

THE WRONG WAY TO RIGHT WRONGS

by Ray C. Stedman

The Apostle Paul is dealing with the problem of lawsuits among brethren in this passage from First Corinthians 6. Just last week, I picked up a current issue of a Christian magazine and read a report concerning two Christian organizations that are both involved in smuggling Bibles behind the Iron Curtain. They are now suing each other before the courts in libel actions for damages. As I read the article I could not help but wonder if they had spent any time reading the Bibles they smuggle, because here in this passage Paul very clearly says that kind of thing among believers is very definitely wrong.

The apostle seems almost to change his subject in this section. In Chapter 5, which we looked at last week, remember that he was talking about immorality and lust and its problems in the church at Corinth. He dealt with a very serious case of incest that was widely known in the congregation there. In the closing part of Chapter 6 he returns to that subject, and deals with prostitution in Corinth and the Christians' relationship to that problem. But in between you have this section, the first eleven verses of Chapter 6, dealing with lawsuits among brethren.

Perhaps somebody is saying, "Well, what has that got to do with lust?" The answer, of course, is that it has everything to do with it because it is a form of lust. Lawsuits usually arise out of greed, out of covetousness, out of a desire to retain certain material benefits. Therefore, a lawsuit is an attempt to force another person to yield to you what you regard as you "right," and this is really another form of lust.

The dictionary definition of lust is: "Any obsessive craving or desire." So you can see how someone who is greedy, grasping, and determined to hang onto his "rights" -- especially regarding material matters -- is guilty of some form of lust, of making "things" more important than people. That is the problem here.

These first eleven verses divide very naturally into three subdivisions.

- The first thing the apostle says is lawsuits among brethren are stupid; they are ridiculous; they are foolish.
- Second, he says, lawsuits are shameful.
- Finally, Paul says they even raise suspicions as to the spiritual state of the ones involved.

Notice how he brings in this subject, Verse 1:

When one of you has a grievance against a brother, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, matters pertaining to this life! {1 Cor 6:1-3 RSV}

The apostle does not use the word *stupid* here, but his implication is that these people are very foolish for doing what they are doing. They were obviously engaging in lawsuits, dragging them before the Roman courts, and having all their quarrels and dirty linen washed in public and settled by a secular court. This, the apostle says, is foolish, and he has two reasons for implying this.

First, he implies that it is an act of audacious boldness: "Dare any one of you having a grievance against his brother take it to a law court to settle?" His clear implication is that this is an audacious act; it is an outrageous act; it is a bold, daring thing to do. Paul implies that, of course, by the word he uses -- that one who does such is uncaring; he has reached the point where he does not care what anybody thinks or feels and he is acting regardless of the injuries that may be done to others.

Paul then suggests, in the two questions he asks, that anybody who does such a thing is really an ignorant person: "Do you not know that the church is going to judge the world, and do not you know that the church is going to judge angels?"

In this chapter there are six occasions where the apostle asks the question, "Do you not know?" This is a little quiz he gives as to our theological knowledge, and he always bases our behavior on what we know or do not know about theology. (If you would like to take this little test, I suggest you do this. Years ago I gave this to some high school kids and most of them flunked it. Even though they had been going to church for years they did not know the answers to Paul's questions.)

These questions he asks imply a certain degree of knowledge that the Corinthians ought to have had. "Do you not know," he says, "that the saints will judge the world?" Surely he is referring to those passages both in the Gospels and in the Epistles where we are clearly told that when the Lord returns the saints are going to share the throne of judgment with him. We are to rule and to reign with Christ, and we are, therefore, entering into judgment with him. Now, just how we will do this we are never told. We are not told whether we are all assigned a little throne to sit on, and have a certain number of people come to us, or whether we divide up according to the alphabet, (I doubt that.) We are, however, to enter into the mind and heart of God as he examines the motives and hearts, the thoughts and innermost desires and urges of men. In Chapter 4, remember, Paul said that we are not to judge before the Lord comes who will examine the motives, the hidden things of the heart. But we are learning how to do that, and that is the point Paul is raising here.

He does not mean to put down the systems of justice that were practiced in that day or any day. Paul admired and honored Roman law -- he himself called upon it for defense on occasion -- but he is saying that human law by its very nature has to deal with trivial, superficial things, with actions, and not with urges and deep, hidden desires and motives.

