

SERIES: PRIDE AND PREJUDICE IN THE CHURCH

INAPPROPRIATE LEGAL ACTIONS

by Doug Goins

Last week as I was preparing for this message, I was thinking that if baseball is the great American pastime, litigation is moving into second place. Our criminal justice system in this country is big business beyond belief. It's also turning into a great entertainment value for the dollar. The legal frenzy that we seem to be wrapped up in is driven by some of our favorite national slogans:

"I've got my rights."

"I don't have to take that from you."

"I've got it coming to me."

The words "I'll sue" are two of the most over-used words in our American vocabulary today, because everybody is suing everybody else. Children are suing parents, pupils are suing teachers, players are suing coaches, homosexual lovers are suing states, spouses are suing their marriage partners. This isn't limited to non-Christians. Christian neighbors are suing each other. Christian faculty members are now filing suit against the administrations of Christian schools. Churches are suing one another. Churches are suing their pastors, and vice versa. Brothers and sisters in the family of God are actually pressing charges, demanding their rights, sometimes to the exclusion of any attempt to reconcile face-to-face.

I was reminded of a cartoon I had seen in *Christianity Today* many years ago. It's Sunday morning, and on the church platform the soloist is about to sing a number as the pianist waits to play the introduction. With microphone in hand he says, "I'd like to share a song with you that the Lord gave me a year ago...and even though He did give it to me, any reproduction of this song in any form without my written consent will constitute infringement of the copyright law which grants me the right to sue your pants off...praise God...."

The problem of lawsuits among Christians is what the apostle Paul is concerned about in 1 Corinthians 6. Eugene Peterson paraphrases the opening of this section in the following way in *The Message* :

"And how dare you take each other to court! When you think you have been wronged, does it make any sense to go before a court that knows nothing of God's ways instead of a family of Christians?"

As I've said before, we've discovered in our study of 1 Corinthians (Discovery Papers 4508-4519 to date) that this entire letter is very practical and issue-oriented. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with moral and ethical issues with which the congregation in Corinth was struggling. We've seen throughout our study that these believers were relatively new Christians. They were a proud group, competitive and assertive. They still reflected a lot of their Greek cultural origins. Corinth itself was a city of philosophical and intellectual arrogance, moral depravity, and unbridled materialism. All of those things fueled the demand for legal rights.

Chapter 5 focused on a particular case of sexual immorality in the church, and Paul was concerned with a couple of things: the spiritual welfare of the individual who was pursuing the immoral lifestyle, and the quality of spiritual life in the church. He was concerned that they exercise discipline in their midst.

That concern for the quality of life in the church continues in this section, 6:1-11, with this second example of their failure to deal with internal problems. There are disputes among church members over financial matters and property rights. These are civil disputes, not criminal cases, but they are ending up before the secular

courts in Corinth. The Corinthians' propensity toward lawsuits provokes a strong response from the apostle. There was a sense of that in Peterson's paraphrase, "How dare you take each other to court!" He's going to state clearly in these eleven verses that Christians of all people ought to be able to settle their own disputes, and that if they understood their true identity in Christ, they would never end up at odds with each other over material possessions or legal rights.

THE AFFRONT OF A LAWSUIT BETWEEN BELIEVERS

This passage is going to correct six misunderstandings that they have. Let's start with the first one in verse 1. Taking each other to court reveals their foolish arrogance:

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?

William Barclay describes how normal it was to be involved in the legal system in Corinth. As you hear this description of Corinthian life, see if you're not struck by how Corinthian we ourselves are:

"The Greeks were naturally and characteristically a litigious people. The law-courts were in fact one of their chief amusements and entertainment...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."

Paul says emphatically in this opening verse that it's wrong for a Christian to sue another Christian. That word "dare" implies that such an action is an affront to God and to the body of Christ as well. Christians ought to be able to manage their own conflicts without going into secular courts.

When Paul describes the Roman judges as unrighteous, he is not suggesting that they are unjust in their judgment. The term simply means non-Christian in contrast to the saints, the believers who are part of the family of God. In reality, Paul had a high regard for the Roman justice system. Acts 18 tells us that in the city of Corinth during Paul's time there, the Jews had dragged him before the proconsul, a man named Gallio, and accused him of treason, of preaching a religion that would undermine Rome. Gallio listened to it and said, "No, this is a minor religious dispute. This has no place in a court of law." So Paul himself benefited from the fairness of Roman justice.

Paul's concern is the arrogance the Christians are showing by making the dirty laundry of their internal struggles public. These lawsuit-happy Christians don't care what other people think. The bench from which justice was dispensed in Corinth was in the public square or the marketplace. So when someone hauled a brother or sister into court there, they weren't just settling a dispute. They were holding the church itself up to public scrutiny and ridicule.

