



151st Church of Christ
Small Group Study Guide – 1 CORINTHIANS
by Richard Wolfe

AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians

Lesson 9, 1 Corinthians 6:1-11, Litigation
TEACHER

GENERAL OUTLINE

1 Corinthians 5:1-6:20, Reported Problems

LESSON OUTLINE

1 Corinthians 6:1-11, Litigation

- 6:1-6 Rebuke for civil suits
- 6:7-8 Honesty & turning the other cheek
- 6:9-11 Power in the blood

Paul turns, in chapter 6, to a second problem that had been reported to him: the Corinthian Christians were defrauding each other in business dealings and were seeking redress through the civil courts. Paul disapproves of both actions. The whole matter was in total contradiction to their calling as Christians. Of what value was the crucifixion of Christ if his followers pursued the same material gains as the world, used the same sinful methods to achieve those goals, and couldn't resolve their problems without calling on the justice of civil courts rather than calling on the name of the Lord (cf. 1 Cor 1:2)?

Paul broached the problem on three fronts. 1. Dishonesty in business was wrong in itself; 2. Pleading their grievances in civil courts showed more esteem for the foolishness of the world than the wisdom of God; 3. The church was once again (cf. 1 Cor. 5) abdicating its responsibility to hold members to a higher, God-given standard of values and behavior.

The problem and Paul's response are, at first glance fairly straightforward, but a closer look reveals a challenging complexity. Modern-day churches generally overlook the implications suggested in the practical application of Paul's teachings. In our discussion, we will look at the basic problem as well as the connection with the teachings of Christ and the example of the early Jerusalem church.

DISCUSSION

1 Corinthians 6:1-6, Rebuke for civil suits

- 1. Identify and discuss how the topic of 6:1-6 flows naturally from the last two verses of chapter 5.**

Paul's statement (5:12) about "judging those who are inside" was more than a figure of speech. In chapter 6, he deals with problems that call for literal judging of "insiders" to be administered by the church. He may have had something similar in mind in chapter 5 as the church admonished the immoral member, but the application is explicit in chapter 6.

- 2. No one, not even Christians are fully "righteous." Still, Paul distinguishes between the "unrighteous" (NIV: ungodly) and the "saints." To whom does Paul refer with each term? Cite precedent in 1 Corinthians to support your answers.**

"Saints" are Christians according to 1 Cor. 1:2, even those who are guilty of many of the wrongs addressed in the letter. The unrighteous would be everyone else, that is, those who are outside of Christ. This is much the same distinction that Jews made between Jews and Gentiles (or pagans).

Stated differently, we could identify as unrighteous the people of the world, who, by definition, follow the natural wisdom of the world, and as saints members of the church who are expected to follow the spiritual wisdom of God. Chapter 6 also equates the unrighteous with "those who are outside" and Christians with "those who are inside."

- 3. What two examples does Paul cite to support his suggestion that Christians should be able to judge between members in cases such as the dishonest business dealings that form the background to this discussion? How do these examples show the upside-down thinking and behavior of the Corinthians in the current situation?**

Christians (saints) will judge the world (v. 2) and angels (v. 3). Paul doesn't identify the Bible passages that would support these ideas, and we don't find explicit teachings in the Bible about us judging the world and angels. However, there are a few passages that could be relevant.

Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:29-30 – Jesus said the apostles would judge the 12 tribes of Israel.
2 Timothy 2:12; Romans 5:17; Revelation 22:5 – Christians will reign with Christ.
Romans 8:17 – Christians will be joint heirs with Christ.
Daniel 7:22 (LXX) – "and he gave judgment to the saints of the Most High."

Upside-down: If we will judge the world in eternity, we shouldn't call on the world to judge us now. This is the basic problem in 1 Corinthians. The Christians were still thinking like the world and trusting the world's wisdom more than that of people who were following God's wisdom.

