

**"When Rights Conflict"**  
(Unity)  
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**I Cor 6:1-11**  
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I read recently of a young Christian woman who decided for several reasons that she needed to give her yet unborn baby up for adoption.

A Christian couple desiring a child by adoption contacted the young woman and made arrangements legal and otherwise to receive the baby immediately after its birth.

In the conversations with lawyers and others, the young woman thought she had a year to change her mind.

After the baby had been in her new home for seven months, the birth-mother, whose circumstances were then very different than earlier, decided that she wanted her baby.

What she discovered was that she didn't have a year to make a decision but she had only six months and the time had elapsed.

At that point you can imagine there was a clear conflict of interests and even an assumed conflict of rights.

Neither the adoptive parents nor the mother wanted to give up the child.

They were all Christians.  
What do Christian people do in such a situation?

Imagine you worked for a Christian business man at a lower rate of pay for a year with the promise that when the task, on which you were working, was completed you would receive a bonus of several thousand dollars.

Now imagine that the task is finished, but the promise is forgotten and you lose all the money you have been counting on.

What do Christian people do in such a situation?

Last I want you to imagine that you have loaned a very expensive tool or appliance to a Christian friend.

Months go by and he or she doesn't return it.  
Finally you ask them about it and they say they already returned it months ago.

You know that is not the case but what do you do?

We live in a litigious society.

Almost every day we hear about someone suing someone else. How many millions was it that a lady was awarded in a suit against MacDonalds? And all because she burned herself with the coffee she ordered.

A few years ago the city of Albuquerque, N.M. was studied and it was discovered that there were in one year over 30,000 lawsuits - or one for every three adults in the city.

And that in a city where 60% of the population claimed to be Christian.

Christians spent over \$20 million in legal fees that year in that county. (Buzzard and Eck Tell it to the Church)

In this whole country there are over 22,000 lawsuits a day. 20 times higher per capita than Japan.

Apparently the city of Corinth, in ancient Greece, was also filled with people who thought law suits were a way of life.

When there was a dispute between people there was a system of arbitration where three people were to help determine the matter.

If they were unsuccessful and the amount disputed was under \$200 then a jury of 201 men would decide the issue.

If the amount disputed was over \$200 then a jury of 401 men would decide and in large disputes it was common for juries of 1000-6000 to make final judgment.

It is written that the Greeks were notorious for their love of going to law. It would seem that every man over 30 would have had many occasions to be involved in the legal process.

Some of those same Greeks were becoming Christians and becoming part of the church.

But not every aspect of their past way of life dropped off immediately upon their becoming a Christ-follower.

Some of their old practices and ways of thinking were still with them and they still went to legal war with each other whenever they felt their rights had been violated.

What might that look like in churches today?

Tom and Jane, a Christian couple and leaders in their church decided they needed to add two rooms to their house.

They contacted, George, a Christian man in the church who was a contractor specializing in remodeling.

The plans were worked out, the cost was agreed on, the money was borrowed and put in escrow and George went to work.

Everyone involved saw it coming but it wasn't until the final bills were presented for payment that it became fully apparent how much more the project cost than had been anticipated.

The way the escrow account was set up, George got his money and Tom and Jane were left with an outstanding bill several thousand more than they could afford.

When Tom came home with the news, he couldn't help but be angry - feeling that George had abused their friendship and had made decisions he had no right to make which cost them more money.

When Tom called George on it, George said he was sorry Tom felt that way but there was nothing George could do about it now - the money was spent.

Tom was so angry he couldn't keep quiet about it and so he told a couple of close friends what George had done to him.

He also wrote a letter to George spelling out his complaint.

Again George answered but a little less friendly than the last time and told Tom there was nothing to be done about it.

This time after talking to more friends about it, Tom sent George a letter threatening a lawsuit if George didn't absorb at least some of the extra cost.

This time George didn't even answer.

Tom got a lawyer who sent the next letter and then George got one who answered - They were headed for court.

In I Corinthians 6 we find that this same kind of thing was going on:

V 1 "If any of you has a dispute with another"

In context a "dispute" means a legal complaint.

When we come to V 6 we find evidence that the disputes were about property, possessions, money.

The word "cheated" or "defrauded" has to do with being deprived of something that is yours.

These Corinthians didn't sit in church all day long anymore than any of us do. They had jobs and businesses, and they bought and sold things like any other people.

And in their dealings with each other there were times when disputes arose - disputes that had to do with money.

