

THE CHRISTIAN AND THE COURTS
1 Corinthians 6:1-11
November 13, 2005 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

In one of his daily blogs this week, Al Mohler mentioned an ongoing battle between U.S. Ambassador Joseph Wilson and White House Deputy Chief of Staff Karl Rove. Appearing last week on CNN's *Larry King Live*, Amb. Wilson commented on his accusations that Rove leaked word that his wife, Valerie Plame, was a CIA operative, thus blowing her cover. Of interest for us this morning is the Wilson's statement taken from the show's transcript. It is his response to a question from a viewer as to why Rove did not use his wife's name in the accusation.

Now, I'm prepared to think the worst of Karl Rove ever since he told Chris Matthews that my wife was fair game. And that's tough for me because Karl and I go to the same church. We go to different services, we go to the same church. I know his wife's name because we get a church newsletter. So, why he wouldn't know my wife's name, perhaps he doesn't read the newsletter.

[<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0511/01/lkl.01.html>]

The fact that Wilson and Rove attend the same church has been verified by other sources, prompting Mohler to inquire:

Doesn't this raise a basic question for the Christian conscience? The Rove/Wilson/Plame controversy may have legal consequences. By now, it is clear that the controversy has political consequences. The investigators, political officials, and media outlets have their own agendas and their own concerns. Yet, the church must surely see this as a matter of *Gospel* concern.

After all, both Wilson and Rove have made public statements about their common participation in the life of a Christian congregation. The fact that they may attend different services does not alter this reality. They participate in the *same* church.

[<http://www.albertmohler.com/blog.php>]

That is Paul's central concern in our text this morning. Paul's argument in these verses is simple: *when a believer takes another believer to court rather than settling their disputes within the church, the Gospel is disgraced among unbelievers.*

I. Paul's Questions of Rebuke (6:1-8)

In the heat of a discussion, have you as parents ever reeled off a list of questions so fast that your child does not have time to answer? And even if they did have time, their answer is not satisfactory at the moment? Questions like: Who do you think you are? Whose house do you think this is? When did you become the decision maker in this house? Who do you think you're talking to? Any of these sound familiar? I know my children have never heard questions like that from me! As parents, we often ask these questions to prove a point, often in a right spirit, sometimes not.

Paul begins this section with an extensive list questions for these at Corinth. Although he does not ask in ranting anger, the tone of his questions suggests that he is not a happy camper. He exhibits a righteous anger in this instance because of the importance of the issue at stake, the

issue of believers suing other believers in public courts. How could these professing believers allow the world to judge these matters?

To get a sense of Paul's agitation, we need to understand a little more about the culture at Corinth. Right in the middle of any marketplace was what was known as the *bema seat*, the throne of judgment. It was the place to go to have the Roman proconsul settle your differences. The practice among the Jews was to take care of things themselves. It was an embarrassment for a Jew to go outside to get their differences adjudicated. What is interesting is this was the same thought among the Greeks and the Romans. It was embarrassing for them to have to go to the *bema*, Roman proconsul, to have their disputes settled. It was to admit defeat and showed that you lacked the wisdom to handle things on your own. Remember, wisdom was the key virtue in Greek thought. So again we see an issue that the church at Corinth had exceeded even the pagans in their practice.

Paul's questions of rebuke reveal four areas of Christian immaturity among those at Corinth.

1. Question of competence (vv. 1-3)

Paul's first questions suggest that these at Corinth had forgotten the competence they had as Christians to settle their own disputes. He begins by addressing the individuals that were involved in mishandling these disputes.

The Corinthians' willingness to sue one another in civil courts was inconceivable to Paul. He shows his unbelief by asking, **"Does any one of you... dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints?"** He wondered that a believer would actually bring a legal dispute before an unbeliever (one who had no interest for the church or in the church) instead of the church. We must be careful that we do not misunderstand Paul's astonishment. He understood that there are times when Christians have legitimate disagreements, disagreements that require mediation. What astounded him was that a believer would bring these matters, or **"cases,"** before an unbelieving judge.

