

1 CORINTHIANS 6:7–8

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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 can refer to them as fallen angels. These are the angels I believe Paul was talking about here. He was saying that we're going to help Jesus sentence the fallen angels to eternal punishment in hell. But Paul's main point here was 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. We should not take our fellow Christians to civil court over these relatively insignificant things. Instead we should find a wise and godly person to help us resolve our trivial disputes.

Then in verse 4 Paul mentioned that the Corinthian believers appointed as their judges those who have no standing in the church. The Greek word for standing actually means "to despise." The idea here is that these unrighteous judges and their behavior were despised by the church. 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 respect for them. So Paul was proba-

bly referring to the universal church here. He was saying that Christians in general despise unbelievers and the way they live. And so he was giving a subtle rebuke to the believers in Corinth who did not share this view. He was hinting that they should have despised the way these unrighteous judges behaved.

And this question in verse 4 leads nicely to Paul's statement at the beginning of verse 5. He wrote, "I say this to your shame!" So in verses 1-4 we've seen a barrage of five consecutive questions from Paul. And 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. And in this statement he made it clear that he was trying to bring shame on his readers through his questions, especially the last one. But 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 an alarm that God uses to wake us up and help us repent of our sins.

Then in the rest of verse 5 Paul continued his attempt to bring shame on his readers by asking yet another question. He said, "Can it be that there is not one wise person among you who is able to arbitrate between fellow believers?" Now I think the Corinthian believers would have thought that their church was full of wise people. But if they were being honest with themselves, I think they'd be forced 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 help resolve these disputes between believers in the church? Why didn't one of them step up to the plate and serve as an arbitrator? This is the great irony that Paul was pointing out to these people in his question.

Then in verse 6 Paul made another exclamatory statement. He wrote, "Instead, brother goes to court against brother, and that before unbelievers!" The word "brother" appears twice here to emphasize that the Corinthian believers were brothers and sisters in God's family. They shouldn't have been taking each other to civil court before judges who were unbelievers! Now in verse 1 Paul stressed the unrighteous behavior of these judges, but here in verse 6 he showed that the root of their unrighteous behavior was in their heart. Their real problem was that they refused to believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. And as a result they would have had a warped sense of justice. So it made no sense for the Corinthian believers to go before these unbelieving judges. How could they expect to get a fair ruling?

But I think the bigger issue here 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." In Titus 2:8 he said that he didn't want our opponents to "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. But this is something that every Christian should be able to do, because we're all supposed to be pursuing wisdom. And God provides wisdom for us if we ask him for it and search for it in his Word.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 6:7. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "As it is, to have legal disputes against one another is already a defeat for you. Why not

rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?” Now so far in this chapter we’ve only seen questions and exclamations. We started with five questions in verses 1–4, and then in verses 5–6 we saw an exclamation followed by a question and another exclamation. But here in the beginning of verse 7 we finally have a regular sentence. Every major conservative Bible translation just puts a period at the end of the first sentence in this verse. But I don’t think it would be inappropriate to view this sentence as another exclamatory statement. It certainly contains some very pointed language!

So let’s take a closer look at this sentence. The Christian Standard Bible begins with the phrase “as it is.” This phrase translates a word in the Greek text that is left untranslated in most Bible versions. It’s just used here to mark a continuation from the previous verse. Another way that we could translate this term is with the word “indeed.” Paul was continuing to talk about Christians taking each other to civil court. But in this verse he used a new Greek word to talk about this situation. We haven’t seen it in this letter until now. It’s translated with the word “legal disputes” in the Christian Standard Bible. Many other translations have the word “lawsuits,” like the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, the New American Standard Bible, and the New International Version.

Now usually this Greek word refers to a guilty verdict and the resulting punishment. That’s what it means elsewhere in this letter. It’s used a total of 27 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 12 of them. It appears two other times in this letter, and they’re both found in chapter 11 in the passage about the Lord’s Supper. In verse 29 Paul said, “For whoever eats and drinks without recognizing the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.” In verse 34 Paul said, “If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you gather together you will not come under judgment.” So in both of these verses our Greek noun is translated with the word “judgment.” It actually comes from the same root as the verb that means “to judge,” which we’ve already seen several times in chapter 6. The verb is pronounced *krino*, and the noun here is pronounced *krima*.

