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1 Corinthians 6:1-11

Ninth Message

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RIGHTING WRONGS IN THE CHURCH

SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Our youngest son, Timothy, is now 21 months old. He has not been a difficult baby. He sleeps well, eats well, and has been fairly compliant. But our darling little boy has discovered his emerging self, and with that discovery comes the addition to his vocabulary of the much treasured word *mine*. It has become one of his favorite words. When he spots something he wants, he simply latches on to it with his viselike grip and yells his favorite word. Deprive him of what he wants and he can go into a rage that would be disastrous were he not so helpless. Yes, my son has been inflicted with “Adam-and-Eve” disease. When sin entered the scene in the garden of Eden, Scripture says that Adam and Eve’s eyes were opened and they knew they were naked. They became self-conscious for the first time. They had never known those feelings before. (We have never known anything else!) So began the campaign to look out for #1.

Obsession with rights doesn’t look so out of place in toddlers. Wise parents understand that bent and train accordingly. However, there is something amiss when it characterizes a church. Such was the situation in the church at Corinth. Whether it concerned marriage, business ethics, food laws, public worship, or exercising their spiritual gifts, there was a “freedom lobby” in Corinth ready to lay claim to their right to do as they choose.

This inevitably led to grudges and grievances which were harbored unendingly between fellow Christians. Resorting to the law-courts was then as now a protracted and expensive business, not calculated at all to improve relationships in the body of Christ. But once a group of Christians becomes obsessed with their rights instead of their responsibilities there will be trouble until they repent.

The Corinthians were proud, competitive, and assertive people. Corinth was a city with uncanny parallels to the Bay Area. In fact we could describe the atmosphere of the city of Corinth in three phrases: intellectually alert, materially prosperous, and morally corrupt. We can identify with those terms. These proud, sometimes wealthy, independent ex-pagans were having a difficult time learning how to live as Christians. It was in their lifestyle, not their theology, where they were confused. Where were the lines to be drawn? How much of one’s culture must be abandoned when one becomes a Christian? Paul’s answers are decisive and direct, and extremely relevant.

Thus, 1 Corinthians is a practical, issue-oriented letter which relates the truth of the gospel to the ethical issues of daily life. Having been immersed in this epistle for many months, I am more convinced than ever that it is indeed a tract for our times. Here the truth of the gospel confronts the intellectually heady, materially prosperous and morally decadent city of Corinth—and ours as well.

This practice of taking one another to court had probably become a regular habit in Corinth. One or two examples would hardly have aroused Paul’s ire so forcefully.

William Barclay wrote:

The Greeks were naturally and characteristically a litigious people. The law-courts were in fact one of their chief amusements and entertainments... In a Greek city every man was more or less a lawyer and spent a very great part of his time either deciding or listening to law cases. The Greeks were in fact famous, or notorious, for their love of going to law. Not unnaturally, certain of the Greeks had brought their litigious tendencies into the Christian church; and Paul was shocked.

In other words, this habit of taking others to court was no different from their giving in to the sexual laxity of the culture; the world was once again influencing the church instead of the church influencing the world.

This particular section of the letter deals with how to handle controversy in the church. In chapter 5 the issue was immorality in the church, and now in chapter 6 we look at how to handle situations where one brother is defrauding another in the congregation.

Verse 1:

Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous; and not before the saints? (1 Cor 6:1 NASB)

“Does any one of you dare to go to law?” That word “dare” is right at the beginning of the sentence in the Greek text, accentuating Paul’s own sense of indignation. He says it is wrong for a Christian to sue another Christian. He is not saying that Christians ought never go to court; sometimes this is impossible to avoid. It may be necessary to settle a claim with a non-Christian in a court. But we ought not to get involved in the litigation process with a brother or sister. It is foolish and shameful.