This idea of "judgment" links to what we have seen previously regarding the adulterous man and the divisions at Corinth. Though they considered themselves to be wise (3:18-20), their wisdom merely led to divisions (3:21-22). Paul showed that the Corinthians, thinking themselves wise, truly lacked wisdom. This legal wrangling in public merely reinforced his argument. They judged when they should not have (4:5), and they failed to judge when they should have (5:3, 12; 6:1).

In vv. 2-3, Paul expands his argument and includes the entire church to show their incompetence. Paul had an uncanny way of meeting objections before they were voiced. Paul anticipates the objection the Corinthians might have that Christians were not competent to judge such matters. So Paul, with a bit of sarcasm, asks if they had forgotten two basic Christian beliefs.

"Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world?" The Corinthians should have known the answer to this question. We saw Daniel's vision in our study in Daniel 7 a few weeks ago, "I kept looking, and that horn was waging war with the saints and overpowering them until the Ancient of Days came *and judgment was passed in favor of the saints of the Highest One*, and the time arrived when the saints took possession of the kingdom" (Dan. 7:21-22). They had this Scripture and should have known this truth that the saints would judge the world. You might say, "Wait a minute, Pastor Todd. Isn't it possible they might have misinterpreted this as some do today? They may not have truly understood what it meant." Perhaps. But what about the words of Christ, "And Jesus said to them, 'Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in

the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30). These verses show the future role believers will have in ruling, and consequently judging, with Christ after He returns. Paul uses this to show that the church was not incompetent to judge these matters. While an individual may not be competent to judge in a given moment, the church as a whole should be able to make decisions corporately. They were “**competent to constitute the smallest law courts**” meaning they were competent to judge these trivial cases.

But Paul continues, “**Do you not know that we will judges angels?**” We see in Scripture that many angels fell from their ranks when they rebelled against God. The Scriptures attest to the fact that these fallen angels, with Satan at their head, await judgment. And who is it that will judge them? Given these truths, that men would judge the world and angels, Paul asks, “**How much more**” competent were they to judge “**matters of this life.**” While these matters might have appeared insufferable at present, on this earth, they were insignificant when compared to the final eternal judgment in which Christians will exercise this authority.

So we see Paul’s question of competence. The Corinthians were so enraptured by worldly wisdom that they had forgotten the wisdom they had received from Christ.

2. Question of respect (v. 4)

“**So if you have law courts dealing with matters of this life,** (this was happening) **do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church?**” There are two ways of interpreting Paul’s thought in v. 4, “**Do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church.**” He could mean that they should appoint men, even spiritually immature men “**of no account in the church,**” to judge these matters. This would be better than allowing an unbeliever outside the church to judge. Or he could again be showing his astonishment that they had appointed unbelievers as judges. Either way, they had bypassed the authority that God has established to render these judgments. In doing so they showed their disrespect for the authority granted them by God as the church.

Let’s go back to the end of chapter 5 for a moment. You remember in that chapter, Paul rebuked the church for not judging and consequently removing the adulterous man from their midst. His objection was that they had become so worldly that they did not even recognize outright, blatant sin. Their actions as a church reflected a conformity even beyond the sexual perversions of the culture. In that text, Paul reminded them that they were not to associate with such people in the church; those that called themselves Christians yet denied it by their lifestyle. They must judge those inside the church; God would judge those outside the church (5:13). Paul’s conclusion was that it was wrong for the church to judge the world but that they were irresponsible in not judging their own.

In chapter 6, Paul turns it around. Just as it is wrong for the church to judge the world, it is even more disastrous for the world to judge the church. It might seem that this text is out of place. It is squeezed in between the adulterous relationship in chapter 5 and sexual immorality in the verses that follow in vv 12-20. But Paul does this because he does not want these at Corinth to simply turn this man over to the *bema seat* and let those who have no concern for the church judge him. *They* were to deal with this and any other dispute in the church *in the church*. A failure to do so showed a lack of respect for God’s instituted authority of the church.

