

1 CORINTHIANS 6:4–5A

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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 the big problem here was that they were taking these disputes to civil court before the unrighteous. Paul used the word “dare” here to express his shock and horror at this situation. These people 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. 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 verses 2–3 he followed up with three 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? Don't you know that we will judge angels—how much more matters

of this life?” 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. So when we’re reigning with Jesus in the future, we will have the privilege of helping him pass sentence on unbelievers.

Then in the second question Paul built on the foundation of the first question, and he argued from the greater to the lesser. 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 are 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 we should ignore these trivial cases. But we need to handle them internally. As God’s holy people we are competent to judge these disputes.

Then in verse 3 we have another question, and it’s parallel to the first question in verse 2. He reminded us in verse 2 that we’re going to judge the world, and then in verse 3 he reminded us that we’re going to judge angels. The Greek word for angels just refers to messengers, and sometimes those messengers are human beings. But most of the time this Greek word refers to spirit beings who were created by God to serve him. That’s what we think of when we hear the word “angels.” And normally angels are invisible to us unless they choose to make themselves visible. Sometimes they reveal themselves in splendor, and sometimes they take on ordinary human form and blend in with us.

But unfortunately some of the angels chose to rebel against God. And so we refer to them as fallen angels or demons. They’re led by Satan, who is also a fallen angel. He’s nowhere near as powerful as God, but he’s far more powerful than we are. And his main 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. According to Revelation 20, this judgment will take place right before unbelievers are judged. And we’re going to help Jesus carry out both of these judgments! But Paul’s main point in our passage was not to emphasize these future judgments. Instead he was using them to teach us about our present lives. That’s why he ended verse 3 with the phrase “how much more matters of this life.” He was emphasizing that if we’re going to judge fallen angels down the road, then we’re certainly capable of judging the things that are part of our daily lives right now.

And of course Paul was referring primarily to the trivial disputes between the Corinthian believers. He was saying that these disputes involved relatively insignificant things in our daily lives. These Christians should not have been taking each other to civil court over these issues. Instead they should have found

someone in the church who was wise and godly to help them resolve their disputes. So the challenge for us is to be the kind of people who can help our fellow believers settle their disagreements. And if we're feeling unworthy to do that, then 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 6:4. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "So if you have such matters, do you appoint as your judges those who have no standing in the church?" So in this verse we have yet another question. We've already seen four questions in the first three verses. Now we're seeing a fifth question here in verse 4. And they just keep coming, one right after another. So let's take a closer look at this question in verse 4. Notice that Paul started it with the word "so." He was drawing a conclusion from the end of his previous question, where he was talking about the matters of this life. Now in verse 4 he referred back to these matters using the same Greek word. And this word actually comes first in the Greek text for emphasis.

But the Christian Standard Bible is a bit incomplete here. Most translations have a longer opening statement in this question. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible both say, "So if you have law courts dealing with matters of this life." So there's a Greek word here that sometimes refers to law courts. That's how we see it used in James 2:6. In that verse James asked his readers, "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. And so they would often take people to court who were not as wealthy and prominent as they were.

But this Greek word for court is used one other time in the New Testament, and we just saw it a few weeks ago in verse 2 of our passage. There the Christian Standard Bible and most other translations give us the word "cases." And that's probably the nuance Paul intended here in verse 4 as well. He was talking about cases in civil court that should have been handled by the church. So Paul was talking about disputes between Christians that involved the things of this life, just like he did at the end of verse 3. And when he used the word "if" in verse 4, he wasn't suggesting that there weren't any disputes in the Corinthian church. He was using the word "if" just like he did in verse 2. He was assuming that the condition was true and building on the foundation of the previous question.

And now we come to the heart of Paul's question in verse 4. He asked, "Do you appoint as your judges those who have no standing in the church?" The Greek word for appoint actually means "to sit down." It's used again in chapter 10 and verse 7, where Paul said, "Don't become idolaters as some of them were, as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and got up to party." In that verse Paul was giving us a quotation from Exodus 32:6. He was describing the behavior of the Israelites after they had Aaron make them a golden calf to worship. These things were happening while Moses was receiving God's laws for the people on Mount Sinai. And one of the things that they did was sitting down to eat and drink.

But sometimes this Greek word has the nuance of causing someone to sit down. That's how Paul used the word in Ephesians 1:20. Listen to what this verse says about God: "He exercised this power in Christ by

raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens.” So Paul wasn’t saying here that God sat down. He was saying that God caused Jesus to sit down at his right hand in a place of honor. And this is the nuance that I believe Paul intended in 1 Corinthians 6:4. He was talking about seating people in a place of honor as judges. There’s actually no Greek word for judges here, but it’s implied by the context and this Greek word for causing someone to sit. After all, judges would sit down when they oversaw a case, just like they do today.

