

Study 7: 1st Corinthians Chapter 6

Introduction

In our society, litigation is becoming more and more common. People are insisting on “their rights” and whenever those rights are invaded by someone else, they believe that they have a right to be compensated – regardless of the cost and consequences to the other person. The same thing was happening in Corinth, and it had become so bad that some members of the church were taking others to court over trivial issues.

In chapter 6, Paul addresses the underlying causes of the problem, and we have some explicit instruction on how we should deal with such issues.

Body of the Study

Litigation – statement of the problem

What should we do if we have such an issue?

Judging the world and angels

Dealing with purity and immorality

The place of expediency

The practice of sexual immorality

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *What actions should we take when we have a grievance against another brother (based on both chapters 5 and 6)?*
- *What are the two tests that Paul says we should use to determine “expediency”, and how do we practically apply them?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapter 7 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 7: Chapter 6

Introduction

People believe that they have a right to be compensated – regardless of the cost and consequences to the other person. The Corinthians were driven to litigation by greed (covetousness), and it had become so bad that some members of the church were taking others to court over trivial issues.

Paul addresses the underlying causes of the problem, and gives explicit instruction on how we should deal with such issues.

Body of the Study

Litigation – statement of the problem

Brethren were taking one another to court, rather than trying to resolve the issues between them. This is not to say that brethren should never go to court to resolve an issue, nor (as we shall see) even go to court against another brother. What was happening in Corinth, was that brethren were taking one another to court over “...*the smallest matters...*” (1:6:2). In understanding the issues, we need to note some things about lawsuits that would have happened in the Corinthian society (just as they do in our society).

People could go to court either for a civil matter, or for a criminal matter. In the case of a criminal matter, the authorities would be the ones who were doing the prosecution and running the case. It may be that one of the brethren was being prosecuted, and it is also possible that the one doing the prosecution (representing the government) was a brother. But this isn't what Paul is discussing here.

Usually, those bringing a civil matter to court are those who are in a position of power, and are bringing the matter towards one who is in a lesser position. This is exactly consistent with the power plays that were happening in the Corinthian church, and it seems that some in powerful positions were usurping their power over those who were less able to defend themselves.

Not every civil lawsuit (even against another brother) is unjust. Paul used the law to defend himself on several occasions (Acts 16:37-39; 18:12 → ; 25:16). Further, the Lord gave the right to divorce on the basis of infidelity (Mt 5:32, 19:9), and in order to legally dissolve the marriage in such cases it is necessary to take the matter to court. And in the case of a civil / public liability claim by an injured person, it is usually necessary to pursue the matter through a court. The latter could be the result of a brother being injured because of the negligence of another brother. Both acknowledge the injury, and the one injured needs to take the case to court in order to receive a claim from the insurance. There is no malicious action on either side.

In the above cases, it may result in one brother taking another to court, but this isn't what Paul had in mind here. Our western society is become more litigious. People are suing others for what appears to be minor and trivial issues. There has even been successful lawsuits made by thieves against the owners of the houses that they are burgling at the time! In a society where someone is out to get whatever they can out of the other person, regardless of the cost to that person, then society has gone mad. That appears to be what had happened at Corinth, and it was brethren taking other brethren to court.

This is not the way that God says that we should do things. If we have truly embraced the sufferings of the Christ, who in the midst of the humility and suffering on the cross said “...*Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing...*” (Lk 23:34). His compassion towards others was so complete that He willingly gave up His just life for those (us) who had committed wrong against Him. So, how could it be that when we have been made right (justified) – have been bought – by the blood of Christ, that we are taking action against others who have also been bought – out of selfish motives?

What should we do if we have such an issue?

The Corinthians were taking the matters to court – to the unrighteous. He does not say (nor imply) that the decisions made by the court are wrong, or biased. He is merely pointing out that some of us may have a genuine grievance against one of our brethren, and that they way to resolve it is to do so before those who have been bought with the same price that we have. We need to consider the motives of the person who is seeking compensation, and also the equity of the situation. A righteous brother should take such things into account, where the court won't. To the court, it will be a matter of right and wrong, and compensation based on the wrong, not on the equity that results.

Paul is quite explicit as to how we should resolve such issues “...*why are you going to law...and not taking it before the saints?...*” (1:6:1) Whilst Paul forbids us to go to law before the courts in such issues, he does not forbid us to go to law before our brethren. This is not to say that the matter needs to be brought before the church. In most instances, the church doesn't need to know or get involved. It is obvious that there will be some brethren somewhere in most congregations who would be able to judge such issues “...*isn't there a wise man among you, not even one, who can judge between his brethren?...*” (1:6:5)

The situation that Paul has described is not dissimilar to the issue in the previous chapter.

- There was a problem in the congregation (sexual immorality in 5, litigation in 6)
- It was happening in the open (everyone knew in 5, it was before the courts in 6)
- The underlying cause (both chapters) was their heart not aligned to God

The heart of the situation is the pride that some of the brethren were exhibiting. They were showing it by seeking to deprive others – and not just anyone – but their own brethren. On the other hand, those who were being deprived were reacting. The true Christ-centred person would behave in the same way that Jesus did:

“...²¹ To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

IPE 2:22 "He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth."