If you are familiar at all with law courts you know that is true. The law specifically prohibits the jury or the judges or the defense attorneys or anyone from probing too deeply into motives. Intent has to be established, but they cannot presume to judge why people act the way they do. The law is restricted to judging the actions as to whether they are injurious to others or not. Therefore, human law is at a rather shallow level of judgment.

Paul is saying, "If you are learning during the course of your life" (presumably this is what we ought to be learning), "how to go deeper than actions, how to understand what is going on deep in the psyche of individuals, and why they act the way they do, and what is wrong and right about those feelings and urges and desires within you, then surely you ought to be competent to judge these simple cases that deal with the actions of human beings among yourselves without taking them to a court of law."

Then the apostle goes even further and says, "Do you not know that we are to judge angels?" Just think of that! We do not know much about angels. They are beings of a higher order than we are. They are not only different in culture, they are different in their very nature than we, and yet the amazing statement of Scripture is that God is preparing a people who are going to be so capable of delving into the motives, and hidden desires, and urges of all beings, that some day they will sit with him in judging the angels that have fallen.

There are two references in the New Testament to the judgment of angels. We are reminded in Second Peter that, "God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of nether gloom to be kept until the judgment," {2 Pet 2:4 RSV}. And in the little book of Jude we are also told about "... the angels that did not keep their own position but ... have been kept by him in eternal chains ... until the judgment of the great day," {cf, Jude 1:6}. Therefore it is the duty of all believers to learn how to judge -- that is one of the major reasons we are here on earth.

You can see Paul's argument then: "Is it not rather ridiculous that you people who are going to have to deal in such difficult and hidden and subtle matters as the judgment of the world and of angels cannot even settle these little squabbles among yourselves?" It is almost like having a mathematician who works with those great computers call in a ninth-grader and ask him for help to balance his checkbook. It's ridiculous, isn't it? So Paul's argument is that it is stupid to have lawsuits between brothers.

I do not think he means that Christians are never to go to law; sometimes that is impossible to avoid. If a lawsuit is brought against you, it may be necessary for you to defend it. In certain cases, at least, this may be the only way that justice can be brought out. Certainly Paul is not saying that it is impossible or wrong for Christians to settle claims with non-Christians before courts of law. It is between believers that it is wrong to go to law.

Paul himself on one occasion stood on his rights as a Roman citizen and appealed to appear before the court of Caesar to have his case settled there. This indicates that it is not always wrong for a Christian to go to law.

But Paul is not through yet. He says that lawsuits between brothers are shameful, Verse 4:

If then you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who are least esteemed by the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no man among you wise enough to decide between members of the brotherhood, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?

To have lawsuits at all with one another is defeat for you. Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud, and that even your own brethren. {1 Cor 6:4-8 RSV}

You can almost hear the shocked tone of voice that is the apostle's here. He cannot believe that these Corinthians will actually forsake the cause of Christ to this degree.

There are four things that Paul points out:

The first is that lawsuits are shameful because they stoop to a lower level of judgment. I have already, in a sense, touched on that, but Verse 4 is a little difficult to translate because the Greek allows for three possible meanings of it. That is why some of your versions may differ from what I am reading here.

According to the Greek, it could be an imperative statement, i.e., the apostle is giving a command. It could read this way, "You Christians, lay these matters before those who are least esteemed in the church." But that seems to be rather senseless, because who would want to lay a difficult, troubling matter before somebody who is the least esteemed, the least respected in the congregation? So the translators have chosen, rather, to take one of the other alternatives.

One of these is that this could be an indicative statement, i.e., Paul is just saying what is going on: "You are laying these matters before those who are least esteemed in the church." But that suffers from the same drawbacks as the first one, so the translators have almost all chosen the third alternative which is that this is a question; it is interrogative: "Why do you do this?" Paul is questioning that, and what he means by "those who are least esteemed by the church" is a reference to the secular judges who are presiding over the courts of law in the world. He does not mean to dishonor them, as I have already said. He recognizes the limits of human law, but he is saying that a secular judge who does not understand the relationship of one Christian to another, who has no concept of the Fatherhood of God and the family life of believers, who does not understand that we are members one of another, and who does not see our relationship to Christ is, therefore, not to be highly esteemed as a judge of matters concerning believers. That is all he is saying.

And then he goes further yet. He says these judgments and these lawsuits between believers ignore a possible alternative that could be adopted.