4. No less than six times in 1 Corinthians 6 Paul asks the rhetorical question, “Do you not know.” What are the things that Paul expected them to know?

v.2, Saints will judge the world.

v.3, Saints will judge angels.

v.9, The unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God.

v.15, Your bodies are members of Christ.

v.16, One who is joined to a harlot is one body with her.

v.19, Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

5. If judgment there must be, describe the process that Paul says they should implement instead of taking their grievances with each other to civil courts. Note that Paul gives a basic idea, but doesn't elaborate on the practical logistics of such an action.

Paul presents the option of the church designating someone in the church (e.g., church leaders) to judge, or possibly arbitrate, between members. This could even be some sort of an official arrangement in which the defrauded brother told his side of the story, the other brother told his, and the panel of brethren (or the one brother if more couldn't be found) would render a decision. Paul doesn't explain or give details as to how the proceeding should be organized and conducted, or how public it would be.

We might presume that the elders of the church could fill this role, but Paul never mentions the presence of elders in the Corinthian church. Not having or recognizing men qualified to be elders could explain part of the problem.

6. Who are the “least esteemed” (NIV: “of little account”)? Discuss the different meanings implied by these different translations of the second half of verse 4.

NKJV (v.4b): “do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge?”

NIV: “appoint as judges even men of little account in the church!”

- a. The “least esteemed” would be civil magistrates who were of no standing in the church. This assumes the phrase is a question (NKJV) and that Paul questions their practice of going to the civil courts.
- b. Or “men of little account” could be the lowliest, least competent members of the church, who would be better than non-Christians for the job. This assumes an imperative (NIV) by which he says that anyone in the church would be better qualified than the most competent non-Christians.

- 7. If cases such as dubious business dealings should be handled internally by the church, what should a modern-day church do in cases where the incriminating behavior is criminal, creates a danger to others (if repeated), or falls under mandatory reporting laws?**

Case in point: the Catholic Church has tried to deal internally with sexual predator priests. You could even argue that they have tried to follow the spirit of this passage by keeping the church's dirty linen "in house." Results have not been good, the number of victims has multiplied, and the cover-up has done as much or more harm to the reputation of the Catholic Church than the original crimes.

Might Paul's treatment of this "white collar crime" between Christians be treated one way (i.e., as outlined in this passage), while certain criminal cases would fall under the principles of Romans 13:1-5, and a modern-day church would turn such matters over to civil authorities?

- 8. The case of sexual immorality treated in chapter 5 was clearly an isolated case involving only one member of the church. (There were not several members living in adultery with their stepmothers.) Do you think the dishonesty in business dealings of chapter 6 involved only one instance, or might there have been several similar cases? What statements and language in the passage lead you to your conclusion?**

In chapter 5, Paul clearly singles out one man. Throughout 6:1-11, he uses more generic terminology that is not limited to a single person. See:

- v. 1, "any of you"
- v. 4, "judgments" (plural)
- v. 5, "judge between his brethren"
- v. 6, "brother goes to law against brother"
- v. 7, "against one another"
- v. 8, "you yourselves do wrong and defraud"
- v. 8, "to your brethren" (multiple victims)

If this was a widespread problem, that would explain somewhat the difficulty finding "even one" who could serve as judge.

- 9. Do you see anything in the problem-solving process of Acts 6:1-7 that is similar to, and could provide some precedent for, Paul's treatment of conflict resolution in the Corinthian church?**

Though not a fraudulent or criminal act, there was a problem in Acts 6 that the church dealt with internally. Church leaders (the apostles) appointed competent men (7 deacons) and charged them with implementing the solution to the problem.

1 Corinthians 6:7-8, Honesty & turning the other cheek

Failure, by some definitions, would mean suing (or being sued) and having the court find against you. For Paul, the mere act of suing a brother in civil court was a failure regardless of who won. Of course, cheating your brother in a business deal wasn't a winner either.

10. By what principles and priorities, and in what situations, can Paul say that it would be better to accept the wrong than to seek redress through civil courts? What are the 4 options described or implied that were available to the Corinthians, and place them in order by degree of Paul's preference.

The reputation of the church is of more value by spiritual criteria than the material gain of winning against a brother in court before unbelievers. Regardless of who won the trial, that Christians did such things to each other and couldn't correct it internally would seriously damage the example and influence of the church in the community. The well-being and reputation of the church are more important than money.