IPE 2:23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed..." (1 Pet 2:21-24 NIV)

How we should behave is further encompassed in the words of Jesus:

“...³⁹ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you..." (Matt 5:39-42 NIV)

The problem was that the Corinthians had not truly submitted and conformed themselves to Christ, to live by His example. In response to that situation, Paul says

“...*The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?* ⁸ *Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers.* ⁹ *Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God?...*” (1:6:7-9 NIV)

The call to the Corinthians is clear, but we also need to hear the message. It is the message of *transformation*, not *confirmation* that Paul discussed in Romans 12.

Judging the world and angels

Paul tells us that we will judge the world (1:6:2), and angels (1:6:3) and that therefore we are well qualified to judge in such trivial issues as the matters being litigated here. This raises the question as to where and how such judgement will be made. We need to note however, that we are not told *where and how*. We can accept the truth of what Paul says – and importantly the implication of what he says – that therefore we are qualified to settle disputes in such matters.

The implication of Paul's statement should not be lost. The saints are going to judge the world – including the unrighteous judges of the legal profession. But what the brethren were doing, was to submit themselves to the judgement of these same people! And of course, the weightiest matters that are to be decided on earth are light in comparison to the matters that will be brought ultimately against the eternal destiny of the unrighteous.

Dealing with purity and immorality

A characteristic of Paul's letters is the way in which he weaves issues through his letters. He has already provided one list of *vices* (1:5:1,11), and some of them are repeated again here. He is about to address the issue of sex and marriage – although he has already begun that discussion in chapter 5. Almost as an interlude (or perhaps a bridge) between the issue of judgement and the issues of sex and marriage, is the discussion on purity and immorality.

Purity and immorality are connected to both issues (litigation and sex). In the one case, it is expressed in how we behave with our bodies, and in both cases it is expressed in how we behave with our minds. The key to both is unrighteousness:

“... you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers.⁹ Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God...” (1:6:8-10 NIV)

The bridge between the two areas comes out in the groups that Paul describes – covetous – which was the main issue leading to litigation, - extortioners – what they were doing to their brethren when they were extracting the most that they could get out of them.

We need to be clear. Christianity isn't about just coming to church on Sunday. It's about who we are – who we are on the inside – and it's demonstrated by how we behave. The change in behaviour comes from the conversion process. We can exhibit the behaviour without ever having been converted, but that won't make us right with God. But because of the *transformation*, we have changed from who we were (Rom 12:2).

It doesn't matter what we used to be or what we have done before we were converted. In the transformation, we have turned from the ugly caterpillar into the beautiful butterfly “...and such were some of you. But you have been washed and made clean, sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus...” (1:6:11)

The place of expediency

The Greek culture was focussed on satisfaction and gratification in whatever way and time and manner the individual found convenient¹. Such gratification extended to food, and to the examples of litigation (that Paul has dealt with) and sexual gratification (that he is about to deal with).

Just because something is legal doesn't make it right. It is not illegal to overindulge in eating for our own self-gratification. But it isn't right that we should do such. Paul isn't talking about the person who occasionally (“once a year”) goes to an all-you-can-eat restaurant and enjoys himself. He makes it clear when he says “...I will not be brought under the power of anything...” (1:6:12).

¹ Ramsay, William. “Historical Commentary on First Corinthians” ISBN0-8254-3637-0 p.59
Study of Corinthians by Graeme Offer

He is talking about the person who *just has to go*, and *just has to pig-out*. The food has control of him, rather than he having control of his own body.

There is a pointed contrast that Paul makes here, that our inner being needs to be in control of what we do in our bodies. The body will be destroyed, but the soul lasts forever. If the body is in control of the soul, where will that leave us in eternity? “...*Foods for the body, and the body for food. God will destroy them both...*” (1:6:13)

Eating food is not wrong in and of itself. But it becomes wrong when we abuse it and let it control us. Likewise, sex is not wrong in and of itself, but it too becomes wrong when we take it out of the context that God has put it in (ie the marriage relationship).

The principle of expediency applies to many things that we do in our lives (and to the organisation and worship of the church). There are some things which are not wrong in and of themselves (such as instrumental music), but they become wrong when we take them out of their proper context (secular music), and put them where God has not authorised them to be (as in the case of playing instrumental music in the worship of the church).

The practice of sexual immorality

In chapter 5, this part of chapter 6, and all of chapter 7, Paul discusses sex and marriage. This raises a lot of more general issues on the subject, and we will look at with the issues in a special study before dealing with chapter 7. Before we do, we will note the historical context of what Paul says about the issue in this chapter (1:6:15-20)

As we noted in the introduction, Corinth was a city built around vice and sexual immorality. Temple prostitution was rife, and the temple of Aphrodite atop Acrocorinth overlooking the city was reported to have 1000 temple prostitutes. The sailors who had shore leave in Corinth took great advantage of their stay in Corinth.

With such sexual practices widely going on around them, the immorality of the world was bound to invade the church. Some of the brethren were sure to stray, if they hadn't already. Some of them had behaved this way in the past, for Paul says of them “...*such were some of you...*” (1:6:11)

But sexual immorality is not an expedient issue. It is wrong in and of itself. Rather than be joined (sexually) to prostitutes, we have been joined to the Lord (1:6:16-17). Sexual immorality is not a sin that we bring on others, but rather a sin that we inflict on our own bodies (1:6:18). We have been bought with a price (the blood sacrifice of Jesus), and therefore we should glorify God in every thing that we do (1:6:20).