And when they had disputes they hauled each other into court.

What we will discover in Chapter Six is God's attitude toward Christians fighting with each other.

Through the Apostle Paul, God will give his people in Corinth and also us a different perspective on what comes so naturally in their culture and ours - a willingness to fight with each other especially over money or other of our possessions or rights.

In the first six verses Paul uses some fairly strong language to express his dismay at their conduct and their attitudes toward each other.

V 1 "If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment?"

Now if any of you can remember your father saying something like, "How dare you speak to your mother like that!", then you know something of this question by Paul.

This isn't really a question - it is a statement - "You should not dare to do such a thing!"

What are they doing that so flabbergasts or disappoints Paul?

They are taking each other to court in front of the ungodly.

They were going to non-Christian civil courts to make their complaints and attempt to get what they wanted.

Look at V 4.

I think the editors of the NIV Bible made a poor "judgment" call when they picked the translation you find in this verse instead of the one you find in the marginal notes.

When there is good textual support for more than one way of translating a particular phrase in the Bible, good editors will note the other options. They have done that here.

And the translation in the margin is like the translation in the New American Standard Bible translation.

So that verse 4 would read as a question: "Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, do you appoint as judges men of little account in the church?"

Or maybe to help us see the meaning even more clearly, "when you have disputes, do you select as your judges men, who have no standing in the church - unbelievers?"

I suggest that in keeping with the context Paul again points out his amazement that believers would take their disputes to unbelievers to settle.

Look at V 6.

Here Paul exclaims the same amazement once again:

"But instead, one brother goes to law against another - and this in front of unbelievers!"

What bothers Paul so much? That they are taking each other to civil court, to unbelievers to settle their disputes.

Why does Paul react so strongly to that?

What else are they supposed to do?

After all, Christians have rights to, don't they?

What are you supposed to do when another Christian rips you off?

Why does Paul react so strongly?

I think one of the objections Paul has to them going to civil courts to settle their disputes with one another is implied here.

In Chapter Three Paul had reminded the Christians that they are God's temple here on earth.

Just as in the Old Testament, so in the New, the Temple is the place God has chosen to dwell to reveal himself to the world.

Since Christ came, God has chosen to take up residence in his people - we are the presence of God in our work places, neighborhoods and schools.

Paul had written to Titus to instruct believers to act in such a way as to "make the teaching about God our Savior attractive."

To the Thessalonians he had said, live "so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders."

Jesus said, "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you love one another."

When these Christians hauled each other into court and said the kinds of things about each other outside of court that they did, their reflection of God's presence, and grace was obliterated - their testimony was shot!

It was nearly six years ago but the damage to the Christian church in America was great when two high-profile ministers went to civil court and to the popular press to sue each other.

Jimmy Swaggart and his long-time associate Robert Gormann filed suits against each other totaling over \$100 million.

The media and the public loved it - scandal, fighting among Christians.

Through it all the name of Christ got mixed into the same money-grubbing, greedy shenanigans as the names of Charles Keating and Michael Boesky.

But the damage to any testimony about Christ that Swaggart and Gormann could do on a wide scale we each do on a limited but nonetheless devastating scale when brothers or sisters in Christ fight with each other.

Paul is not suggesting there be a cover-up of disputes but that we handle them very differently.

Why does Paul react so strongly to Christians going to civil court against each other?

Because when Christians fight their testimony is compromised before a watching world.

But there is another reason why Paul is so disgusted that they fight with each other in civil court.

This one is explicitly expressed in these first 6 verses:

After Paul, says, "How dare you take your disputes before the ungodly" he gives an explanation by asking more questions.

V 2 "Do you not know?"

V 3 "Do you not know?"

And both times he appeals to the same idea.

V 2: Don't you know that Christians will judge the world?

V 3: Don't you know that Christians will even judge angels?

According to Jesus in Matthew 28 (following on the prophecy of Daniel 7) those who are God's people will somehow be involved in the final judgment of the unbelieving world and even in the judgment of angels when Christ comes again.

Look at his argument: both times he argues from the greater to the lesser.  
If you will do the greater then surely you should do the lesser.

If you will judge the world and angels (the greater) then surely you can make judgments about "trivial cases" (v 2) about "things of this life" (v 3) (the lesser).

Do you remember back in chapter 2 Paul said, "The person without the Spirit of God does not accept the things that come from God, for those things are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them because those things are spiritually understood?"

