

FOOLISH JUDGMENT

By Steve Zeisler

There is a lot of bad advice being offered people today. For example, to say that "Ignorance is bliss" is just not in accordance with the facts. Here is another piece of bad advice: "What you don't know won't hurt you." Deliberately avoiding the truth is foolish, of course.

The church in Corinth was famous for allowing the appearance of things to sway them and thus avoid reality. In his first letter to the church at in that city, the apostle Paul has been at pains to say that the "secret and hidden wisdom of God" is far more powerful than the wisdom of man for all its flashy appearance. Paul has been castigating the Corinthians for living like kings in proud self-estimation at the same time that the apostles themselves were being reviled and misunderstood by the world. The Corinthians loved the appearance, not the reality, of things.

In our study in chapter 6 of the letter this morning, we will encounter the first three of six questions put in this section in which the apostle repeatedly asks, "Do you not know?" "Are you not aware," he is asking the Corinthians, "of truths which you need to understand in order to live life?" Paul is confronting these believers with truth which up to now they have been avoiding.

What do you see every time you look into a mirror? Do you realize what it means to be transformed by the Spirit of God so that you no longer are what you once were? Do you know your destiny now that you are in Christ? These are the questions which should come to mind when you stand before your mirror in the morning. If you are a Christian, what you see growing before you is a young Solomon. All of the ancient world came to Solomon in order to hear the wisdom that comes from God; they came for understanding and for judgment. But Christians are being prepared to judge the whole world, the angels, and everything in the life to come. Knowing the mind of God, we are to sit rendering judgment as magistrates, so intimate are we with the mind and heart of our Creator. That is our destiny.

These are the issues which Paul has in mind as he addresses this series of questions to his readers in this chapter of Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 6:1-8:

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? Are 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?

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? 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.

Both of the "Do you not know?" questions which the apostle asks in verses 2 and 3 make essentially the same point. "Do you not know," he asks his readers, "that your destiny is to serve your heavenly Father in judging the world to come?" As a parent, when you judge a difference of opinion between your three- and

five-year-olds, as mundane as that process may seem to you now, you should be aware that God is using that action to prepare you to one day judge galaxies. For months, our political leaders have been unable to agree on a man with the qualifications to serve as a Supreme Court justice. Yet all around us here in this building are sitting people whom God is developing into judges for the purpose of adjudicating in eternity. That is why Paul must ask the Corinthians, and us, the question, "Don't you know what you are being fitted for?"

Apparently the Corinthians were in the habit of hauling one another before the Roman courts to achieve what they deemed to be their rights. The name of Christ was thereby dishonored by their inability to solve their problems among their own family. It is nothing short of a travesty that brothers and sisters in Christ must resort to the laws of a pagan nation to resolve differences.

There is another, far better way of doing things. Just last week I talked with two Christian men, one of whom had bought a car from the other. I was struck by the fact that each of them desired that the other benefit as much as possible from the deal. They even spoke to the elders of this church at one point to discern if PBC could benefit from the transaction. The entire thing was done with a beauty and an honesty that was truly Christian--just the way brothers should treat one another.

On the other hand, all too often I have witnessed occasions in which Christian brothers fought and disputed over business deals. Their main concern seemed to be their own rights; whether they were being cheated and what was in it for them. To resolve their differences they at last resorted to the courts of the land. On other occasions I have seen Christian offspring fight over their inheritance from their parents. As far as the cause of Christ is concerned, probably the saddest circumstances in recent years has been the recent and ongoing squabble over the PTL ministry. There have been lawsuits and threats of lawsuits, investigations by the IRS, charges and counter-charges as this debacle has unfolded. This is what happens when Christians demand their rights and neglect to arbitrate their differences in the context of their own family.

If, as Paul says, Christians should not seek to resolve their differences in the public arena, what should they do? The apostle makes the point in verse 7 that Christians have already suffered defeat if they don't get along with each other; the fact that they even have lawsuits is an indication that they have already lost. They should be willing to forfeit their rights rather than go to court and air their disputes in public. That is the attitude that ought to prevail on every side so that nothing be allowed to come between believers.

In 4:11, the apostle demonstrated that he himself practiced what he preached: "To this present hour we [the apostles] are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands, when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now." When the apostles were reviled, they tried to conciliate; when they were slandered, they sought a way to make things right; when they were taken advantage of in Christ's name, they endured. They had no interest in getting what they perceived to be their due; rather they worked with their hands, seeking ways to bless others.