But look at how Paul referred to these judges. He described them as “those who have no standing in the church.” The Greek word for standing actually means “to despise.” It’s used 11 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote eight of them. We already saw it back in chapter 1 and verse 28, where Paul said that “God has chosen what is insignificant and despised in the world—what is viewed as nothing—to bring to nothing what is viewed as something.” In that verse Paul was talking about Christians and how most of us were viewed by the world before we were saved. God didn’t choose to save us because we were anything special. Instead he saved lowly people who are despised by the world so that we wouldn’t be able to boast about our salvation.

So the Christian Standard Bible is not very accurate in chapter 6 and verse 4 when it refers to “those who have no standing in the church.” Unfortunately this wording is also found in several other good translations, the English Standard Version and the NET Bible. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have the phrase “who are of no account in the church.” But this statement isn’t very accurate either. All five of these translations are missing the key word “despise.” Now I’m not a big fan of the New King James Version, but it actually comes close here. It has the phrase “those who are least esteemed by the church.” When you despise someone, you’re holding that person in very low esteem. But this translation is still giving us a more palatable interpretation that doesn’t sound so mean. It would be better to give a straightforward translation and say that these judges were despised by the church.

Now at this point it sounds like Paul was talking about the unrighteous and unbelieving judges that he mentioned in verse 1. But we run into a bit of a problem here. In the seven other places where Paul used this Greek word for despise, he never used it to refer to unbelievers. We already saw in chapter 1 and verse 28 that it clearly refers to Christians there. Now this doesn’t mean that Paul couldn’t have used this word to refer to unbelievers in our passage. But we should pause and consider the possibility that he was referring to believers here. And this view has been popular throughout church history. Even today there are quite a few respected commentators who hold to this interpretation.

But this view makes no sense unless we make a significant change to our translation. Instead of seeing verse 4 as a question, we would need to see it as a command. And this approach is completely justified when we look closely at the Greek text. That’s because the Greek verb for appoint is second person plural and is in the present tense. And in this case the form of the verb is the same for the imperative mood and the indicative mood. In other words, it can be either a command or a regular verb that’s used in statements or questions. Now we might think that we can simply look at the punctuation in the Greek text to see if there’s a question mark there or a period. But as I’ve told you before, our oldest surviving copies of the New Testament don’t have any punctuation marks or even any spaces. They just give us a steady

stream of capital letters. And so punctuation marks can only be determined by studying the text carefully like we're doing.

Now there are a few translations that give us a command instead of a question in verse 4. The King James Version says, "If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church." The old New International Version says, "Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church!" So in both of these translations Paul was basically commanding the Corinthian believers to appoint as judges their fellow believers who were despised. The idea seems to be that some believers in the church were more despised than others, and Paul wanted those people to be appointed as judges. In other words, even the most despised believers in the church were competent to judge disputes.

Now this interpretation has a lot going for it. One of the strengths of this view is that it sees the despised as Christians, which is consistent with how Paul spoke elsewhere, as I already mentioned. Plus if we see the despised as unbelievers here, then it's hard for us to understand how the Corinthian believers were despising these unrighteous judges. After all, they were willingly taking each other to court before these judges, and so they must have had some level of respect for them. Another strength of this view is that the Corinthian believers would not really have been able to appoint a particular unbelieving judge to handle their case. They probably would have just ended up with a random judge from the civil court system. But they could have approached a specific fellow believer from the church and appointed that person to help them resolve their dispute.

But there are some good responses that we can give to this view. I think it's likely that Paul wasn't talking about appointing a specific person to help them resolve their dispute. Instead he was probably just talking about turning to the civil court system in general and relying on any given unbelieving judge to handle their case. Now it's true that the Greek word for despised usually refers to Christians. But the key here is that it normally refers to believers in general and not to a specific group of believers in the church. That's how Paul used the word back in chapter 1 and verse 28, as we already saw. He was saying there that Christians in general were despised by the world before we were saved.

So I don't think Paul would have spoken positively about the idea that some believers in the church were more despised than others. That was almost certainly happening, and it happens in most churches today as well. But I doubt Paul would have thought it was appropriate to affirm that viewpoint. It would have hindered his efforts to eliminate the divisions in the church. But why would Paul have said the unbelieving judges were despised by the church? It seems pretty clear that the Corinthian believers had too much respect for them! But I think the updated New International Version is on the right track here. It says, "Do you ask for a ruling from those whose way of life is scorned in the church?" So this translation points us beyond the unbelieving judges to the way that they live.

