

1 CORINTHIANS 6.1-11

Taking Each Other To Court... And Loosing!

INTRO: Chapter 5 concluded with Paul discouraging judgment of outsiders while saying that sinners in the church should be judged (5.12).

Interestingly, chapter 6 begins with showing that not only had they failed to judge the sinners in the church, they were actually taking each other to court to outsiders! “Everything in this church is in reverse order. If the church does not “judge” those outside, neither does it go outside with inside affairs.” (Gordon Fee)

We’ve noted that pride and arrogance were at the root of the Corinthians’ problems, whether their divisive behavior or their boasting in sin. So, we should not be surprised that pride was involved in this matter as well. However, to understand what was taking place, we need to look at the cultural context.

LAWSUITS IN GREEK / ROMAN SOCIETY

(Summarized from David E Garland in the Baker Exegetical Commentary)

1. The courts were weighed in favor of the wealthy and men of higher social ranking. “The poor always had the cards stacked against them in the courtroom. Pliny the Younger (Ep. 9.5) commends the new governor of Baetica in Spain regarding his administration of justice for ‘maintaining consideration for the best men.’ He advises him to continue to ‘maintain the distinctions between ranks and degrees of dignity.’ Social standing weighted the scales of justice; and if that did not work, bribery could tip the balance.” (Garland)
2. Men of high social ranking used the courts as a tool to maintain their status. “Persons of high status were prone to settle disputes through litigation. They had the upper hand in the courts because they could capitalize on their influence and wealth and could enhance their own reputation by injuring their opponent’s

or increase their wealth with legal conquests. The lower classes were restricted from doing so since they were unlikely to win against stacked odds.” (Garland)

3. Lawsuits were nasty affairs (some things never change). “The aim of the ancient lawsuit was to prevail over another, and that usually involved an assault on the opponent’s character.” (Garland)
4. With this background information, it seems likely that the lawsuits were related to the factionalism in the church, part of which we will see in chapter 11 was based on economic standing. It would see that those who were wealthy in the congregation were using the courts to beat down their opponents. Furthermore, evidence in the chapter would indicate that these suits were over small matters (as indicated by the words used for “smallest law courts” in vs. 2 and “matters of this life” in vs. 3). So, it may have been that these small slights were being used by the powerful to beat down their opponents and secure higher rank for themselves in the church.
5. This helps clear up some of our own questions about this chapter and how it applies to us.
 - » First, this chapter does not apply to criminal offenses. The language of the chapter clearly shows that civil cases (and probably small ones) are under consideration. Furthermore, Paul’s words in Romans 13.1-5 show that God has given government the authority to “bear the sword” in criminal cases.
 - » Second, this chapter does not preclude the involvement of the law in matters between brethren. For instance, if there is a wreck in our parking lot two brethren can make use of their insurance to settle any damages that occur. Such will require the involvement of law. Matters involving the

exchange of property, inheritance, etc. will all involve the law and need not fall under what Paul is considering here.

- » However, this isn't to say that this chapter doesn't have much to say to us. It certainly does, particularly regarding our attitude toward each other.

VSS. 1-6, HOW THESE SITUATIONS SHOULD BE HANDLED

1. The situation is described in vs. 1. You will note that Paul doesn't say a wrong wasn't committed or that the situation doesn't need to be resolved, even though it's clear in vss. 7-8 that Paul was not happy with those who thought themselves to "be in the right".
2. Paul's issue was that these matters were not being handled within the church, but brought before "the unrighteous." It is doubtful that Paul was referring to civil judges as unrighteous in character (although their penchant for taking bribes made them unrighteous), but in reference to their standing outside of God's people, the righteous.
3. The church should have been able to handle these matters! (vss. 2-6)
 - » After all, the saints will judge the world and even angels! While it is God who will judge the world (Romans 3.6), our status as reigning with Christ (2Tim 2.12; Rev. 22.5) means that we "judge" with Him.
 - » Paul's point is plain: if we will one day "judge" all things, how can we not take care of these small matters?
 - » The fact that they were unable to do this was to their shame (vs. 5). After all, for a group that boasted so much in wisdom, how could they not have a wise person among them to decide these cases?
 - » You will also note that Paul uses the term "brethren" once and "brother" twice in vss. 5-6. Had they forgotten that they were a family, that families should be able to take care of things within the family? The Lord's words in Matthew 18.15-18 must have been on Paul's mind.

VSS. 7-11, THE REAL TRAGEDY

1. Having the dirty laundry of the church aired out in the public is bad enough, but the real tragedy is addressed in these verses.
2. The Christian attitude and character found in Matthew 18 was completely absent in these believers! They were wronging and defrauding each other (I believe this is aimed at the men who were bringing their "opponents" to court). They should have been willing to be wronged instead! After all, that was the attitude of Jesus (1Peter 2.23) and of Paul (1Cor 4.12-13).
3. Thus, this situation was a "defeat" for them. Interestingly, this term is the same word used for loss in a lawsuit. So, they were suing each other to gain something physically, but they were losing spiritually and morally.
4. Vss. 9-11 show them their spiritual danger. The unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom! They had once been unrighteous, but had been saved by God's grace. Implied is that they are in grave danger of being considered unrighteous again!
 - » This makes an important point about our attitude toward others and our treatment of them. Injustice is a serious matter, on par with sexual sins, sins that we emphatically warn others against. "The people of God frequently have trouble recognizing that injustice is as serious a sin as incest and other sexual misconduct and that it warrants the very same punishment (cf. Jer. 7:8-15)." (Garland)
5. Finally, this passage speaks to the necessity of Christians becoming the new creatures God intends for them to be! "Their former life was to be just that, their former life...God's grace does not mean that God benignly accepts humans in all their fallenness, forgives them, and then leaves them in that fallenness. God is in the business not of whitewashing sins but of transforming sinners." (Garland)