But in chapter 6 and verse 7 our Greek word clearly does not refer to a guilty verdict and the resulting punishment. Instead it describes an earlier stage of the legal process. It refers to the initiation of legal action against someone. That’s why no major conservative Bible translation has the word “judgment” here. Instead most of them have the word “lawsuits” or the phrase “legal disputes” as we see in the Christian Standard Bible. Paul was using this Greek word to refer back to the disputes that he mentioned in verse 1. He said, “If any of you has a dispute against another, how dare you take it to court before the unrighteous, and not before the saints?” So the big problem here was not that the Corinthian believers had disputes with each other. The major issue was that these disputes were being taken to civil court. They had become legal disputes.

And in verse 7 Paul told his readers that to have legal disputes against each other was already a defeat for them. The Greek word for defeat is used only one other time in the New Testament, and it’s found in Romans 11:12. In this passage Paul was talking about how God had not rejected the Israelites even though they had rejected his prophets and the Messiah. In fact, God was working behind the scenes to bring good out of the situation. Look at what Paul wrote in verses 11–12: “I ask, then, have they stumbled so as to fall? Absolutely not! On the contrary, by their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to

make Israel jealous. Now if their transgression brings riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fullness bring!”

So that word “failure” comes from the same Greek word that we have in 1 Corinthians 6:7. Paul was talking about Israel’s failure to obey the Lord and ultimately to accept Jesus as their Messiah. And in 1 Corinthians Paul was talking about a similar kind of failure. He was talking about how the Corinthian believers failed to live in a way that pleased the Lord. This Greek word can also be translated with the word “loss” or the word “defeat,” which is what the Christian Standard Bible has in chapter 6 and verse 7. And these two words help us to see the irony of the situation here. These people were going to court to try to win the case and get a legal victory. But they were in a no-win situation! Even though one of them was going to get a favorable verdict, that person would still lose in God’s eyes.

That’s why Paul used the word “already” here. The people who were in the process of a legal dispute didn’t have to wait for the verdict to find out the ultimate outcome. Paul told them that even before the verdict was given, both parties in the legal dispute had already lost the case in God’s sight. And Paul stressed this fact by adding a Greek word here that’s not translated in the Christian Standard Bible. But we do see it in more literal translations like the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. The first word in those two translations is the term “actually.” It comes from the same Greek word that we saw back in chapter 5 and verse 1, where Paul said, “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you.”

So in both of these verses the word “actually” emphasizes that something really was true. In chapter 5 it was true that there was sexual sin in the Corinthian church. And in chapter 6 it was true that the legal dispute between the Corinthian believers was already a defeat for them. So the situation was completely lost for these people who were taking each other to court. One of them would certainly get a legal victory, but it would come at a high price. It was inevitably going to be accompanied by a spiritual defeat. That’s why Paul was opposing this action so strongly! That’s why he wanted the dispute to be handled internally by a wise person in the church.

But even if this good option wasn’t available to the Corinthian believers, it would still have been better not to go to court at all. And that’s exactly where Paul went at the end of verse 7, where he asked his seventh and eighth questions in this chapter. In these two short questions he asked, “Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?” And there was no good answer to these “why” questions. If I ask my kids why they didn’t get their homework done, they might occasionally be able to give me a good answer that I will accept. Maybe they got stuck on one of their subjects and weren’t able to get any help. Maybe they ended up having to do some extra chores that day. Maybe they weren’t feeling well and needed to rest.

