

1 CORINTHIANS 6:5B–6

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 6. In the beginning of this chapter Paul has been dealing with the sin of Christians taking each other to civil court. Some of the Corinthian believers were deliberately putting themselves in a position where they would be judged in court by unbelievers. But Paul gave a better approach than going to court before the unrighteous. Instead he said in verse 1 that we should go before the saints. And Paul wasn't talking about just a few extraordinary believers. In Scripture the word "saints" refers to all Christians. We all have the status of being holy in God's sight. And as our practical holiness more closely matches our positional holiness, we become more equipped to serve as judges for our fellow believers. When we have a disagreement with another Christian, we should find a mature believer who can help us resolve our dispute.

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 2–4 he followed up with four more questions. He was showing his readers why they should have taken their disputes before the saints and not the unrighteous. First he reminded them in verse 2 that the saints will judge the world. When we're reigning with Jesus in the future, we will have the privilege of helping him pass sentence on unbelievers. Then Paul 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.

Then in verse 3 Paul reminded us that we're going to judge not only the world but angels as well. Angels are spirit beings who were created by God to serve him. But unfortunately some of the angels chose to rebel against God. And so we refer to them as fallen angels or demons. But sometimes in Scripture they're simply called angels. In Matthew 25:41 Jesus talked about "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." 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.

Then in verse 4 Paul asked yet another question. He wrote, "So if you have such matters, do you appoint as your judges those who have no standing in the church?" In this question Paul was drawing a conclusion from the end of his previous question. He was talking about the matters of this life, and here he referred back to these matters using the same Greek word. And when he used the word "if," he was assuming that the condition was true, just like he did back in verse 2. The Corinthian believers definitely had disputes with each other. So Paul asked them if they appointed as judges those who have no standing in the church. The Greek word for standing actually means "to despise." The idea here is that these judges were despised by the church. And most likely Paul was talking the unrighteous judges that he mentioned in verse 1.

Now it doesn't seem like these unbelieving judges were despised by the Corinthian believers. 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. But Paul didn't specifically refer to the church in Corinth here. He just said "the church." And so Paul was probably referring to the universal church, not any local church. The universal church is simply a reference to all Christians regardless of time or place. So Paul was saying that Christians in general despise unbelievers and the way they live. He was basically 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 the obvious answer to Paul's rhetorical question here is yes. The Corinthian believers were indeed appointing unbelievers as their judges. 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 doing here. He was asking them a question of fact, not a question of obligation. And this question leads nicely to Paul's statement at the beginning of verse 5. He wrote, "I say this to your shame!" 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.

So Paul made it clear that he was trying to bring shame on his readers through his questions, especially the last one. And there's nothing wrong with what he was doing here. It's a good thing for people to feel shame when they've sinned against the Lord. It's God's way of helping us to repent of our 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.

Now let's move on to some new material and cover the rest of verse 5. Look at what Paul wrote in the second part of this verse: "Can it be that there is not one wise person among you who is able to arbitrate between fellow believers?" So at the beginning of this verse it seemed like Paul was done with his barrage of

questions. But he was just taking a quick break. Now we have another question at the end of the verse. And it seems clear that Paul was continuing his attempt to bring shame on his readers. When Paul said, “I say this to your shame,” he could have been using the word “this” to point either backward or forward. And I don’t see why it can’t be pointing in both directions. Paul wasn’t done trying to make the Corinthian believers ashamed about taking each other to civil court.

Now in the Christian Standard Bible this question in verse 5 starts with the phrase “can it be.” The English Standard Version has the same phrase, and the New International Version has the similar phrase “is it possible.” But these translations are not very literal here. The original Greek text just begins this question with a word that usually means “so.” The New American Standard Bible has the phrase “is it so,” and that’s probably on the right track. But the other translations have the correct idea even though they’re not as literal. So Paul started this question by essentially raising his eyebrows. He was indicating his skepticism about what he was about to ask. Was there really not a single wise person among the Corinthian believers? He has serious doubts that this could be the case. Surely at least one of them had to have some wisdom, right? I think it’s safe to say that Paul thought so.

