

A Kingdom Perspective for Handling Disputes

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1 Cor. 6:1-11

If you have ever watched daytime TV at some point you have probably come across one of several “small claims court” type shows, such as Judge Judy or the People’s Court, in which people share their grievances against each other before a judge on national television. I happened upon a Judge Judy show where a college kid was receiving money from the government each month that was specifically to help pay for rent, but he wasn’t paying his rent with the money, he was spending it on other things. So the woman he was living with hauled him to court to collect the rent. Judge Judy was lecturing him about how our tax dollars was being given to students like him to help them get an education and that \$400 a month was for him to pay his rent so he should pay his rent with it! She was about to rule in the woman’s favor, when the college student said, “ask her if she pays the rent”. It turned out that this woman who was suing this man for rent money, didn’t own the apartment and she wasn’t paying the rent either. Judge Judy dismissed the case!

There is an odd kind of entertainment value to watching people air their dirty laundry on national TV, and the more contentious the lawsuit, the more sordid the details, the more outlandish the litigants look, the more entertained we are. In the case I mentioned, you could say that the college kid won because he didn’t have to pay back any rent, but in my opinion he lost far more than he won because he came off as an untrustworthy deadbeat who will cheat someone out of a few dollars any chance he gets. Not sure that show is going to look good on his resume! From what I’ve seen of these shows, no matter who wins, both sides come off looking like losers. We are entertained at their expense.

In many ways our culture isn’t all that different from the culture in the Greek city of Corinth. Historical studies show that Corinth was a very litigious society (just as ours is) and people commonly dragged each other into court to settle even minor differences. It had even become a source of entertainment in Corinth just like it is today. What bothers Paul is that word has reached him that Christian brothers in Corinth are acting just like the world and dragging each other into court to settle their differences. Believers are airing their dirty laundry to unbelieving judges and juries and no matter who wins, the church loses because they are damaging the church’s witness for Jesus and their credibility as a community that is supposed to love each other.

Conflicts within the church are inevitable. Arguments, quarrels, even financial and legal disputes between one believer and another are going to happen, and so this passage is very relevant today and raises some tough questions for us to wrestle with:

- How should Christians handle conflict with other Christians?
- Is it always wrong for a Christian to take another Christian to court?
- Should all legal matters be handled exclusively within the church?

- Should Christians just absorb any wrong done to them by another Christian and take no further action about it?
- And then one textual question: why in verses 9-11 does Paul link these lawsuit skirmishes with those who will not inherit the kingdom of God? In the Greek it is clear that the train of thought is connected, but how is it connected? It feels like Paul is linking small claims court to eternal judgment. Why?

Called to a kingdom perspective rather than a worldly perspective

To try and answer these questions the first thing I want us to do is to look at the passage as a whole and see the wide angle lens that Paul is looking at this issue through. This isn't just about keeping the church's dirty laundry out of the public eye. It's about having a kingdom perspective rather than a worldly perspective about these matters. Disputes are never just about the disputes. There is always a spiritual dimension – and a spiritual resolution – to them.

So Paul rebukes them for bringing these matters to “the unrighteous”, to the “world”, and to “those who have no standing in the church” rather than to believers within the church. Paul means no disrespect to unbelieving judges. His terms aren't meant to be derogatory – what he is saying is that those who are followers of Jesus Christ are called to live and resolve disputes by different principles than the values and principles of the world. Paul then points our attention to that future day when thrones will be set up and men and angels will be judged by the Lord, and amazingly he reminds us that the Bible says that believers will preside with Jesus on that day. For Paul there must be a sense of irony because in chapter 4 he writes that he and the other apostles have been made a humiliating spectacle for men and angels to mock and gawk at. One day the tables will be turned and he will sit in judgment of those very men and fallen angels. Paul then closes this passage with a warning that those who will inherit the kingdom of God need to live a lifestyle that doesn't contradict the kingdom of God.

The wide angle lens on this passage is that, when it comes to conflicts and lawsuits, Paul is calling them to a kingdom perspective rather than a worldly perspective and this kingdom perspective leads to three principles and one glorious encouragement.

1. *The church should have people who are wise enough, discerning enough, and fair enough to arbitrate disputes between believers*

It is amazing to Paul that a church that prides itself on how wise it is doesn't have *anyone* in the church who is wise enough or mature enough to deal with these disputes. Surely there must be someone mature enough to handle these disputes in house rather than airing all of this in a secular court.

Now before we go any further with what Paul is saying, I think we need to take a small detour and look at what he's *not* saying here. Someone could read this and come to the conclusion that Christians should *never* bring lawsuits against each other and that all legal matters should be kept in house rather than brought to secular courts and that would be a problem. The matters Paul is referring to here are relatively light civil matters, *not* criminal matters. He calls them “grievances” in verse 1, “trivial cases” in verse 2, and “disputes” in verse 5. He also mentions “defrauding” in verse 7 which indicates someone cheating someone else out of money or property.