Paul is not saying that we shouldn’t get involved in the law courts because they are unjust. He is simply saying that there is another way of dealing with the problem of internal affairs. Paul had a high view of the Roman legal system, and he often appealed to it. Once he himself appealed to Caesar, the highest possible court. At another point when he was about to be beaten unjustly, he appealed to Roman law. Thus it is not that Roman law was unjust, but simply that there is a better way to handle these problems. Secular law courts are not the place to settle disputes between Christians.

Using several rhetorical questions, Paul helps the Corinthians see their wrong attitude and reminds them of their responsibilities in this new kingdom. I will summarize Paul’s reasons in four exhortations.

Prohibiting lawsuits among believers: Four important reasons.

I. Do not forget the destiny set before you

Verses 2-4:

Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we shall judge

angels? How much more matters of this life? If then you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? (6:2-4)

The reason that Christians should not to go before secular judges is that they themselves have the capacity to discern justly. We can make righteous judgments; we don't need to go before secular judges. Paul challenges the Christians at Corinth to remember the responsibilities that will come their way when the kingdom of God is fully established. There is a time coming that we will judge both the world and angels. In other words, we will have cosmic discernment. Jesus himself taught his disciples this truth. Peter felt the cost of discipleship after Jesus dealt rather firmly with the rich young ruler. He asked Jesus,

“We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”

Jesus said to them, **“I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”** (Matt 19:27-28 NIV)

Perhaps the apostle was reminded of a passage in Daniel which describes a particularly vivid dream. Daniel 7:9-27:

“As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze... Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.” (Dan 7:9, 27 NIV)

The sheer grandeur of this perspective on the consummation of the kingdom of God, and the part to be played by saints like these Corinthians who were fighting each other, must have been distressing to Paul. We are being prepared to learn to rule righteously. One of the great purposes God has for us here on earth is the skill of correct judgment, of balancing truth and love.

We are to judge angels, says the apostle. Think of that! We don't know much about angels. Scripture says that they give their energies to the worship of heaven (Rev. 5:11-12), and the service of the saints (Heb. 1:14), but they have difficulty understanding the glories of salvation. Peter imagines them peering down from heaven, trying to understand the mysteries of what it means to be redeemed (1 Pet. 1:12). It is our task to communicate this divine wisdom to these angelic beings, and God is preparing a people who will be so capable of delving into the motives of all beings that we will participate with him in judging the angels that have fallen. What a destiny!

Do you see Paul's point? It is ridiculous that those who are being prepared for the difficult task of judging the world and judging angels can't seem to solve these minor problems. The analogy is easy to relate to. It is as if a Supreme Court justice comes home from work to find his children fighting. They can't solve an issue, and he goes next door to find someone who can mediate the situation because he is uncertain that he can deal with the problem; or a mathematician who works with great computers asking his junior high-age son for help in balancing the checkbook.

Knowing our destiny, seeing the end of the matter, it becomes humorous, maybe even blasphemous, to go to court over these trivial

matters. Do not forget your destiny: you are being prepared to judge the world.

II. Do not Overlook the Resources Among You

Verses 5-6:

I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers? (6:5-6)

Here Paul gives the proper procedure for handling problems of this nature. When someone is being defrauded or cheated, or there is an issue that brothers or sister can't work through in the body, the way to handle the situation is to call in another brother, a wise man, a neutral third party who can arbitrate the matter. You don't need to drag all your dirty linen before the non-Christian world. Get two brothers together and appoint a wise man to arbitrate. Whenever relationships become severely strained it is important to bring in those gifted members of the body who can bring the wisdom of God into a situation.

The Scriptures tell us that we have everything we need in the church to express the love of Christ. Paul reminded the Corinthians that as a church they were “enriched with all speech and all knowledge.” We can make subtle moral discriminations the world cannot make. We can perceive things the world cannot see. We can understand things the world cannot understand. We have already seen why this is true. It is not that Christians have some inherent capacity the world doesn't have. We are not more inherently just. Paul's point is that we have the mind of Christ. And that, according to chapter 4, is the Scriptures. God has revealed his perspective on life. He has taught us to focus on the right things and thus to perceive justly. Because we have the Scriptures and because we are aligned with him, we can make righteous judgements.