3. Question of discernment (vv. 5-6)

The situation has changed since 1 Cor. 4:16. In dealing with the misguided leadership at Corinth, Paul said, “I did not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved brethren.” Here, however, **“I say this to your shame” (v. 5)**. Again, the issue was their presumed wisdom. Paul’s sarcasm here is biting. “You mean to tell me that with all of this wisdom you do not have anyone who can judge these petty disputes?”

Paul then reveals two problems in v. 6. First, the Christians at Corinth appealed to the law to settle their disputes. Again, for Paul it was strange that these brothers would appeal to the law at all. Yet this was something that was happening continuously in at Corinth. Here is the problem. Where was the gospel in all of this? Where was grace and forgiveness between two brothers? Where was the love and unity that should be evident in the life of the church? Rather than appeal to Christ and the forgiveness he had shown them, they unwisely turned to human law, which falls short of the wisdom of the gospel.

But an even greater problem is that they did this **“before unbelievers.”** What did this do to their gospel witness? The gospel is at its very core a gospel of reconciliation. A true believer has been reconciled both to God and to the body of Christ. In other words, they are no longer enemies. The Corinthians were blowing their testimony with these unbelievers. By suing their brother in court, they were acting as if they were still enemies. How could they proclaim the reconciling love of the gospel when they denied it by their actions? Why would an unbeliever turn to the Corinthians gospel of reconciliation when they could not reconcile their own differences?

This is the climax. That there should be disputes about ‘ordinary matters’ is bad; that Christian should go to law with Christian is worse; that Christians should do this before unbelievers is worst of all. It is a scandal before the heathen world. [Robertson-Plummer, quoted by Geoffrey Wilson, *1 Corinthians*, 88]

4. Question of principle (vv. 7-8)

Hence Paul’s conclusion, **“Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you.”** It really didn’t matter whether or not the ruling was in their favor. They had blown their witness, shamed the gospel, and in the grand scheme of things, were defeated regardless. This leads Paul to ask a question, **“Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?”** These were evidently the leading trivial disputes among them. Paul’s question was a question of Christian principle. What did Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:38-40?

“You have heard that it was said, ‘AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.”

These at Corinth were not demonstrating this principle of Christian love in any way by suing their brother in public court. But it is even worse. They were hypocrites! They were guilty not only of failing to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39) and refusing to submit to lawsuits (Matt. 5:40), but we see in v. 8 that they were involved in the same things against their brothers. Do you see why Paul is so incensed with them? The testimony of Christ and Christ crucified was being made a mockery by the actions of these believers.

II. Paul's Words of Warning (6:9-11)

Now that Paul had their attention, he offers the sternest of warnings. And how does he do it? He goes to the gospel. Look what he does.

1. The ways of the unrighteous (vv. 9-10)

“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?” When I read the words **“inherit the kingdom of God”** the Beatitudes immediately come to mind:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great.” [Matt. 5:3-12]

It is rather obvious that these at Corinth were not demonstrating this spirit, the spirit that would inherit the kingdom. They were acting more like the unrighteous. And just in case they were not getting it, Paul reminds them of what an unrighteous man looks like.

1) Sins of sexual impurity (v. 9)

“Fornicators” refers to those who are involved in any kind of pre-marital or extra-marital sexual relations.

“Idolaters” is included here because it was one of the leading forms of sexual perversion in Corinth. These people either served other gods by their sexual acts or their sexual acts were their god. Regardless, it causes them to worship the creature rather than the Creator, which is idolatry.

“Adulterers” include those who are married and break the sanctity of that relationship sexually. **“Fornication”** refers to the act by one who is not married; **“adultery”** speaks of one within the bonds of marriage.