But Paul did not think that the Corinthian believers could give him an acceptable answer to his “why” questions. There was no good reason for them to avoid being wronged and cheated. The alternative would have been much worse. Paul used the word “rather” in each question to make an implied comparison. We could also put the word “instead” there. Instead of having legal disputes against each other, these

people should have been willing to be wronged and cheated. Notice that both of these verbs are in the passive voice. We can see that fact from the presence of the word “be” in each question. So Paul was talking about an action that would have been done to the readers, not by them. In other words, he was only talking about one side of the dispute here. One person was trying to take advantage of the other, and Paul was talking to the innocent party here. But that person would no longer be innocent if he took the matter to court! Instead he should have been willing to be wronged and cheated.

The Greek verb for wronged is used 28 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote nine of them. Sometimes this word refers to bringing physical harm on someone. That’s how we often see the word used in the Book of Revelation. In Revelation 11:5 the apostle John was talking about the two prophets that God is going to send during the future seven-year period of tribulation on the earth. In that verse John said, “If anyone wants to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and consumes their enemies; if anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this way.” But sometimes our Greek verb just refers more generally to acting in an unjust way. And that’s clearly how Paul was using it in 1 Corinthians 6:7. This verb actually comes from the same root as the noun that Paul used back in verse 1. It’s translated with the word “unrighteous” in the Christian Standard Bible. So Paul was basically asking his readers, “Why not rather be treated unrighteously?”

Now in verse 1 the word “unrighteous” was a reference to the unbelieving judges. Paul was saying that in general their behavior was not right in God’s eyes, and that was certainly true in court. They would often reach unjust decisions that favored those who were wealthy and prominent in society. But here in verse 7 the unrighteous behavior was not coming from unbelievers but from believers! Someone in the church was treating a fellow Christian wrongly. And Paul was pointing out here that this person was acting just like those unrighteous judges! Instead the Corinthian believers needed to follow Paul’s example. Listen to what he told them in 2 Corinthians 7:2: “Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, corrupted no one, taken advantage of no one.” Our goal should be never to treat anyone in an unrighteous way, especially our fellow believers!

So in 1 Corinthians 6:7 Paul asked his readers, “Why not rather be wronged?” And then he asked a parallel question: “Why not rather be cheated?” In this question Paul used a verb with a more specific meaning. He showed us that the particular way in which some of the Corinthian believers were wronging their fellow Christians was by cheating them. The Greek word for cheated is used six times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote four of them. Three of those four occurrences are in this letter. This verb just means to rob or steal. Jesus used it when he was interacting with the rich young ruler in Mark 10:19. When he listed some of the Ten Commandments for this man, he used this word when he reviewed the eighth commandment: “Do not steal.”

So when some of the Corinthian believers were treating their fellow Christians wrongly, they were stealing from them. This statement seems to show that some kind of financial transaction was involved. In other words, one person owed money to the other and wasn’t paying it. This is why Paul mentioned the greedy and the swindlers at the end of the previous chapter. He was pointing forward to the situation that he was about to address in the beginning of chapter 6. But the solution here was not to take this financial

dispute to civil court. Instead the person who was being wronged and cheated needed to find a wise person in the church who could serve as an arbitrator. And if that didn't work for some reason, then the person just needed to be willing to be wronged and cheated. It was better to preserve the church's testimony before the world than to get justice and avoid being mistreated.

But Paul wasn't saying one thing and doing another here. Earlier in this letter he showed that he was leading his readers by example. Look at what he wrote in chapter 4 and verses 11–13: “Up to the present hour we are both hungry and thirsty; we are poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless; we labor, working with our own hands. When we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we respond graciously. Even now, we are like the scum of the earth, like everyone's garbage.” So Paul was willing to be mistreated. He was reviled, persecuted, and slandered, but he didn't repay anyone evil for evil. He blessed his enemies instead of cursing them. He treated them graciously and endured the mistreatment that he was suffering. And that's what the Corinthian believers needed to do as well. If someone in the church stole from them, then they needed to be willing to be cheated if they couldn't get the matter resolved internally.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 6:8, which flows directly from verse 7. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 8: “Instead, you yourselves do wrong and cheat—and you do this to brothers and sisters!” This verse starts with the word “instead,” which indicates a strong contrast. Instead of being willing to be wronged and cheated, the Corinthian believers were wronging and cheating. Paul used the same two Greek verbs that we just saw in verse 7, but this time he used the active voice instead of the passive voice. Now I don't think that Paul was talking about exactly the same people here. In verse 7 he was talking about the people who were being cheated and were filing the lawsuits in court. But in verse 8 he was talking about those who were doing the cheating and were being taken to court.