Now the point could be made here that the Corinthian believers didn't really scorn or despise the way unbelievers live. After all, we've already seen that these Christians were enamored with worldly wisdom, and they were tolerating a man in the church who was committing incest. But notice that Paul didn't spe-

cifically refer to the Corinthian believers here. He just referred to “the church.” And the word “church” can have two different nuances. Normally when it’s used in the New Testament, it refers to a local church. That’s how Paul used the word in Colossians 4:15. In that verse he wrote, “Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her home.” Now we don’t know anything about Nympha or where she lived, but clearly there was a group of Christians who met in her home. And so Paul was clearly talking about a local church in that verse.

But sometimes the word “church” refers to the universal church, not a local church. The universal church is simply a reference to all Christians regardless of time or place. That’s how Paul used the word in Colossians 1:18, where he said that Jesus is “the head of the body, the church.” Paul wasn’t saying there that Jesus was the head of only one local church like the Colossian church. Instead he was saying that Jesus is the head of the universal church. He’s in authority over all Christians everywhere at all times. And that’s probably how Paul was using the word “church” in 1 Corinthians 6:4 as well. He was saying that Christians in general despise the way unbelievers live. And so I think he was giving a subtle rebuke to those in the Corinthian church who did not share this view. He was hinting that they should have despised the way these unrighteous judges behaved. Then they naturally would have wanted to take their disputes before the saints instead.

So I lean toward the view that Paul was not giving a command in verse 4. He was not telling the Corinthian believers to appoint the despised among them as their judges. Instead he was asking them if they appointed unbelievers as their judges. And the obvious answer to this question is yes. Now if Paul had asked them if they should have been doing that, then the answer clearly would have been no. But that’s not what Paul was asking them. He was asking them a question of fact, not a question of obligation. And he used the Greek present tense here, which normally indicates a continuous action. He was showing us that there was at least one civil court case in progress at that time involving members of this church.

So Paul was essentially rebuking the Corinthian believers with this question in verse 4. And that rebuke leads nicely to his statement at the beginning of verse 5. Look at what he wrote here: “I say this to your shame!” Now if there’s a command in verse 4, then this statement doesn’t really make a lot of sense. But if Paul was giving a rebuke through a question, then this statement fits perfectly. So we’ve endured a barrage of five consecutive questions from Paul in the first four verses. And now in verse 5 we finally get a sentence that’s not a question. But Paul didn’t even let us catch our breath! Instead he switched to an even stronger type of sentence. He made an exclamatory statement. Now most Bible translations don’t put an exclamation point here, but it’s hard to read this statement without feeling some strong emotion from Paul. And so an exclamation point is very appropriate here.

So Paul made it clear in verse 5 that he was trying to bring shame on his readers through his barrage of questions and especially the last question. The Greek word for shame is only used one other time in the New Testament, and it’s found later in this letter. In chapter 15 and verse 34 Paul wrote, “Come to your senses and stop sinning; for some people are ignorant about God. I say this to your shame.” So in both of these verses Paul was trying to bring shame on the Corinthian believers. But earlier in this letter Paul used a verb from the same root as the Greek noun in these two verses. In chapter 4 and verse 14 he said,

“I’m not writing this to shame you, but to warn you as my dear children.” So why did he say there that he did not want to shame them when later he said twice that he did want to shame them? I think the answer is simply that he was dealing with different sins in these passages. In chapter 4 he did not want to shame them about the divisions in their church, but in chapter 6 he did want to shame them about the fact that they were taking each other to civil court.

And there’s nothing wrong with what Paul was doing here. It’s not a bad thing for people to feel shame when they’ve sinned against the Lord. We have another example of this in 2 Thessalonians 3:14. There Paul wrote, “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take note of that person; don’t associate with him, so that he may be ashamed.” So this verse is also talking about Christians feeling shame. But in this case the source of the shame was different. It was not coming from reading Paul’s words of rebuke. Instead it was going to come from the suspension of fellowship with fellow believers. When professing Christians are living in unrepentant sin, we need to follow the church discipline process and eventually stop associating with them. That way they will feel shame and be motivated to repent. Paul didn’t talk about this theme in 1 Corinthians 5, but I think it’s safe to say that it was part of the reason he told his readers to remove the stepson from the church.

However, in chapter 6 Paul was trying to bring shame on other believers in the church. He wanted people to feel shame if they were taking disputes with their fellow believers to civil court. They were fighting with their fellow Christians in public for everyone to see instead of handling these disputes internally. And so they were ruining their testimony before the world. That’s why Paul took such a strong approach in this passage with his barrage of questions and this exclamatory statement. He wanted them to feel shame so that they would repent of their sins. So whenever we feel shame, we need to ask ourselves why. If we can determine that we’re ashamed because of some sin that we’ve committed, then we should thank the Lord for giving us that shame as an alarm to wake us up. And we should immediately confess that sin to him and turn away from it. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God’s help to live in obedience to him.