But I believe the Corinthian believers would have responded much more strongly to this question. I think their knee-jerk reaction would have been to say, “Of course! Our church is full of wise people.” But the problem was that most of them had the wrong kind of wisdom. We’ve already seen this Greek word for wise 10 times in this letter, and in most cases it’s used negatively. In chapter 1 and verse 27 Paul said that “God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.” God brought shame on those with worldly wisdom, not godly wisdom! Then in chapter 3 and verse 18 Paul said, “If anyone among you thinks he is wise in this age, let him become a fool so that he can become wise.” So apparently there were many believers in the Corinthian church who were enamored with worldly wisdom. But Paul said that they needed to let go of that wisdom. Only then could they be truly wise in God’s sight.

But we’ve already seen several times in this letter that the Corinthian believers were arrogant and boastful. They thought highly of themselves and were proud of their wisdom. So Paul turned the tables on them here in chapter 6 and verse 5. He forced them to take a hard look at themselves and see if they really were wise. And if they were being honest with themselves, I think they’d have to conclude that they weren’t as wise as they thought. After all, actions speak louder than words. If they really were wise, then why didn’t one of them step up to the plate and help resolve these disputes between believers in the church? This is the great irony that Paul was pointing out to these people in his question.

So Paul was basically saying that if there was a truly wise person among the Corinthian believers, then that person would have been able to arbitrate between them. The Greek word for able is actually a verb that’s in the future tense. It’s translated in the present tense in the Christian Standard Bible and many other translations. But the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible preserve the future tense for us. Now I don’t think Paul was saying that none of the Corinthian believers had the ability to arbitrate between them at that time. I think it’s safe to say that there were at least a few mature Christians in the church. So Paul was probably just emphasizing that no one was actually showing that ability. None of them was functioning as an arbitrator at that time.

The Greek word for arbitrate comes from the same root as the Greek word for judge. We saw that word back in verses 2–3, where Paul said that we will judge the world and angels. But here in verse 5 Paul added a prefix to that word, and so he was using a compound word. Now sometimes this compound word has a different nuance than the root word. We already saw this word back in chapter 4 and verse 7, and we concluded that it refers to being different there. In chapter 14 and verse 29 it refers to making an evaluation. But here in chapter 6 and verse 5 I think it refers pretty clearly to reaching a legal decision. In other words, it has the same basic meaning as the root word that we saw in verses 2–3. That’s why the New International Version has the word “judge” here.

But I do like the choice of the word “arbitrate” in the Christian Standard Bible. That word just refers to reaching an authoritative judgment outside the normal legal process. An arbitrator is not an official judge but an independent person who is appointed to settle a dispute. In arbitration people who have a disagreement agree to abide by the decision of the arbitrator. And so the word “arbitrate” perfectly describes what Paul was advocating in our passage. He didn’t want believers to take a dispute to civil court before unrighteous judges. Instead he wanted them to choose someone from the church to serve as an arbitrator. This person would reach a decision about how to resolve the dispute, and the two sides would submit to this decision.

Now at the end of verse 5 Paul talked about a wise person arbitrating between fellow believers. The Greek word for between refers to being in the middle. It’s used in Luke 5, which talks about some men who were carrying a paralyzed man on a stretcher. They were trying to get him to Jesus so that he could be healed, but they couldn’t get him through the crowd. So verse 19 says that “they went up on the roof and lowered him on the stretcher through the roof tiles into the middle of the crowd before Jesus.” And the picture is similar in 1 Corinthians 6:5. We can view the arbitrator as being in the middle between the two people who had a disagreement. They’re at odds with each other and can’t settle the dispute on their own. So the arbitrator comes between these fellow believers and brings them together to work things out.

But the phrase “fellow believers” comes from a Greek phrase that literally means “his brother.” I couldn’t find a single Bible version that gives us a literal translation here. That’s because the Greek text doesn’t make a lot of sense at this point. It almost sounds like the arbitrator is resolving a dispute between himself and his brother. But the context clearly indicates that the dispute is between two other people. So there are some Bible scholars who think that the text has been corrupted at this point. Of course we don’t have the original letter that Paul wrote, and our oldest copy was written about 150 years later. And so it’s possible that someone made a mistake when copying this letter during those 150 years and that this mistake has been passed down in all our surviving copies.