The decision by these Christians to go to court also reveals how little respect they have for the church's authority and ability to settle its own disputes. But back in chapter 1 Paul identified these people as saints, or holy ones of God. He said they were enriched in Christ Jesus, that they were not lacking in any gift. In chapter 2 he said they had the mind of Jesus Christ; they could think the way Christ thought. So they have in their body of believers all the resources necessary to settle disputes-truth, wisdom, equity, justice, kindness, generosity.

THE CHURCH'S COMPETENCE TO JUDGE

The problem is that the Corinthians don't know the Old Testament Scriptures very well. If they did, they would understand their identity as saints and the capacity God has given them to make righteous judgments in complicated disputes and conflicts. In the next three verses Paul asks five rhetorical questions, and the implication is that they ought to know the answers to these questions. But the fact that they're taking each other to court betrays their ignorance. Verse 2:

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 [that is, non-Christians]?

In verse 2 Paul is asking, "If you as Christians are one day going to sit on God's supreme court over the world, aren't you qualified to judge in the small, daily matters that come up among you now?" That reference to believers' ruling and having some sort of authority goes back to Daniel 7. Daniel has a vision of Christ in his millennial kingdom, and it says that believers will somehow be involved with him in judging the world. Revelation 2 and 3 also talk about that consummation. We aren't sure exactly how it's going to work, but the promise is that this is our destiny. So if we have this tremendous privilege of spiritual judgment in the future, and that ministry we're going to have will be based on principles of Biblical understanding, wisdom, and justice that we have available now in the Scriptures, then we can certainly trust them for handling disputes among ourselves right now.

Verse 3 tells us that we're even going to judge angels in the future. The Scriptures aren't specific about which kinds of angels, or what kind of authority we're going to have over them, but whatever the sphere in the heavenly judgment, Paul's point is the same. If we are to judge the world and angels in the age to come, we are surely able under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, with the Scriptures, to help settle matters of disagreement among ourselves today.

The point is that if two Christian parties can't agree between themselves, they ought to ask fellow Christians to help settle the matter for them, and then be willing to abide by their decision. In verse 4 Paul says that even the most uneducated, poorest believer in their fellowship has more spiritual resources to speak truth into a dispute than the most trained mediator or lawyer or judge that any secular court can provide, because the latter doesn't have the mind of Christ. We must trust the wisdom of the Scriptures and the life of the Lord himself at work in those we ask to step in and mediate all the tangles. When we do that, the problem gets solved. It's also a tremendous testimony before the world of our unity, love, submission to one another, and confidence in God's resources to untangle disputes.

I've seen that at work beautifully in the body here at PBC over the years. I've watched folks come to mature men and women in this congregation to help them judge between two believers who couldn't agree, whether it was business misunderstandings or disagreements, employee-employer conflicts, landlord-tenant conflicts, or even marriage crisis issues. I remember one case in which people were willing to trust the judgment of their brothers and sisters in the body in settling the estate of a family inheritance.

Verses 5-6 suggest that there isn't the spiritual maturity in the church in Corinth to exercise leadership. There is real sarcasm in Paul's words here:

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?

Paul is saying that he's ashamed of his spiritual children. They know better, but there doesn't seem to be even one person in that congregation having the spiritual maturity to stand for this kind of loving mediation between brothers, or even exercise this ministry of reconciliation between them. Because of the absence of these mature people, they are going public in the secular courts and having their testimony as a church trashed before the world.

WHEN IT'S RIGHT TO GO TO COURT

Let me briefly address the issue of when we do legitimately need to get involved in the justice system. I will not try to be at all comprehensive. We are citizens of the nation, and we do have civil obligations. If we're required to answer a charge or to testify, we have to respond, because as Christians we live under the law of the land just as much as anyone else. There are times when we need legal clarification of different kinds of

agreements such as contracts, real estate deals, and insurance coverage. There are some things that only a court of law can provide interpretation of. Sometimes, tragically, the quarrels or disagreements between Christians over financial issues and property issues get so tangled that they do have to have a secular court step in to render an expert legal judgment.

My own conviction is that in a criminal matter, a believer may need to sign a complaint against another believer who has broken the law, because sometimes failure to do so would condone the lawlessness. Any time that a Christian is being divorced by his or her spouse, the law requires a secular court to be involved. That may also be the case for child abuse, spousal abuse, financial irresponsibility, or child neglect. In those kinds of situations a parent or spouse may be forced to seek court protection.