The first problem which the Corinthians had was that they allowed themselves to become involved in disputes. They would be better off if they had allowed themselves to be defrauded. But if they insisted on competing among themselves over matters involving property, investments or whatever, could they not at least bring their disputes before a mature believer who would serve as adjudicator for them? "Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren,...?" asks the apostle in this regard (Verse 5).

Thirdly, the apostle expressed his outrage at their arrogance. 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?" Why were they so willing to deny the presence of Christ among them and the training they were getting for their future task of judging the world? We sense Paul's outrage over this travesty.

I asked a Christian lawyer friend to think about this chapter, and he responded by sharing some of his thoughts with me. California, he told me, is the most litigious society in the world. Here in the city of Palo Alto, he said, there is one lawyer for every ten people. He described to me how disillusionment soon sets in in people

who come to him for counsel. They arrive with eyes flashing, teeth and claws bared, ready to defend to the last their viewpoint. But they become disillusioned because the system just doesn't work the way they imagined.

Our legal system is deliberately arranged so that adversaries have to compete with one another under certain rules of the game. People hire the best gunslinger available and proceed to fight to the end, with never a thought for their adversary's position or well-being. Adversaries seek to defend their own territories with all their might, with the hope that at some stage in the process justice will prevail and they will get their due. Thus the process is deliberately designed to be adversarial. For the unregenerate, that is probably the best system. Following a fair fight, justice hopefully should prevail.

But how different would be the result if Christians involved in a dispute would only take their problems to a wise brother. As the adversaries and their Christian mediator sit down together, they would do so as brothers in the same Lord. Very soon, a concern for justice for both sides would become apparent, not just personal interest in what is due one or the other. As the name of Christ is paramount, the mediator's sole concern will be for what is true, honest, and God-honoring.

Christians whose only concern is for their own rights, however, want no part of this kind of program. They would rather partake of a system that allows them to fight and claw for their rights. Any thought of being gracious, honest and loving toward their brother with whom they are in dispute never enters their heads. To the immature, a fight, not a reconciliation, is a much more acceptable thing. That, however, as we have seen, is not the biblical way to resolve disputes among believers.

In summary, Paul is saying that Christians are better off being defrauded than fighting for their rights. If, however, they must dispute over a certain matter, then they should not go public with it in the courts of the land and thereby bring the name of the Lord into disrepute. They would be much better off taking their problem to a wise, godly and impartial believer and seek his wisdom in solving the problem.

In verse 9 we discover what unchecked arrogance and insisting on one's rights leads to. 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 idolators, 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.

Here is the third of the "don't you know" questions which Paul asks of the Corinthians. "Do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?" In their insistence on having their own rights realized they were in danger of becoming one or more of the people on the list which the apostle sets out in verse 9: a fornicator, an idolator, an adulterer, a drunkard, a reviler, a swindler, a homosexual, etc. People who insisted on demanding their rights were in danger of becoming like those who determined to leave God completely out of their lives. Such people were declaring by their actions that they had never come to Christ in the first place.

But Paul does not merely say, "the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God," and then stop. He recognizes that although people may become all of these terrible things, it is equally true that they can be rescued from such a fate. In the Corinthian church there were people from all of the categories of sinners Paul mentions. "Such were some of you before you were washed and sanctified and justified," says Paul.

In his asking the question, "Do you not know," the apostle is saying, "Don't you know how terrible it is to let yourself become this, without the touch of God in your life. Don't you realize further that when you were saved, you gave up being that kind of person, becoming instead one who is 'in Christ'? You are no longer, by definition, any of the things on this list. You have been washed. You are no longer unclean. You have been sanctified. Therefore you must no longer consider yourself useless. And you have been justified. You are no longer guilty." If you have ever felt dirty, useless or guilty, the word of Scripture here is that, once you came

to Christ, you are no longer what you once were. "Such were some of you..."

In these verses the apostle focuses again (having spoken of incest in chapter 5) on matters dealing with sexuality. The Bible declares that our sexuality is given to us as a good gift by our loving Creator. If we do not use it in a godly fashion, however, it can take over our lives and wreak havoc in our experience. Having said that, though, it is good to remember that our sexuality was created by God, and that it is given to us as a gift. It is in fact that extraordinary power by which husbands and wives are propelled towards intimacy with each other. The barriers to real intimacy are so imposing that, were it not for our sexuality (what Ray Stedman calls "the urge to merge"), we might stay isolated forever. It propels us along. As John White says, eroticism is a "pathway to the end of aloneness." That's what sexuality is for. It is to be the servant of intimacy, of our marriages, of our growth into one flesh at every level--spiritual, emotional, intellectual.