Corinth was a Roman colony, so their legal system was based on Roman law which was actually pretty fair and objective when it came to criminal law. But civil law was a very different matter. Civil judges and

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juries expected to receive some kind of pay-off for a favorable verdict, whether it be in the form of a financial bribe or social influence. So winning a civil case often had more to do with who had more wealth or social status than it did with who was actually in the right. To game the system to take advantage of a less wealthy Christian brother was another way that one brother could defraud another.

Paul was not against the secular legal system and in fact, appealed to Caesar in order to protect his own rights as a Roman citizen (as well as his life!). In Romans 13, speaking of the governing authorities, Paul writes that they bear the sword (of judgment) by God's authority.

We would be reading more than this passage says to think that it forbids Christians to ever take another Christian to court, and definitely reading more than this passage says to conclude that all legal matters are to be handled by the church. The church is not in any way equipped or structured to deal with criminal offenses. So if a crime is committed, even if it is by one Christian against another, it is our responsibility to alert the authorities and we are not disobeying God's word to do so. Churches go outside of their scope and can do great harm when they try to deal with criminal offenses internally. Thank God, we are blessed to live in a country with a justice system that is based on biblical precepts and, although not perfect, is in my opinion the best and fairest justice system in all the world and in all of history.

So this isn't referring to larger legal and criminal matters, but smaller disputes. And the church should be able to wisely, honestly, fairly, and with grace, help two brothers or sisters in a dispute work through it and come to a fair resolution. God cares about these issues, and He cares about the relational damage that can come through disputes poorly handled or not handled at all. By taking each other to court, the Corinthian believers weren't focused on salvaging the relationship; they were trying to win the case.

When Christians today, or Christian institutions, take each other to court to fight over petty disputes (or even large disputes) it hurts the Christian witness. What is probably more common today than open court cases— although that certainly still happens — is that many disputes between Christians simply go unresolved and tear relationships apart, often leaving festering bitterness and anger. We love to deal with things in private and aren't typically comfortable seeking help to work out these kinds of conflicts but Paul is saying that a kingdom perspective will motivate us to seek spiritually mature arbitration and resolution. This doesn't have to be over legal matters, by the way. Any conflict or dispute that is creating a strain on the relationship and where the two parties can't seem to work through it on their own is an opportunity to bring in wise and trusted counsel. But our attitude needs to be that we want to hear and abide by biblical truth, not simply hear our own perspective confirmed by someone else.

When I was serving at Covenant Fellowship as a pastoral intern, because my salary wasn't enough for us to live on, a single guy named Jimmy invited us to live with him in his townhouse for a year. After about 5 months we found some tensions and disputes growing between us and one day he came in and shared that he didn't think it was working and maybe we should find another place to live. The next day I went in and shared an overview of what Jimmy said with the pastors and they were all upset with Jimmy and very supportive of me. I felt very cared for and somewhat vindicated in the relational tensions between me and Jimmy. But one pastor, Andy, came into my office later that day and he just couldn't shake this feeling that there was more to the story. He knew Jimmy pretty well and he felt that before I found another place for us to live, he wanted to meet with Jimmy, Janice and me to talk this out more. We did that, and it came to light that, while I had told the truth, I hadn't told the *whole* truth. I wasn't trying to be deceptive, I just naturally highlighted the parts of the story that put me in the best light and left out some details that didn't put me in the best light. It took a wise third party to help all of us to see the bigger

picture, for me to see where I was wronging Jimmy, for Jimmy to see where he was wronging us, and for all of us to reconcile and ask each other for forgiveness. We stayed with Jimmy the rest of that year, and to this day I feel slightly ashamed for how I wronged Jimmy and feel a great deal of respect for Jimmy for his generous heart towards us. And I am grateful for Andy's wisdom in pressing us to work through it so that rather than a gaping hole in our relationship, we ended that year well together.

Is there an ongoing dispute in your life? If it's produced a strain, consider getting outside counsel and help from a trusted brother or sister in Christ. Like me, there might be things in the dispute that you aren't seeing completely and there might be things the other person isn't seeing completely. A spiritually mature church should have men and women who are wise enough to carefully and graciously hear a matter and apply biblical truth with grace in order to render a sound judgment and promote a peaceful and God-glorifying resolution.

2. *Living for the kingdom of Christ means dying to our rights, not fighting for our rights (vs. 7)*

Paul then turns to the one who has been wronged and defrauded in some way and says, wouldn't it be better to be wronged than to drag the church and the name of Christ through the mud in the eyes of the world? Why not be defrauded? Now this isn't saying that we should just lie down and accept it whenever a brother or sister does us wrong or cheats us in some way. Many times the most healthy and loving thing we can do is to confront them with it so that they have the opportunity to see what they did and repent.