But the problem with this view is that the commentaries written on this letter by early church leaders don’t make any mention of a problem here. Many of these commentators knew Greek very well, and so if the text is unreliable, I think at least some of them would have struggled with this verse. But that’s not the case. So I think the best solution here is that Paul just left out a phrase on purpose. Here’s a literal translation of the end of verse 5: “To arbitrate between his brother.” For this statement to make sense, all we need to do is add the phrase “a man and” right after the word “between.” Then we have the phrase “to

arbitrate between a man and his brother.” It seems pretty clear that this is basically what Paul intended to communicate, but he just omitted a few words because they were obvious.

Now the Greek word for brother can certainly refer to a physical brother. But we’ve already seen this word used eight times earlier in the letter. And in each case it refers to a spiritual relationship. Paul was stressing to his readers that they were all part of God’s family. And it’s pretty obvious in most of these verses that Paul wasn’t just talking about men. He was clearly including women as well. That’s why the Christian Standard Bible uses the phrase “brothers and sisters” in places like chapter 1 and verse 10, chapter 2 and verse 1, chapter 3 and verse 1, and chapter 4 and verse 6. The last time we saw this word was in chapter 5 and verse 11. In that verse the word is in the singular, but Paul was still talking about a man or a woman, and so the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase “brother or sister.”

But here in chapter 6 and verse 5 we have the phrase “fellow believers.” Now that’s the correct idea because Paul was once again emphasizing a spiritual relationship. But this translation misses the nuance that Paul was trying to convey. He was stressing the fact that Christians are brothers and sisters in God’s family. And so it would be better to include the literal terminology here without being overly masculine. Earlier I gave you the translation “to arbitrate between a man and his brother.” But here’s an even better translation: “To arbitrate between a person and his brother or sister.” I still have a masculine pronoun there, but I’m not a fan of using the third person plural pronoun in place of a third person singular pronoun. That’s the way most people talk today, but it sounds like fingers on a chalkboard to me. We could say “his or her brother or sister,” but that’s too wordy for me. So that leaves us with the phrase “his brother or sister.”

Now let’s move on to verse 6, which flows right out of verse 5. Look at what Paul wrote here: “Instead, brother goes to court against brother, and that before unbelievers!” So the Christian Standard Bible gives us an exclamatory statement, just like we had at the beginning of verse 5. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New International Version take the same approach. But the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible have a question here instead. In fact, they don’t give us a new question, but they treat verse 6 as part of the question in verse 5. And this approach is certainly a possibility since we don’t have punctuation marks in the oldest copies of this letter. But having one long question here isn’t very smooth, and I think it makes more sense to read verse 6 as an exclamation instead of a question.

So the Christian Standard Bible gives us a pretty good translation in verse 6. It starts with the word “instead,” which indicates that we have a strong contrast between verses 5 and 6. In verse 5 we saw that the Corinthian church should have had at least one wise person who could have served as an arbitrator between the members of God’s family when they had a dispute. But no one was stepping up to the plate. Instead we see in verse 6 that brother went to court against brother. Notice that the word “brother” is here twice, and in each case it comes from the same Greek word that we saw the end of verse 5. But thankfully the Christian Standard Bible gives us a more literal translation this time. I wish we had a good way to add the word “sister” here, but it’s not very smooth to say, “Brother or sister goes to court against brother or sister.” We could say, “A person goes to court against his brother or sister,” but that translation loses Paul’s extra emphasis on the Greek word for brother. So the Christian Standard Bible works well enough here.

Now we already saw the word “court” back in verse 1, and in both cases it actually comes from the Greek verb that means “to judge.” It’s the same one that Paul used in verses 2–3, and as we already saw, it comes from the same root as the Greek word for arbitrate in verse 5. Now in verses 2–3 Paul used this verb in the active voice, which means that the subject does the action. But in verses 1 and 6 the verb is in the passive voice, which means that the subject receives the action. So here’s a more literal translation of the beginning of verse 6: “Instead, brother is judged with brother.” The word “against” in the Christian Standard Bible comes from a Greek preposition that normally means “with.” The idea here is that these two Christian brothers or sisters went to civil court with each other to be judged.