Human law by its very nature can only deal with relatively trivial and superficial matters. It is restricted to judging actions. There are among us people who are far more competent to settle these problems. I think this alternative ought to be used more often than it is. Elders ought to be called upon when disagreements can't be solved in the body.

Paul says that we have the sort of discernment that is necessary to decide wisely how to handle a problem between two brothers. That is not an arrogant statement. The apostle is not saying that we know something no one else knows. We have that discernment only because God has revealed truth to us, and that truth is available to anyone who will believe it. The problem is that people in the world will not believe it. If you believe, you will have the wisdom to make righteous decisions.

III. Do not Betray the Calling Given You

Verses 7-8:

Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? On the contrary, you yourselves wrong and defraud, and that your brethren. (6:7-8)

Paul implies that they were betraying their calling as saints by the way they were treating one another. They had been called to be saints, called to share in Christ himself, called to know his wisdom and power—to shame the wise and the strong by the quality of their

community life—and here they were living defeated lives, behaving like unconverted pagans and giving in to such basic temptations as resentment and covetousness. They were winning lawsuits—but at each other's expense. Paul says that even if they win, they lose! Whatever the outcome of the legal decision, to go to court with a brother is to incur defeat!

So what are we to do if we cannot work it out and a brother insists that he is right in defrauding us? What do we do when the negotiations break down? Supposing we get them together, bring in a third party to share his wisdom and they are still unable to reconcile? There is hardness of heart. One man insists on his own way, and won't listen to counsel. What do we do?

There is a better way which represents our true calling. Those who have been defrauded or suffered some wrong are to accept it without bitterness. That was the clear teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:38-40:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.” (Matt 5:38-40 NIV)

Even if you take the person to court and get your money or your piece of property back, you have lost because you have diminished yourself. Any time we disobey we lose, no matter what the apparent benefit. Perhaps even more importantly, we lose corporately, as a church, because we are displaying our own disobedience before the world. We ought to be entirely different from the world. If we fight and demand our rights and defraud and cheat one another, we are no different than anyone else. The world will look at us and, like Nietzsche, will declare, “When I see your redeemed life, I will be more inclined to believe in your Redeemer.” Even if you win you lose. Why not be defrauded? From God's perspective people are the most important thing in the universe. We must be willing to be cheated and wronged so as to seek the best for the other person.

Ray Stedman once shared a story concerning Dr. Harry Ironside that had a big influence on Dr. Ironside's life. His mother had taken him to a church meeting when he was eight and he remembered that everyone was discussing some kind of problem going on in the church. He said he didn't remember what it was about, but he did remember that one man stood up, shook his fist, and shouted, “I don't care what the rest of you do. I want my rights! That's all! I just want my rights!” An older man who was hard of hearing was sitting beside the boy. He cupped his hand behind his ear and asked, “Brother, what did you say?” The man repeated his statement a little less forcefully: “All I said was, ‘I want my rights!’” The old man spoke up, “Your rights, brother, is that what you want, your rights? Why, the Lord Jesus didn't come to get his rights. He came to get his wrongs, and he got them.”

We need to remember that we are called to demonstrate a different lifestyle before the world, one in which we are ready to surrender our personal rights for the cause of the gospel and the healing of others. There may come a time when you must accept a wrong done to you in your life without fighting back in order to heal another individual.

David was hunted and oppressed by Saul for many years. Twice during Saul's pursuit of him in the wilderness, David had in it his power to kill Saul. He was the king-elect. His friends told him, “Get him! Kill him! It is the Lord's will. He has brought about this moment.” But David could not do it. He knew that God would defend

him, and at the proper time exalt him. I mention this because most of our counselors, though well-intentioned like David's friends, will care more for your happiness than your obedience.

The difficult people in our lives are starving for genuine love, love that gives even when it hurts. May I ask you a personal and challenging question? Would you be willing to give up your rights so that others might be healed?