What are you going to do if this should happen to you -- you have an agreement with someone who is a brother in Christ and he ends up owing you money, and he has the money to pay it but he chooses to use it for other reasons? Well, the world would say, "Take him to court; take him to the law." That is what the courts are for -- to force him to pay money that he has agreed to pay. You can get your rights that way.

But that is the very thing the apostle says is not right for Christians. In fact, he says, when you do this you are passing by an alternative, and he suggests it here: "Can it be that there is no man among you wise enough to

decide between members of the brotherhood? Why do you not select somebody in the congregation who understands the whole matter of relationships among Christians and ask him, or perhaps a group of people, to decide for you?"

I am amazed at how little this is practiced today!

I have been involved in a couple of instances where I have been asked to serve in this capacity, but it is very rare. Yet I think it is something that ought to be more common than it is. Elders ought to expect to be asked to serve in this capacity. It is not that there will not be disagreements among Christians. They will come, and they do need to be adjudicated. But the apostle's point is that you have people available far more competent to settle these than any secular law or court would be because they understand things more deeply and more truly than any of the secular judges could. Therefore, he suggests, why not do that?

Then Paul has still a third thing to say about this, Verse 7: "To have lawsuits at all with one another is defeat for you." No matter who wins the lawsuit, the gospel is still going to suffer. In the case of these two Christian organizations I mentioned that are going to law with one another, it really does not make any difference which one wins. As far as the cause of Christ is concerned it has already been degraded in the eyes of the watching world; no matter who wins the case, there are people that have been turned off already by the fact that believers are fighting each other in this open, aggressive way.

What a lawsuit says to the watching world is, "You Christians are no better than we are; you do not have anything different than we have. You have to have a judge come and settle matters between you and force one to do the right thing. What have you got to offer us?"

The last thing Paul says is that there is still another alternative: "Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud, and that even your own brethren." What he is suggesting here is that these matters that are brought for settlement cannot be all that important when you consider the damage and injury that would be done by bringing them to secular court to settle. After all, what is the loss of a few hundred dollars or a thousand dollars, or a hundred thousand dollars, if the whole cause of Christ and the gospel is going to lose attractiveness in the eyes of those who need it in the world around?

So Paul calls the Corinthians back to an awareness of what they do as believers in the eyes of others when they give way to these aggressive, self-centered, self-serving defensive methods which insist on getting their rights at all costs.

I have mentioned this incident before, but there are many here who have not heard it. I will never forget the time when Dr. H. A. Ironside, with whom I have traveled, told me of an incident in his own life as a Christian. When he was only eight years old, or so, his mother took him to a meeting of the Brethren who were discussing some kind of difficulty among themselves. Evidently there was some terrible injustice that one felt others had done. Young Harry Ironside did not know what the trouble was, but it was clear they were deeply disturbed. He said that one man stood up and shook his fist and said, "I don't care what the rest of you do. I want my rights! That's all! I just want my rights!"

There was an old half-deaf Scottish brother sitting in the front row, and he cupped his hand behind his ear and asked this man, "Aye, brother, what's that ye say?" And the fellow said, "Well, all I said was that I want my rights. That's all." The old man said, "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." Harry Ironside said, "I'll always remember how that fellow stood transfixed for a little while. Then he dropped his head and said, 'You're right, brother, you're right. Settle it any way you like.'" And in a few moments the whole thing was settled.

What we should never forget is that, as believers, we are called to demonstrate a different life style before the world, one in which we are ready to surrender personal rights for the cause that we serve. Paul is going to develop this more and more in this letter. There is nothing more characteristic of a believer than his willingness to surrender, even at his own cost and hurt, some personal right so that the cause of the gospel may prevail.

After the 8:30 service this morning I was chatting with a Christian businessman and he told me how, when somebody accused him of overcharging or of taking advantage in business, he has made it a practice all of his life to say to them, "Well, how much is involved?" When he learned the amount he would say, "Well then forget it. I don't want that money. I don't agree with you, but if you feel it is yours I would rather you had the money than to fight with you." And it would shock the individual involved and oftentimes open a door for a witness that he had never opened up to anyone before. This is what Paul says is so important.