But with all those exceptions to the principles of 1 Corinthians 6, going to court should always be seen as the last resort. And our motive must be to glorify God, never to gain selfish advantage. We must be concerned about the cause of Christ in the life of the other party; that must be central. Dr. Gordon Fee, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, talks about this issue of the motivation, the spiritual issues in being involved in litigation: "Litigation will hopefully be the last resort even with non-Christians. If it is out of concern for the one defrauded and for all others who might be taken in, then it is fully justified."

SUFFERING INJUSTICE VS. SPIRITUAL DEFEAT

Verses 7-8 explain what is at stake spiritually when Christians bring litigation against each other:

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.

Paul is saying that the believer who demands their legal rights in the face of this apostolic counsel always loses the case in God's sight. What becomes visible in that individual is their own selfishness, and also the fact that by demanding their rights in a court of law, they are basically saying that they don't believe God with his power and wisdom can work in the circumstances to accomplish his will. They're trusting the court system more than God himself.

The two questions in verse 7 are unsettling and radical: "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?" Paul's point is that it's better to lose financially than to lose spiritually. Even when we're clearly in the right legally, we don't have the spiritual or moral right to insist on it in public court. If we've been wronged or defrauded, we're called to forgiveness, not bitterness. If we or fellow believers can't convince the brother to make things right, Paul says, we're better off to suffer loss and injustice than to bring a lawsuit against him. Paul is only expanding the clear word of the Lord Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' [That was the law, absolute legal redress.] But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also." (Matthew 5:38-40.) These hard words are absolutely contrary to the standards of the world that we live in today. When we're deprived wrongfully, we're to cast ourselves on the care of God, who will work for our good and for his glory. We can pray to the Lord who can change hearts and deal with injustice. We must not trust the legal system to do that, because it won't.

This morning I talked to a lady who is in a terrible legal mess involving a really horrible divorce and child custody case with tangled financial issues. She said that in the middle of all that she wasn't crying out to the Lord for justice, she was trusting the system. She really thought that our justice system would bring justice, but it hasn't.

Two brothers in the body here were in a business venture together a number of years ago. They invested several hundred thousand dollars in a business and were defrauded. It's an amazing story. These two men sat down with the man who had defrauded them and his lawyer and asked for full restitution. They said that was what was right morally and legally. He owed them and their other investors full redress. Then they gave him a letter that said in essence, "This is what we want from you because it's right. However, if you choose not to

meet the moral and legal obligation, we forgive the debt." The lawyer read the letter and said, "Give me a minute, please...I'm a Christian, but never in all my years of legal practice have I seen Christians take the Bible this seriously." These brothers were willing to suffer loss, and they even gave the man who defrauded them a Bible as a parting gift. I don't think to this day they know if he's ever come to faith in Christ. But their conviction was that his eternal destiny was more important than their getting redress in court. They were willing to lose for the sake of God's kingdom.

Our primary concern should not be to protect our rights or our possessions, but to protect our relationships with the Lord and with fellow believers. Verse 8, unfortunately, makes clear that the Corinthians were committed to just the opposite. They were committed to a lifestyle of demanding their rights in court, in contradiction to Jesus' radical call to sacrificial love. Paul accuses them in verse 8 of living fraudulently, claiming to be Christians but not living like it. He also accuses them of wronging others in the body of Christ with their aggressive legal pursuit of their personal rights.

LIVING LIKE THE UNRIGHTEOUS

That brings us to Paul's next concern for these lawsuit-happy Christians. He says their litigious behavior raises the question of whether some of them are really Christians. It's as if they are totally unaware of what Christian behavior ought to be like. Verses 9-10:

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.

Now Paul is powerfully pointed here. His choice of words is what controls the continuity of all these eleven verses. The word in verse 7, "Why not rather be wronged?" and then in verse 8, "...You yourselves wrong..." has the identical basic root in the Greek as the word in verse 9, "unrighteous." We have already seen the word "unrighteous" back in verse 1. I told you at that point that it means non-Christians. So four different times, twice when Paul uses the word "wronged," and twice when he uses the word "unrighteous," he is describing non-Christians and their behavior. Paul's purpose in this provocative vocabulary is to shake his brothers and sisters in Corinth out of their self-centeredness, to confront them with the fact that their legal bullying puts them in company with the nonbelieving community around them. It's as if Paul is shouting at them, "There is so much more at stake than you and your petty personal agenda, your possessions, your rights! The kingdom of God must be visible in your lives! You've got to demonstrate the kingdom, and this behavior is not kingdom living."

