we should do right now. In the future we’re going to judge unbelievers and fallen angels, but we should be judging disputes between believers right now. And so at the end of verse 3 I think it’s strongly implied that Paul was talking about the present age and not the future time of judgment. As we saw last week, we’re worthy right now to judge trivial cases between our fellow Christians. They shouldn’t be taking their disputes to civil court before unrighteous judges. We need to be willing and ready to step in and help them settle their disputes.

And of course if we ever find ourselves in a dispute with a fellow believer, we should never take it to civil court. We should not want immediate justice so badly that we’re willing to pursue it at any cost. We need to remember that our Christian testimony before the world is more important. Paul said later 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?” So 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 should not 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.