But Paul wasn't trying to make a clear distinction between these two groups. Instead he was addressing the church as a whole. And he used the emphatic phrase “you yourselves.” This phrase comes from only one word in the original Greek. It's just a simple second person plural pronoun. But when this pronoun is the subject of a verb, it carries a lot of emphasis because it doesn't need to be there. You see, Greek verbs have suffixes to indicate person and number. And so when a verb is first or second person, there's no need for a subject. That's because there's only one word that could be the subject. We have two second person plural verbs here, and so the subject has to be a second person plural pronoun. Now in these cases the pronoun usually isn't there, but Paul included it in this verse! So we should conclude that Paul was using this pronoun to stress the fact that there were people in the Corinthian church who were wronging and cheating others.

Now it's bad enough to wrong and cheat people, but the big problem here was that it was being directed against fellow Christians! And so Paul added an important statement at the end of verse 8: “And you do this to brothers and sisters!” So once more we have an exclamatory statement. We already had one in verse 5 and another one in verse 6. Now we're seeing a third one here in verse 8. Paul was appalled that some of the Corinthian believers were wronging and cheating their brothers and sisters. The phrase “brothers and sisters” comes from one word in the Greek text, and it can be literally translated with the

word “brothers.” That’s what we see in the English Standard Version and the Legacy Standard Bible. And sometimes this Greek word refers only to males. For example, in 1 Timothy 5:1 Paul told Timothy to exhort “younger men as brothers.” But when this Greek word is in the plural, like it is here in 1 Corinthians 6:8, it usually refers to a mixed group that includes both men and women. And I think that’s what Paul intended here. Women could be wronged and cheated just like men, and it was sin in either case.

And obviously Paul was not talking about physical brothers and sisters here. We’ve already seen this Greek word 11 times in the letter, and in each case it refers to a spiritual relationship. We just saw it with this nuance three times in verses 5–6. Paul was stressing to his readers that they were all part of God’s family. And so it was a terrible tragedy that the Corinthian believers were having family squabbles in civil court. We shouldn’t be fighting and arguing with our Christian brothers and sisters anyway. But it’s even worse to have those family squabbles in public for everyone to see. We should want the world to see our love for each other. Jesus said in John 13:35 that this is how people will know we’re his disciples. In 1 John 4:21 the apostle John said that “the one who loves God must also love his brother and sister.” And we’re not showing love to our Christian brothers and sisters if we take them to court before the unrighteous.

But let’s say that you’ve been wronged by a fellow believer, and so you get a wise Christian to arbitrate for you. The person who wronged you agrees to the arbitration, and after the three of you meet, the arbitrator decides that the other person needs to pay you a certain amount of money. But what should you do if that person refuses to abide by the arbitration and pay you that money? Now you could certainly choose not to pursue the matter any further. But we do have recourse through the church discipline process. And we don’t even need to be the one who initiates it. The arbitrator can confront the sinner and plead with that person to repent. And if the sinner refuses to repent at each step in the process, then this person will eventually be removed from the church, and at that point civil court becomes an option.

This solution is how I believe divorce settlements should be handled with two professing believers. The church should intervene and do everything possible to preserve the marriage. And that includes using the church discipline process on one or both of the spouses. But if reconciliation doesn’t happen, then normally at least one of them is going to be removed from the church, and then a divorce settlement can proceed in court. But there may be times when we’re wronged by others and don’t get a favorable decision through arbitration. Or sometimes the church leadership may choose not to pursue church discipline for minor sins. And so in these cases we just need to be willing to be wronged and cheated like Paul said for the sake of our Christian testimony. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God’s help in this area.