While our sexuality may bring us there, it is designed to serve a greater reality, and that is, oneness. I have often wondered why God made sexuality so potent and so filled with potential for pain. People have always chosen to build their towns and cities by great rivers. A source of fresh water is necessary for growing crops. That is where mineral deposits are made, etc. Growth and life are historically found by great rivers. But rivers also have great potential for destruction. Floods and drowning accidents, to name but a couple, are hazards of living by bodies of water.

Our sexuality can also be hazardous. We all live with temptation toward sexual sin. The tempter has many different approaches to incline us toward this kind of sin. Some sin by denial and frigidity (Paul will speak on this in chapter 7), while others give free vent to their sexuality. If you encounter a fellow-sinner whose temptation differs from yours, you need to recognize that you have your own weaknesses. We all live by the same river and we all must face both the advantages and disadvantages of that.

I want to comment briefly on one of the sexual sins, homosexuality, which Paul makes mention of here in this list. When the subject of homosexuality is debated among Christians, this reference in Corinthians is always brought up. There are two words used in verse 9, one of which is translated in the New American Standard version as "effeminate," while the other is rendered as "homosexual." The Revised Standard Version, on the other hand, uses the same word, "homosexual" to translate the two words. One word is *malakos*, which means "soft" ("effeminate" is a good translation of this word). The other word is *arsenokoitas*, which very simply means "intercourse with a male." Some thinkers who want to apply the insights of modern science to the Bible hold that Scripture does not really condemn as sin a relationship of commitment between homosexuals. They hold that this reference in 1 Corinthians, and other references in the Bible, speak only to homosexual prostitution. They maintain that there really is the possibility for Christians to express their homosexuality if it is done appropriately.

There is no way to sustain that viewpoint from the Bible if we take into account everything that is said about our sexuality. In fact, I feel that the notion that Paul is old-fashioned and unsophisticated is put to rest by his using two different terms to refer to what perhaps is receptive and aggressive homosexual experience. This suggests that Paul knew people who did these things and that he talked with them about what they were doing. He was a pastor who understood where they had come from. Rather than being uptight, Paul was a fairly savvy thinker when it came to human sexuality. Modern science has not made any discoveries about the causes or nature of homosexuality. It is claimed that modern observers are more sophisticated than the ancients were at interpreting human experience. I don't believe it. The insistence on having our "rights," the freedom to do with our bodies whatever we please, can lead to all kinds of degrading behavior. There are answers to the problem of sexual temptation and sin. What we need to do battle against is the arrogance that glories in sexual sin.

Whenever we meet people we also need to recognize that we are just like everyone else. All of us have weak areas, places where the river can overflow the banks. None of us is free from weakness, therefore rejection and viciousness have no place in our dealings with others.

We would be wise to examine our sexuality, to be honest about the weak spots in the river bank. Rather than saying, "Well, this is who I am and this is what I feel like doing," rather than redefining terms so that we are inclined more towards sexual sin, we should remember that the great promise of Scripture is that "We have

been washed. We have been sanctified. We have been justified. That is not who I am anymore." It is possible to harness our sexuality so that good, not evil, is the result in our lives; so that once more sex is that valuable thing that propels us toward intimacy in marriage.

Although it may take time, and there may be much brokenness to be recovered from, it is possible to harness the river again so that it will not overflow its banks and destroy everything in its path. It is good to examine what we are doing and the choices we are making. If we find that we are saying we want everything, that it is our right to express our sexuality in whatever way we want, then we are headed in the wrong direction and face great danger.

"Do you not know," asks Paul several times in this chapter. Don't you know where you are headed? There you are, gazing at yourself in a mirror. Do you know who you are looking at? Do you see someone who is being fitted with the mind of Christ, one who will rule with him in the world to come? If you are a Christian, that is who you are looking at. Do you not know that what has happened to you in the past? Although the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God, you are no longer in that category; you are no longer what you once were.

"Such were some of you," says the apostle, but you have been changed. There may still be years of struggle left and battles yet to be fought, but our great hope is the work of God in us, in the rescuing, cleansing, transforming power 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.

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Steve Zeisler
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