“Effeminate” here could refer to male prostitutes, those who gave themselves in pagan sexual religious rituals. But the more likely meaning is one who is passive, or allows, a same sex relationship.

“Homosexuals” then would refer to those who initiate this type of relationship; also known as “sodomites” from a description of the wicked men of Sodom in Genesis 19.

We can see that this culture had a very specific word for any type of sexual relation.

2) Sins against others (v. 10)

“Thieves” can be described by what we might call nickel-and-dimers today. Leon Morris calls them “petty pilferers” [*1 Corinthians*, 94].

“Covetous” simply means greedy; seeking to gain from others loss.

“Drunkards” certainly refers to the act of over gratification with alcohol. But it also refers to the damage done by such a person as this in familial and fraternal relationships.

“Revilers” describes a verbal abuse for the purpose of tearing someone down. It is also called “slander.”

“**Swindlers**” or “extortioners” are those who take unfair advantage of others for financial gain.

Paul had already given most of the sins in this list in chapter 5 in describing those outside the church. Here is warning is clear, “**Do not be deceived.**” They should take great care that they were truly in the faith. They were not evidencing a life a faith by their actions.

2. The contrast of the righteous (v. 11)

“**Such were some of you; BUT...**” Does this sound familiar? Look with me at Eph. 2:1-10. This is what Paul is trying to get them to see. If they truly were in Christ, it was high time they began to demonstrate it, both individually and corporately.

1) A description of their salvation – Regenerated, sanctified, and justified

“**You were washed**” refers to the work of regeneration. Titus speaks of the “washing of regeneration” in Titus 3:5. It is what the Bible means, and what we mean, when we use the phrase “born again.” When Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be “born again” He was saying that Nicodemus must be regenerated to see the kingdom of God. It is God’s work in changing the hard, obstinate, rebellious heart of a man by implanting a new desire, a new affection, a new longing for spiritual things. Regeneration is a new birth from spiritual death to spiritual life of which repentance of sin and faith in Christ is the fruit. Notice that regeneration must precede repentance and faith. Dead men can’t exercise anything, much less repentance and faith.

Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of God's grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. It is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith are inseparable experiences of grace. [2000 *Baptist Faith & Message*, IV.A]

“**You were sanctified**” refers to God’s setting apart for holiness. When a dead sinner receives life from God, he is set aside for His purposes.

“**You were justified**” means they had been declared righteous by God based on the work of Christ’s atonement on their behalf. The saved sinner is guiltless before God and stands clean based on the merits of Christ on His behalf.

2) The working of their salvation – “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit of our God.”

Trinitarian work in salvation – The Father, by His grace and for His glory, *initiating* salvation; the Son Jesus Christ, by His grace and for His glory, *accomplishing* salvation for those who the Father had chosen for Himself by His coming to this earth, living a perfect life without sin, and bearing the sins of those for whom He dies and procuring righteousness for them at the cross; the Spirit *applying* the work of salvation by the work of regeneration.

To whom much is given, much is required.

Application:

- 1. Paul is not condemning seeking legal advice**
- 2. Paul is not condemning a believer taking an unbeliever to court**
- 3. Paul is condemning a believer taking a believer to court – Christians testimony before the lost; lack of reconciliation**

As it is not to be imagined that the fornicator and the blasphemer can partake of the sacred Table, so it is impossible that he who has an enemy, and bears malice, can enjoy the holy Communion.... I forewarn, and testify, and proclaim this with a voice that all may hear! "Let no one who hath an enemy draw near the sacred Table, or receive the Lord's Body! Let no one who draws near have an enemy! Do you have an enemy? Draw not near! Do you wish to draw near? Be reconciled, and then draw near, and touch the Holy Thing!" We are commanded to have only one enemy, the devil. With him never be reconciled! But with a brother, never be at enmity in thy heart. [*John Chrysostom, Homily 20*]