

“Disputes and Suits”
1 Corinthians 6:1-11
August 26, 2007

INTRODUCTION:

We come today to the final sermon in our summer-long series on conflict. The passage before us is a very practical one. It answers the question of what we are to do when we have a grievance with another Christian that is not resolved through a private attempt. Paul acknowledges the inevitability of disputes arising between Christians. He says, **“When one of you has a grievance against another...”** Suppose you’re a Christian contractor, and one of your customers is a member of another church in town. You have done some work for this man and he still owes you about \$10,000. Yours is not a large company, and that outstanding \$10,000 bill is hurting you and your family in a significant way. You signed a contract with him, and it is very clear that he owes you the money, which you have tried repeatedly to collect. At first, he responded by promising to send the money in a few weeks, but no check ever came. Now he will not answer your calls, and it seems clear that he has no intention of paying you this money. What should you do?

Many would say that since this is a business matter and not a spiritual one, that it should be taken to the civil authorities. Paul would not agree. There is an ancient error known as Gnosticism that tends to spiritualize everything. The Gnostic error says that the Church should only deal with spiritual matters while the civil authorities alone are to wrestle with material issues. Paul had heard that the Corinthians were taking their disputes into civil courts, and he is quite upset by the news. We can get a glimpse of how strongly he felt about this by his statement in verse 5 that he is writing this **“to their shame.”** Back in 4:14, Paul deliberately steered clear of bringing shame upon them. But this is such a serious matter that he wants them to feel shame over it.

When we have a dispute with another, our tendency is to want the right outcome. I can’t help but notice in this passage that Paul is more concerned with the right process than he is with the right product. He asks in verse 7, **“Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?”** Disputes between Christians are inevitable in a fallen world with fallen people. The critical issue is how such disputes are to be handled. The process is even more important than getting the right outcome. The right process includes the following three factors.

I. Go to the Right Court

It is news to many Christians that there are courts available to them beyond the civil and criminal courts of our land. In our own Presbyterian church

government, the three levels of our government are called Sessions, Presbyteries and our General Assembly. These are called the courts of the church. But Paul is not speaking that precisely here. He is saying that any Christian leaders can come together and form a type of court for the hearing of disputes between Christians.

Two things are necessary for the formation of a court: jurisdiction and judicial wisdom. Jurisdiction means that the judge has a right to judge, and judicial wisdom means that he has the ability to judge. Both of these are present within the church for the resolution of disputes. Christians have jurisdiction simply because God's word gives it to us here. He says that disputes between Christians are to be judged by Christians (v. 5). This jurisdiction is not accompanied by the power of the sword, which has been given by God to the civil courts. It is no less real for that reason, but simply not to be enforced by coercive means. So a church court cannot, for example, force someone to obey its decision by threatening a fine or imprisonment. Its jurisdiction is real, but in a spiritual way, and it is non-coercive. It needs to be added that this jurisdiction does not extend to non-Christians. Paul had a high view of civil government (Ro. 13), and he is not saying here that Christians should never utilize this resource. Paul himself utilized it. The jurisdiction of the church extends only to cases between two Christians. It is not wrong for a Christian to take a dispute with a non-Christian to civil court.

An effective court must also exhibit judicial wisdom. Paul says that the church has this as well, as evidenced by the fact that we will judge the world. It's an argument from the greater to the lesser. If we will judge the world, including angels, then certainly we are capable of judging the lesser disputes between Christians. The Bible teaches in the gospels and in the book of Revelation that Christians will sit on thrones of judgment together with Christ (Mt. 19:28; Luke 22:30; Rev. 3:21; 20:4). We will even judge beings higher than ourselves, the angels. By the help of God's Spirit and the insight found in the Word of God, Christians are equipped to make judgments on matters from the very trivial to eternal things like the judgment of the world and of angels.

So what might it look like to take our disputes to the church instead of to civil courts? Let's take the example I began with. You're a Christian businessman or woman, and another Christian owes you money which they are refusing to pay. In keeping with Matthew 18, you are first to go to that person privately. As we said two weeks ago, you are to go with maximum privacy, maximum patience and maximum love. If such an approach doesn't yield a reconciliation, other Christians are to be brought in to the dispute. You may want to ask the other person if the two of you could agree on two or three other respected and wise Christians who could assist you in resolving the dispute. If the person is also a member of this church, it could be brought to the Session of this church. We have spiritual jurisdiction over both parties by their vow to submit to the government and discipline of this church. If the person is not a member of this

church, the church where their membership is held could be asked to assist in the matter.

Ken Sande recommends that when the assistance of other Christians is sought, the best way to render such assistance is through the steps of mediation, followed by arbitration if necessary. Mediators serve more as counselors, trying to assist the parties so that the two in dispute with one another are able to reach a mutually agreeable solution. They provide some much-needed objectivity and perhaps some helpful experience of their own. The need for objectivity can be seen in verse 7, where Paul says that they are actually wronging and defrauding their brothers. There's an irony in this. In their zeal to pursue a brother they feel has wronged them, they lose their objectivity and actually commit wrong against the very ones they think have wronged them. Having served many times in a mediating role with disputants, I can tell you that it is quite easy to demonize the person with whom you are in conflict. After you demonize another, it is easy to wrong them. Mediators help us see things as they really are, with objectivity. Arbitrators go one step further than mediators and act as judges who decide upon a solution. Again, since the church has no earthly power, both parties must beforehand willingly submit themselves to the decision reached by the arbitrators.