When we look at the list in verses 9-10 and consider the people who habitually live out these sinful behaviors, who rationalize and justify them, whose lives are totally characterized by these sins, we see how inclusive the list is. It does mention people who are dominated by heterosexual and homosexual lust, but there's also the lust of the greedy and acquisitive, the materialistic people who are in love with possessions, from robbers to con artists. It mentions alcohol abuse. We all know how destructive alcohol is in relationships. Verbal abuse is in the list.

But Paul's point is that Christians cannot continue any of these destructive and violent behaviors as a lifestyle-including demanding legal rights in secular courts of law. A believer in Jesus Christ is a new creation, having a new inner personhood made out of God's own Person. In the life of a believer there is no longer unbroken or habitual unrighteousness. We are no longer slaves of self-indulgence or self-gratification or self-destruction. Conversion ultimately will make a visible difference.

In 2 Timothy 2:19 the young pastor Timothy is at the church in Ephesus, and he is struggling with the question of who is a believer and who isn't, and how much emphasis he can put on expectations about lifestyle in that regard. Look at what Paul says to him: "Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, 'The Lord knows those who are his....'" That's God's perspective. He can read hearts; he knows the people he has called to himself and sovereignly transformed. But we can't read hearts, so the next inscription says, "'Let every one who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness.'" I was drawn to this verse

because the word "wickedness" is the identical Greek word that we saw in 1 Corinthians 6:9, "unrighteous." If you confess the name of the Lord, you will turn away from unrighteousness. Eventually there will be visible evidence that you are a believer in Jesus Christ. The old patterns will be broken.

SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

In verse 11 Paul goes on to say in essence, "You have confessed the name of the Lord, so don't light-weight your position in Jesus Christ":

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.

This final verse is wonderfully hopeful. The behaviors that he listed in verses 9-10 characterized the pre-Christian lives of many of the Corinthians, but that old life is not who they are now. They have left those patterns behind. So there is every hope that they can stop suing each other.

I love Paul's logic here. When Paul wants to motivate or encourage people to action, his favorite appeal is, "Become what you really are. You aren't living like it, but it's your identity." And what are the Corinthians? Three things: First, they have been washed. That speaks of their new life in Jesus Christ, of God's work of regeneration or re-creation. Listen to how Paul describes it in Titus 3:5: "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit." In 2 Corinthians 5:17 he writes, "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." Finally, in Ephesians 2:10 he says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus..." We are washed to a new life.

The second thing Paul tells the Corinthians about their identity is that they are sanctified. That speaks of the sovereign act of God in making them his people, setting them apart for his intended purposes, which God promises they will fulfill; they will become everything that he has set them apart to become through sanctification.

Third, he uses the word "justified." This is one of Paul's favorite words for what God does to make people his children. Whenever Paul uses it in the past tense it's almost synonymous with sanctification. God finished a work in you to make you his own.

These Corinthians have experienced spiritual transformation, Paul reminds them. It was done in the name of Jesus Christ, by his authority and power, the authority that he won through his death on the cross in obedience to his Father, through the resurrection that his Father accomplished, and through his glorification and ascension to the right hand of the Father. That transformation that has happened in the past and that they can count on in the future is based on the authority of Jesus Christ and on the power of the Spirit of God at work in them. Their passionate commitment to their personal rights can be broken. God can humble them before each other. He can change them from an aggressive, competitive, rights-oriented community into people who are willing to give up their rights for the good of the whole, people who care more about the salvation of the world than their own personal possessions.

I don't know where you are today. Maybe you've never sued anyone in your whole life. Maybe you've thought of it a few times and wished you had the resources to do it. Maybe you're tangled up in a complicated litigation right now that's confusing and difficult. Maybe you have anger toward other people that doesn't express itself in court, but might express itself in punching them out. The great thing about the word of God is that it captures us where we are in our own hearts and it speaks to us. It can turn us around if we're open to change.

Let me conclude with these pastoral words from the apostle Paul in Romans 12:14-19a (J.B. Phillips paraphrase of the New Testament):

"And as for those who try to make your life a misery, bless them. Don't curse, bless. Share the happiness of those who are happy, and the sorrow of those who are sad. Live in

harmony with each other. Don't become snobbish but take a real interest in ordinary people. Don't become set in your own opinions. Don't pay back a bad turn by a bad turn, to anyone. See that your public behaviour is beyond criticism. As far as your responsibility goes, live at peace with everyone. Never take vengeance into your own hands, my dear friends."

Notes:

1. Peterson, Eugene. *The Message* . Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1993, p. 345.
2. Barclay, William. *Letters to the Corinthians* . Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1954, p. 55.
3. Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* . Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987, p. 238.
4. Phillips, J.B. *The New Testament in Modern English* . New York: The MacMillan Company, 1958, p. 342.

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