In order, best to worse:

1. No bad dealings against brothers in Christ (or against anyone else).
2. Plead before the church according to some agreed upon format.
3. Accept the wrong.
4. Go to civil authorities (this option is excluded by Paul).

11. Paul imagines the possibility of good-faith efforts at reconciliation or restitution by the defrauded brother reaching an impasse. In this case, he should "accept the wrong." What similarities and guidance can you see when comparing the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20 with what Paul proposes in 1 Corinthians 6:1-11?

"Telling it to the church" in Matthew is not necessarily the same as finding one or several brothers to judge in 1 Corinthians, but the two ideas are not exclusive, and there are some similarities of spirit and intent.

If the offender "refused to hear the church" (Matthew 18), or rejected the decision of the panel of arbitrators (1 Corinthians 6), the defrauded brother should let the matter drop as far as redress is concerned, but the option of severing close fellowship ("let him be as a sinner and a tax collector") would not be excluded by Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 6.

12. In what ways do Matthew 18:15-17, Acts 6:1-7; 1 Corinthians 5:4-5 and 1 Corinthians 6:1-6 reveal a Christian subculture that was to be distinct from the world around it.

All these passages see the church as a social subculture that does for itself much of what the world does for non-Christians. The church would handle disputes through internal mediation and/or discipline, much as it might handle welfare needs for its members (Acts 6).

Both the disciplinary assembly of 1 Cor 5 and the church “court” of 1 Cor 6 show the church acting as a society within society, with special gatherings and processes to deal with internal problems.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Power in the blood

Paul concludes his treatment of this particular problem by returning to a key theme of the letter. In Christ, Christians have been made into something they weren’t before – sanctified and forgiven children of God who are called to live in a community that is different from and distinct from the world. Being saved and added to the church brought more than mere blessings. It brought a new identity and people so identified shouldn’t live as they had under the old identity. Paul will return to this theme in 2 Corinthians 5:12-21 with his discussion of Christians being “a new creation.”

13. In what ways might the Corinthians deceive themselves in matters such as the one described in the preceding verses (6:1-8)?

1. Thinking that defrauding brethren (or other sins against brethren) was acceptable, tolerable, or untouchable behavior.
2. The church thinking that this behavior should be tolerated without the church taking a stand and thinking that it wouldn’t do additional harm to the church if tolerated. This thinking is similar to the hands-off approach in 5:6-7.

14. Much of Paul’s discussion deals with how the defrauded brother and the church should deal with such situations. What does Paul say to the dishonest brother? Does anything in this passage relate to the doctrine of “once saved – always saved”?

Much like the problem treated in chapter 5, in this letter Paul is primarily concerned with the actions of, and the impact on, the church. He says nothing directly to the dishonest members.

The sin of dishonest business dealings, whether condemned by the church or not, would keep the guilty party out of heaven. Actions prior to conversion were forgiven by the blood of Christ, but a return to such behavior could reverse the situation. There is no danger and no need for Paul to write this last paragraph if losing one’s salvation were not possible. And Paul doesn’t suggest that the guilty parties were not really “insiders” who, therefore, had no salvation to lose.

15. What fundamental and general theological truth underlies Paul's treatment of this situation? How does it build on the affirmations with which Paul opens the letter (1:2)?

This is not how sanctified people of God behave. The defrauding is incompatible with redemption. Giving the matter such importance that one would take a brother in Christ before secular courts is also incompatible with our sanctified condition whereby we anticipate receiving more in eternity than we could ever receive in a court-ordered settlement. More basically, this is not how Christians live; this is not how the church is to function; this is not how members of God's temple (dwelling place) treat each other.

16. In summary, should a Christian be so disinterested in material things that he remains passive when wronged?

Not necessarily. To have remained passive would have meant leaving the dishonest brother in his sin and leaving the sin in the church. Both this passage and Matthew 18:15ff allow (even encourage) actions aimed at redemption, repentance and reconciliation.