

Text: 1 Cor 6.1-11
St Stephen's

Nov 22, 2008
Sun

The Winning in Losing

We take up today the popular subject of lawsuits in the church! I've been waiting for this passage for a long time!!

We are expecting that sometime soon, the national church will file suit against the Diocese for our moves to change our constitution and realign. They have rebuffed any and every effort at negotiations with us and with every other parish and diocese around the country that has sought to realign. Their single response has been to litigate everyone, and they may chose to include us in their lawsuits. This year they have open cases or threatened cases in dozens of instances against individual parishes and whole dioceses who want to move to safer spiritual homes and take their parish buildings with them. Their response is simple and consistent. Reject any efforts at negotiations or mediation. Sue them.

So Paul will have something to say to us today.

But the issue is far larger than our denominational issues. I have known Christians to sue each other with increasing frequency over the years. Sometimes it is people who meet in church, share the same faith, and venture a business partnership together. Then it goes sour, or someone does something the other considers unwise or worse – and the lawsuit is filed.

Increasingly the **courts are the course of first resort** when someone feels they have been wronged. We live in a litigious culture today... You see law firms advertising on TV and billboards, promising that they can get the law to work for you – for no fees unless you win a settlement. And money is their motive.

Over the last fifty years the cost of the U.S. tort system has increased one hundred fold and at current levels, tort costs are equivalent to a 5 per cent tax on wages. Litigation outlays reached 300 billion after 2005, driven by large damage awards.

Civil litigation seems to be an American pastime; you might remember stories about **doctors shutting their practices** because they can't pay medical malpractice insurance premiums. You may have heard some of the famous stories about **frivolous lawsuits**: people suing because they weren't warned that coffee is hot, or lawsuits against McDonalds for selling fast food that makes people fat.

What was it that Ivana Trump said when she was divorcing her famous, billionaire husband? After the famous and lucrative divorce, she made a cameo appearance in "the First Wives club" and her memorable line was, "Remember girls, don't get mad, get everything!" She pretty much did, too!

Corinth was a culture not too unlike modern America in its love for litigation. It had become something of a pastime there as well.

So here we are, and Paul's words might bring a special hope to us today!

When one of you has a dispute with another believer, how dare you file a lawsuit and ask a secular court to decide the matter instead of taking it to other believers!

1 Co 6:1

We don't know too much about the background of this passage, just that someone in Corinth had defrauded a fellow Christian – who responded by taking him to court. The courts in Corinth had become something of a cultural pastime – sort of like **open street theater** played out in the marketplaces of the city where the impromptu sessions were held. If a suit was not able to be settled by arbitration, it was referred to a jury system that could involve juries of 200 or 400 people, depending on the size of the case. The Greeks loved these kind of disputes, and sometimes in Greek cities it seemed like everyone was a lawyer, arguing these cases. News of new cases would sweep the gossip circles, and simple justice or mediation was hard to find.

When Paul hears the Christians have appealed to these courts against each other, he responds with horror, and ends up saying that doing this is not just a **failure of two believers** to reconcile their differences, but also a **failure of the church**.

In this chapter Paul uses a particular phrase some 5 different times. The phrase is, "Don't you know..." – or as the New Living Translation puts it, "Don't you realize..."

- Don't you realize that someday we believers will judge the world? (Vs 2)
- Don't you realize that we will judge angels? (Vs 3)
- Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? (Vs 9)
- Don't you realize that your bodies are actually parts of Christ? (Vv 15-16)
- Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you? (Vs 19)

Paul does this often, and I pointed it out back in September when we looked at chapter 1 that one of the ways to get back on track when you get off track is to **'remember' some things that you have forgotten.**

Have you ever noticed that **your 'rememberer' doesn't work well?** Don't you have a long list of things that people have done to you? You remember every single one of them!!! Never forget!!! But you have forgotten every time they have done something good to you! You remember the things you ought to forget, and you forget the things you want to remember!

That is why Jesus said to do some things, week after week, 'in remembrance of me' – because **our rememberers are broken.** The Corinthians had **broken rememberers.** They kept forgetting important things...

So Paul reminds them...

Remember Your Destiny:

Don't you realize that someday we believers will judge the world?

Don't you realize that we will judge angels?

1 Co 6:2,3

Well, maybe they had forgotten that, and maybe we have, too. What

Paul is saying is that when Christ returns to judge the world, we will share in that task. We aren't given details, just hints – and here alone in the New Testament, a plain statement.

Let me speculate like a fool. Maybe some of us will be the lower courts, to hear the easier cases. Some of us who are wiser will hear the appeals. Maybe the apostles and prophets will be the court of appeals. And the Lord himself is the supreme court. **I don't know, we aren't told** – except that God will trust us in this task, that Jesus will share his authority with us in the judgment of the world. And, Paul adds, in the **judgment of angels.** We are told that.