Now we already saw the problem with this action back in verse 1. Paul said that the Corinthian believers were going to court to be judged by the unrighteous. And here in verse 6 Paul gave us a similar statement. He ended this verse with the phrase “and that before unbelievers.” The word “that” is just pointing us back to Paul’s statement at the beginning of the verse. When these people went to court, it was happening before unbelievers. The word “before” comes from the same Greek preposition that Paul used in verse 1 when he talked about going to court before the unrighteous. In both cases Paul was talking about secular judges. In verse 1 he stressed their unrighteous behavior, and here in verse 6 he emphasized that they were unbelievers.

The Greek word for unbelievers is used 23 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 16 of them. But 11 of these occurrences appear in our letter, which is almost half of them. We’re going to see this word five times in chapter 7 when we talk about an unbelieving spouse. So this Greek word just refers to people who do not believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. It comes from the same root as the Greek word for believer, but it has a letter alpha in front of it, which is basically equivalent to our letter A. So the opposite of a theist, who believes in the existence of God, is an atheist, who does not believe in the existence of God. But usually in English we use the prefix “un-” to indicate the opposite of something. And so the opposite of a believer is an unbeliever. Paul was saying here that most judges at the time were not believers in Jesus, and the same thing is still true today.

So the problem with taking a Christian brother or sister to civil court is that you’re probably going to be judged by an unbeliever. Now certainly this means that you’re less likely to get justice, because unbelievers have a warped sense of justice. Thankfully they have a conscience, and so they’re not completely unfair in their rulings. But until they put their faith in Jesus, they’re not going to follow God’s righteous standard of justice very well. However, I think the bigger issue here for Paul is that we’re not being a good testimony to the world when we take our fellow believers to court. In 1 Thessalonians 4:12 Paul said that he wanted us to “behave properly in the presence of outsiders.” Listen to what he said in Titus 2:8: “Your message is to be sound beyond reproach, so that any opponent will be ashamed, because he doesn’t have anything bad to say about us.” If unbelievers see us fighting each other in court instead of loving each other, then our Christian testimony will be ruined.

So we can see how important it is for us to handle our disputes internally. We should find a wise person in the church who can serve as an arbitrator for us. Godly wisdom is simply the ability to apply God’s Word to our lives. And this is something that all Christians should be able to do. In Ephesians 5:15 Paul

wrote, “Pay careful attention, then, to how you live—not as unwise people but as wise.” But how do we get wisdom? The Bible teaches that wisdom comes from God and that we should ask him for it. James 1:5 says, “Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God—who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly—and it will be given to him.” But Proverbs 2:4 tells us that we need to search for wisdom like hidden treasure. So there’s a balance here between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. God’s not just going to drop wisdom into our laps like he did for Solomon. Growing in wisdom requires hard work.

So how should we search for wisdom? First, we need to start with Scripture, because it’s full of wisdom from God. We find a great deal of this wisdom in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, which were written by King Solomon. God made Solomon the wisest man who ever lived apart from Jesus, and he passed along much of his wisdom to us in these two books. But we should also search for wisdom by learning to do research and gather information. Nehemiah 2:13 tells us that when Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he inspected the city walls to see what their condition was before he started working on repairs. He did some research before making a wise plan for rebuilding the walls. So whenever we face a big decision in our lives, we should do plenty of research and then make a list of pros and cons to help us think through all the information and evaluate our options.

But there’s a third way that we should search for wisdom. We should ask others for advice and feedback about our decision. In Proverbs 12:15 Solomon said that “a fool’s way is right in his own eyes, but whoever listens to counsel is wise.” Solomon knew that it’s easy for us to be biased in our perspective and blind to our weaknesses. So we need to be teachable if we’re going to be wise. But we also need to go to the right people for counsel. In Proverbs 13:20 Solomon said that “the one who walks with the wise will become wise, but a companion of fools will suffer harm.” So we need to identify wise believers who are spiritually mature, and then we need to spend time with them regularly and learn from them. And as we learn wisdom from those who are wise, we shouldn’t just keep it to ourselves and use it for our own benefit. We should turn around and pass that wisdom along to others. As we grow in wisdom, we’ll be more equipped to help our fellow believers overcome their disputes. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God’s help in this area.