But before we allow something to escalate to the point that it brings reproach to Christ, we need to consider: wouldn't it be better to be wronged, to be defrauded, than to win the case and lose our testimony. Paul says, *to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. (vs. 7)*. Even if you win, you lose. In theory, everything can be worked through, but the reality is that sometimes there is no peaceful resolution possible – sometimes you're just too far apart in your perspectives, sometimes the other person is not open to admitting any wrong on their part, and to press it will just create more conflict and relational breakdown, possibly hurting our witness in the process.

When that's the case, we're not supposed to just stuff it, or become welcome mats that embrace being walked on, that's not what Paul is saying. He's saying, we live for a kingdom so great and so eternal, that we can absorb a little wrong and loss for the sake of that kingdom. We follow a King who didn't fight against every wrong that was inflicted against him but rather accepted and suffered wrong and indignity quietly. Jesus didn't come to assert his rights but to give his life. He didn't come to be an activist, he came to be our Savior.

Following Jesus and living for his kingdom often means dying to our rights, not fighting for them. This is hard – it takes the work of the Holy Spirit in us – and honestly I get just as offended and mad and affronted when my rights are stepped on as anyone, but Christ calls us to die to that thing that rises up to assert our rights at any cost. We live for a kingdom that turns everything upside down: we live by dying, we are free when we become servants of Christ, we are exalted when we humble ourselves.

But let this sink in: Christ is worth it. He is more valuable than anything we could gain by asserting our rights, or fighting to get even, or by winning every argument, or never being wronged by anyone. Christ speaks to our souls and to that deep fear that we're going to lose something precious if we don't assert our rights and he says, you won't lose what is truly precious, come follow me. My kingdom isn't about asserting your rights, it's about dying to your rights so that my upside down kingdom can advance in the

world and in other's lives. Jesus meets us in the pain of being wronged and brings strength and purpose and healing to that pain. Living for the kingdom means dying to our rights, not fighting for our rights.

3. *Living for the kingdom of Christ results in a lifestyle that doesn't consistently contradict the kingdom of Christ*

Finally, in verse 8 Paul turns his attention on the person who is deliberately wronging and defrauding his brother or sister in Christ and he has a strong warning for that person. Verse 9 is linked with verse 8 by the word "or" – *or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?* Vv. 9-11 are the center hinge in this chapter, connected to his point in vv. 1-8 and connected to his closing point in vv. 12-20 so we will look more at this section next week too. But in these verses Paul lists sinful practices that are similar to the list in chapter 5 where he says that those who profess to be brothers but practice these things are to be removed from the church. Here his warning is even stronger – those who practice these things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Included in this list are thieves (those who rob others of their property), and greedy (those who lust for material things), and swindlers (those who cheat people of what belongs to them). These are the kind of dark motivations that would make someone willing to wrong and defraud a brother for their own personal gain.

People who live a lifestyle that in no way reflects the kingdom of Christ need to be very concerned that they will not inherit that kingdom. People who consistently live a lifestyle that is contradictory to the kingdom of Christ are in grave danger of forfeiting their inheritance in that kingdom. Like all warnings, it is meant to get the true believer's attention. Warnings in the Bible are meant to be taken seriously, not muzzled by a doctrine that says we can't lose our salvation therefore these warnings don't apply to us.

It's true that we don't – and can't – save ourselves, and that when Jesus saves us, he never lets go. But when we are truly saved, we don't dismiss the Bible's warnings as something we don't need to hear, rather, we hear the beauty in them, and heed the warning in them. For the brother whose heart has become so captivated by material or positional gain that they are willing to hurt, rob, and defraud their brother to enrich themselves, this warning is meant to shock them: a lifestyle of greed, stealing, and swindling, as well as sexual immorality and drunkenness, and idolatry, is a lifestyle that contradicts the kingdom of God and those *who consistently live in that lifestyle will not inherit the kingdom of God!*

But...and here's the glorious encouragement...this doesn't mean that those who were once ensnared by these sins will not inherit the kingdom of God. *And such were some of you...* that is exactly what you once were, Corinthian church, but you aren't that anymore: *you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.* Don't be what you aren't anymore. Be what you are. A new creature in Christ.

If every believer approached conflicts and disputes with these 3 principles and one glorious encouragement in mind, I don't think there's a grievance or difference that couldn't be worked out. Seeking spiritually mature perspective to give biblical counsel, dying to our rights and our desire to promote and assert ourselves above others, walking in the fear of God that we not ever wrong or defraud a brother or sister in Christ, and living in the glorious grace of Christ's washing, cleansing work in our lives and giving that grace to other believers.

I believe God wants to help us grow in a kingdom perspective right now in whatever conflicts or disputes might be going on in our lives right now. Let's pray and as we do, ask the Holy Spirit to help you apply these kingdom truths to any dispute or conflict that you are walking through now or have walked through.