It is a sober thought. Are you ready for this? Later in his life, Paul would write to Timothy to remind him that **if we endure**, we will **reign** with Christ. This seems to be part of what it means to reign: to discern wisely and judge justly. Enduring the hardships of this life is part of how God gets you ready. Living in his mercy and compassion is how God gets you ready. Learning the ways of the human heart are how God gets you ready. Raising your children is how God gets you ready. Your will help him judge the world. That is part of your destiny, your calling, in eternity ahead.

Then **Paul brings it home:**

Since you are going to judge the world, can't you decide even these little things among yourselves? I am saying this to shame you. Isn't there anyone in all the church who is wise enough to decide these issues?

1 Co 6:2,5

Well, there ought to be, shouldn't there? This is why mediation efforts are so important in broken marriages. It is why peacemaking ministries gained such currency in Christian churches. It is why the Archbishop of Canterbury offered to mediate in the Episcopal Church situation. But both parties must be willing for mediation to have a chance. I'll come back to that thought in a minute.

Paul reminds them of a second issue...

Remember Your Influence

One believer sues another—right in front of unbelievers! Even to have such lawsuits with one another is a defeat for you... you yourselves are the ones who do wrong and cheat even your fellow believers.

1 Co 6:6-8

Paul was intensely conscious of **the impact** of their lawsuits on the Corinthian population. The gospel is about forgiveness and reconciliation and undeserved love – and you are going to sue each other!! And you carry your fight right out into public for every unbeliever to see.

What will they see? What will they hear? What will they remember? Forgiveness and reconciliation and undeserved love? Or will they see something else that undercuts the promise of Christ's death?

To Paul, this was defeat. Sheer defeat for the church and the gospel.

You and I are the only Bible that some people will ever read. And they do read our lives, and our lifestyles.

Note that Paul is **not criticizing them** for a relationship going wrong, a partnership falling through. That someone had defrauded another was not the problem. Those things will happen. **How they handled it was the problem.** No one intervened. No one mediated. They fought it out. A scorched earth fight. A burn it down fight. They wouldn't negotiate. They wouldn't settle. They wouldn't trust it to people in the church who were wise and just. They fought, all the way into the public marketplace, in front of all the people they were trying to lead to faith in Christ, they fought.

If you sit back and ask why they did this – why people today do this – I think you end up in a familiar place. In the middle of conflict like this, when we think that we have been wronged, **it is all about winning.**

Do you remember how **Vince Lombardi** famously said it – the Green

Bay Packer coach who was the winningest coach in NFL history?

"Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." When I grew up, it was, *"It's not whether you win or lose; it's how you play the game."* You don't hear that anymore. We like to win, and winning is the name of the game in sports, in love, in business, in politics, in life.

If winning is the only thing, you will **never know love**. Not real love. You will just be interested in **crushing people**. It is a terrible way to live. There must be a better way. We find it in the next paragraph, where Paul gives us one more thing to remember:

Remember His Grace

Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves... Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

1 Co 6:9,11

This is one of the great paragraphs in the NT, and was the **key passage of my own conversion**. I didn't think I could change, and I didn't think God would forgive me as I was. For some years, I lived under the first sentence: *"those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom"* – and then Paul gives a list of sins that had haunted my world; pride and arrogance and sexual sin and greed and lust and partying and theft and cheating... and the list goes on...

And then look at the underlined phrase from verse 11: *"Some of you were once like that."* When I first saw that, it took my breath away. **There I was**, in the pages of the bible. There I am. And it was the next sentence that made my heart race...

But (I love the word, 'but' – it is one of God's grace words) you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God

But.. when you were wrong, God took it all on himself. Carried it himself.

No matter the cost, no matter the suffering, no matter the pain. Lifted it from you. Washed you. Picked you up on his shoulders and bore you to his own home. He **welcomed you**. And there you were. And here you are.

And now someone has done you wrong. So what will you do? Are you going to sue them? Burn their house down? Humiliate them? Get even? Win at all costs. Don't get mad – get everything!!???

Paul never prohibits the use of courts or the exercise of civic rights. You might remember that he took advantage of his Roman citizenship when he was about to be whipped in Jerusalem, and he appealed to Caesar when he was on trial in Caesarea. His point here is **not to forbid the use of courts**. His point is to open up **a better way**. There is a better way. He puts it in the form of a question in verse 7.

Why not just accept the injustice and leave it at that? Why not let yourselves be cheated?

1 Cor 6.7

Good question. Why not bear the abuse in the name of Jesus and return good for evil? Why not love your enemies? Why not turn the other cheek and go the extra mile?

When you draw near to the mercy of Jesus you find out there is more power in mercy than in judgment. It is at the cross that we learn there is winning in losing.