This principle demonstrates how radical are the demands of the gospel. I don't know about you, but when I became a Christian I was not aware of how demanding following Jesus was. The demands of Christ's Lordship are radical—prioritizing life from God's viewpoint and seeing the value of people.

IV. Do Not Deny the Power Within You

Verses 9-11:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God. (6:9-11)

Paul goes on to show how fundamentally different our life is because we have come to Christ.

It is a little difficult to see the connection between these verses and what has come before. The word translated “wrong” in v. 8 is from the same root as the word “unrighteous” in v. 9. It could be translated:

On the contrary you yourselves *act unrighteously* and defraud, and that your brothers. Or do you not know that those who *act unrighteously* will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul is saying that if I act unrighteously toward my brother, cheat him, wrong him, insist upon my rights, and not care how it affects him, then I may not be a Christian at all.

Now he is not talking about failing once or twice, or saying that if I do act this way, I will lose my salvation. He is saying that if this is a pattern of life, that I continually step over people to acquire what I want, then it is possible that I am deceiving myself and I may not be a believer. He is not saying that we cannot fall into these sins periodically as Christians, because we can and do. But you cannot go on justifying this kind of lifestyle. It is not Christian.

When you look at Paul's list of those who are excluded from the kingdom, it is very inclusive. It includes not only those who are dominated by immoral sexual lust, but those who are dominated by the lust for things as well—the greedy and covetous.

Let me say that when Paul refers to the “effeminate and homosexuals,” he is not talking about homosexual tendencies, but of behavior. These words refer to male prostitutes and homosexual offenders. Homosexuality was rampant in the Roman world. Fourteen of the first fifteen Roman Emperors practiced it.

That word *thieves* means “petty pilferers, sneak thieves.” The worst places of attack were the bath houses and the gymnasium. Thieves would steal the clothes of those who were exercising and bathing. It became so bad that this became a capital offense, punishable by death. Some things never change, do they? We are an acquisitive

society, and the need for protection of all kinds has made security big business.

And such were some of you...

Paul's point is that it is all in the past. We are different now. For all of their so-called knowledge, the Christians at Corinth had lost sight of the centrality of Jesus Christ, the controlling power of the Holy Spirit, and the life transforming experience of having been called and saved by God.

There are few more exciting and energizing statements in the New Testament than this phrase: And such were some of you.

When we recall the moral cesspool that Corinth was, we can appreciate the wonder and beauty of that statement. No power on earth could have produced such a transformation in this motley collection of believers. Every single individual rescued from that list of vices is a trophy of God's grace. Every Corinthian Christian is living evidence that God's answer to sophisticated Greek culture was not clever arguments but changed lives.

...but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified...

Something had happened. They were no longer caught up and bound by that way of life. All three verbs are in the past tense. They refer to something that has already happened.

We have been washed, we have been sanctified, we have been justified. The proof of Christianity lies in its power—power to take the dregs of humanity and make them into glorified beings; to take one who is lost in shame and make him a son of God. There are people in this room who are proof positive of the re-creating power of God. God taking lives and making them brand-new. That is the glory of Christianity.

We like to play Monopoly at our house. It's nice to feel the sense of power that comes with owning hotels and motels. It's nice to know when someone rolls a seven that they're going to have to pay you. But once the game is over, and the board is folded up, it's back to real life once again. I don't own any hotels. I don't own all those cars. I'm just a normal person. That is what life is like. The Lord lets us play with some money for awhile and then the time comes when we must fold the whole game up, then we will see what you are really worth. What is really important to you and me? The real test is what do we really value above everything else? And if it is people and investing in people's lives, then we will be willing to be defrauded. What is a human life worth—\$100, \$100,000, \$1,000,000? It is worth the life of the Lord Jesus. God is creating a people for his name's sake, a glorified people who will be able to demonstrate before a hurting world how humanity was designed to live. That is our calling as Christians.

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