But he is still not through. He has a third thing to say, Verse 9:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals [sexual pervers], not thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. {1 Cor 6:9-11 RSV}

What ties this section with that which has gone before is found in the word in Verse 8, "But you yourselves wrong," and the word in Verse 9, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?" Those are the same basic root words. What Paul is really saying is, "Look, when you are so aggressive in defense of your own rights that you take another brother to law before a secular court, you are wronging that brother. Even though you may be right in your cause, you are wronging your brother, and that wronging, that unjust action, gives rise to the question, 'Have you yourself ever been justified before God?'" That is what Paul is saying. To treat another unjustly makes one ask if you have ever been justified, and he says the unjustified, the unrighteous, the unregenerate cannot inherit the kingdom of God if they are committed to these things that he lists as a life style.

Now he surely does not mean that those who have been involved in these things cannot be saved, for he goes on to say, "such were some of you"; they have come out of it. But what he is saying, very clearly, is that these things cannot be continued as a lifestyle for Christians. Conversion makes a visible difference, and if it does not, there is room to question whether there has ever been a conversion.

You recall that incident in the Gospels {cf, Luke 19:1-10} when Jesus came into Jericho and he saw Zacchaeus, the tax collector, up in a tree, Jesus called him down and went to his home for lunch and afterwards Zacchaeus came out and began to give away his money. He began to repay those from whom he had stolen, and repay them not only the amount he had stolen, but four times as much. Nobody has ever doubted that Zacchaeus was converted from that day on -- it changed his whole life. His attitude changed so completely that his behavior began to alter almost immediately. This is what Paul is saying.

This morning we read together the passage Paul writes to Timothy where he says: "God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' [that is God's side of it. He reads the heart, but you and I cannot see that. The way we tell is:] Let every one who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity," {2 Tim 2:19 RSV}. That is the way you tell if somebody is a believer in Christ. To try to go on living in a lifestyle involving any of these things -- fornication, idolatry, adultery, homosexuality, thieving, greediness, alcoholism, reviling, stealing, robbing, etc. -- all of these are entirely incompatible and inconsistent with a Christian profession. Those who go on living this way are simply giving testimony that they have never become a Christian.

Notice how Paul closes this on a rather practical and positive note: "Such were some of you." He says, "I know there must be some among you, and because you are carrying it this far and getting involved in lawsuits, etc., you are really giving testimony that you never were changed, but that is not true of most of you. Such were some of you." "But," he says, "the rest of you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus. Therefore, I can count on the fact that you are going to change your way of approach to life."

He then lists the three things that make the change, not in the order of their experience, but in reverse order.

1. It really begins with justification, "You were justified," he says. "You came to the place where you quit trying to earn anything from God, to earn your salvation. You acknowledged the fact that Christ had paid it for you in your place, and on the basis of your trust in what he had done for you God counted you righteous; God gave you the gift of acceptance before him, and you were justified.
2. Then that began the process by which you were sanctified. The Holy Spirit began to speak to you about the need to change your attitude and your behavior."

I was with a couple just last night and they were telling me about how they were married in Soledad Prison shortly after becoming Christians. They were in there involved with drugs and all kinds of evil things, but their attitude was so changed by this conversion experience that all that they had once done -- though it still had a hold on them in some ways and they struggled with it -- was offensive and repulsive to them. The woman put it in a very straightforward way. She said, "When I think of all the things I did, it was 'yuk' to me!" That is being sanctified.

3. Finally, there is a washing. You actually change your behavior; you start acting differently. This is what was happening here in Corinth. These people were behaving quite differently. They had actually been cleansed by the change in their heart, made, Paul says, by the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Now that is what conversion is all about. That is what Christianity is all about. It is clear from this whole passage that the testimony of Christians before the watching world is that of showing a loving concern for others instead of ourselves. The selfish spirit of, "I've got to have my rights at all costs" is broken within us, and we are even willing to suffer loss and be defrauded that the name of Christ may be advanced. That is what makes the world begin to sit up and take notice. When people do not see that attitude they tend to say, "Your gospel is no different than anything we've got, so we're not interested in it."

Well, did I miss anybody? If I did not hit you this morning, raise your hand and I will be glad to have a little private session with you.

That gets us all, does it not? It sure gets me.

But what a forthright and faithful word. How it lifts us above the petty squabbles we can get involved in to see the whole cause of Christ, and what our individual actions can do to that cause in the world.

Prayer

Father, teach us now by this word to understand more thoroughly the great sweep of Scripture extending even beyond this life where we are learning things and principles that we will be putting into practice in the life to come. Help us to understand that we need to already begin to live in terms of that world, and that life, and thus manifest to the watching world around us a totally new life style. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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By: Ray C. Stedman

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