If all of these efforts still fail to bring about an acceptable solution to the dispute, you are left with two options. First, if the other person has refused to submit himself to other Christians and to their judgment as mediators and arbitrators, they may be treated as non-Christians. In that case, the matter can be pursued in the civil courts. But we must be careful here, because the other option open to us is to be willing to be wronged. Perhaps the matter is not as clear as it could be, and other Christians have differed on what is best. In that case, Paul says **“Why not rather suffer wrong?”** There is a time to be willing to suffer loss, when love for others and for the glory of God requires it.

II. Go with the Right Heart

Christians in dispute with others must also handle their dispute with the right heart. There are two elements to such a right heart. First, we must have a love for our brothers. Several times Paul uses this family language to remind us that we have a deep relationship with one another. He says that these disputes are **“between the brothers”** (v. 5). Would you take family members to court? Neither, then, should we take other Christians to court. Of course, the Corinthians had trouble with this love command. Paul had to write an entire chapter explaining how essential such love is. Put simply, he said that where there is no love for one's brothers, there is no true faith.

Even more important than love for one's brothers is a love for the glory of God. It is obvious from Paul's language that he is quite worked up about this issue. He asks a series of staccato questions, just like a parent who finds a child's behavior

completely irrational and unacceptable. Look at the way he asks his first question. **“Does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?”** A certain hard-hearted boldness is required to do this. Why does Paul find the taking of a dispute before unbelievers such an important matter? I believe that it is because it lessens the glory of God by making God look bad. For God’s people to take their disputes to the civil courts would be like your children knocking on the doors of your neighbors’ houses to ask for food. “Do your parents not feed you?” your neighbors would rightly ask. And in the same way, unbelievers who see Christians going to the courts of unbelievers for justice are proven right in thinking, “There must be no justice with God.” Paul is so outraged about this because it lessens the glory of God.

Christians are to trust God for all things, even justice when we feel have been wronged. As we’ve already said, God has given civil courts to us for the purpose of justice, and it is not wrong to use them in certain cases. But when Christians trust the civil courts instead of God, it is an example of idolatry. It is worship of the wrong God, similar to the Israelites looking to Egypt instead of trusting in their God for deliverance from their enemies. It has been pointed out that the devotion Americans have to lawsuits and all things related to the courtroom borders on a religious zeal. Jerold Auerbach has said that we are a people whose “law is our national religion; lawyers constitute our priesthood; the courtroom our cathedral, where contemporary passion plays are enacted” (in Poirier, p. 203). Over twenty years ago, Chief Justice Warren Burger pointed out incisively,

One reason our courts have become overburdened is that Americans are increasingly turning to the courts for relief from a range of personal distresses and anxieties. Remedies for personal wrongs that once were considered the responsibility of institutions other than the courts are now boldly asserted as legal ‘entitlements.’ The courts have been expected to fill the void created by the decline of church, family, and neighborhood (Poirier, p. 203).

We must work for the glory of God as we reassert the claim of God to exercise justice over his people. As John Stott has pointed out, the church is to be God’s new society. As such, we are to show the world how disputes can be resolved and relationships reconciled. God has broken into the world with his new community, and when we take our cases to the civil courts we are living as if there is no new community but only an old one full of animosity and conflict. The world is watching, desiring a place of justice. We want the world to sit up and take notice that justice can be found among God’s people, for the simple reason that the God of justice is among us. We want the world to say, as they said in the days of Moses, **“Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people, For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us”** (Deut. 4:6-7).

III. Go in the Right Power

Paul says that we are to be willing to be wronged and defrauded in our disputes with other Christians. As we've already outlined, there are other options to being wronged. There are appropriate ways to seek justice within the courts of the church, and at times an appropriate access to civil courts. But it is inescapable that in every case there must be a willingness to be wronged should God call us to that. Do you know how difficult that is? When you feel strongly that you have been wronged, everything in you wants to scream about the injustice. I remember once years ago when I was accused falsely of lying. There have been times when I have been guilty of dishonesty, and I've had to confess that as the sin that it is. But in this case I was not guilty. The person accusing me had been very angry at me for quite some time and in her desire to lash out at me, she heard what she wanted to hear instead of what I said. She wanted to tell others about this as well. Everything in me wanted to defend myself as vigorously as possible. There is a time to do that, but also a time to be willing to be wrongly accused.

I know of only one power on earth sufficient to give us a willingness to be wronged when we think we are right. Paul speaks of it frequently throughout his letter to the Corinthians, and one of the most eloquent is in verses 9-11. I have always read these verses as separated from the first 8 verses of the chapter, but I have seen this week that there is a vital connection here. Paul is telling the Corinthians that the only way to be willing to be wronged is to know the gospel. So he rehearses that gospel here. The gospel says that God's holy law excludes from heaven all evildoers. And he is explicit in listing the sins excluding us from heaven. The sexually immoral will not enter heaven. By this he means sexual relationships outside of marriage, what we usually call premarital sex. Idolaters too are excluded, as are adulterers. The practice of homosexual acts, and theft, greed and drunkenness are sufficient to exclude us. And then we have some of the sweetest words in Paul's letter. **"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 by the Spirit of our God."**

CONCLUSION:

The only way to be willing to be wronged is to know that you are right in Jesus. You have a righteousness in him that cannot be taken from you. It is such a glorious thing, that when you grasp it, you become willing to be defrauded if that becomes necessary. You would do this even if it meant living in a two bedroom apartment on the wrong side of town and driving 15 year old cars and shopping at the thrift shop for all your clothing and household furniture. What we need more than anything else as we enter into conflict with others is a deeper grasp of the gospel. Let's ask God for that as come now to the Lord's Table.