Conversely, the person with the Spirit of God, the Christian, has a God-given perspective on life and death, on what is truly important in life, on what values have highest priority.

The Christian has the capacity to truly think differently about life - we can see the value of self-sacrifice,  
the value of not retaliating against someone who harms us,  
the value of unity even more than money, etc.

I think the logic then goes something like this:

If you Christians have the Spirit of God living in you and you Christians are the ones who have a God-given perspective on truth, on life, on what is important, and you are the ones who will thus be involved with Christ in finally judging the whole world and even angels then how can you imagine that you can get good judgments by submitting your disputes to unbelievers.

They don't have the right perspective.

For example judges who don't follow Jesus will think most in terms of win or lose.  
Such judges will not think in terms of the impact their decisions will have on the Kingdom of God.

Such judges will not think in terms of Christian self-sacrifice, Christian unity and Christian testimony and so on.

Paul is not saying all civil courts are wrong or unnecessary.

In Romans 13 and elsewhere he makes it clear that there is a place, a good place for civil government.

But he is saying that when Christians have disputes how can they possibly go to non-Christians to get a decision when those non-Christian judges won't and can't take into account the greater values of the Kingdom of God in their decisions.

If all you want is a decision based on legal "rights" then I suppose the civil courts are o.k. but Christians are concerned with matters far beyond "rights" - aren't they?

I ask that somewhat sarcastic question because Paul does something similar in verse 5: "Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?"

Remember these were the Christians who were claiming to be very spiritually wise, very mature.

Paul somewhat sarcastically points out they are not as wise as they claim or they wouldn't be taking their disputes to civil courts.

So for two reasons they should not be taking their disputes before unbelievers: One, their quarreling between themselves ruins their testimony and two, unbelievers cannot give the kind of judgments that need to be given - judgments that take into consideration the issues of being a Christ-follower.

But Paul is not only disgusted that they are willing to take their disputes to unbelieving courts but beginning in V 7 he expresses his disgust that they are fighting with each other at all.

Look at v. 7 "The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already."

The far greater issue for Paul is not that you go to court before unbelievers but that you go to court at all.

Yes, there may be times when you need arbitration led by godly people of the church but the very fact that you get so far as to need that arbitration means there is a failure already.

The principle is that God's people should be concerned about the Kingdom of God, about the greater issues of life, and about the unity of Christians. God's people should have the same objectives in mind so much that they settle potential disputes without ever going to court, without ever being in an adversarial position.

The response of most of us is that that is unrealistic!

It's not as unrealistic as we think if our perspective was different.  
And I believe that is what Paul is getting at here.

Paul gets right to the heart of it when he asks the hard questions:  
"Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?"

Why wouldn't you rather be cheated out of your money than jeopardize your relationship to another Christian and jeopardize your testimony before unbelievers? Why not rather be cheated?

We respond: "Why not, indeed". I'll tell you why not Paul.

Because you don't know what he did to me.

Because he took my money.

Because they can't get away with that.

Because you don't know what that will do to my financial security?

Because I have my rights too.

"Why not rather be cheated." What kind of nonsense is that?

When we ask those questions it reflects something of our value system.

It gives some indication of how important our possessions and our rights are to us.

They have become more important to us than the church - the unity of believers, more important than Christ's reputation.

Do you remember back in verse 2 when Paul referred to their lawsuits as "trivial" matters.

What was he saying?

Compared to the weighty matters of being God's person, of being God's representative in your world, losing some money, losing face, losing some of your possessions, are trivial.

16 years ago a man outside of our church gave a gift of \$11,000 to the church asking that \$10,000 go to the general fund and \$1,000 to the Senior Pastor - me.

I wouldn't have known except the man sent the check and the instructions to me.

That had been this man's practice for several years before I came to the church.

The church would give the gift to the pastor and the pastor would pay taxes on it.

That particular year, one of the Trustees decided that shouldn't happen.

Even though it was perfectly legal and it had been going on for some years, he didn't think the pastor should get a gift like that.

And so he sent it back to the donor who never said another word about it but did not give any money to the church for several years after that.

I was disappointed. No, I was angry.  
I felt I had been cheated.

Whether I had been cheated or not is not the issue at all.  
What is the issue is the way I handled that dispute.

No, I didn't take the man to court.  
No, I didn't split the church over it.  
No, I didn't plot to get the man off the finance committee.

I'd like to tell you, that was because I understood this principle in I Cor 6. But more likely it was because I knew I didn't have the power to win.

Instead I was greatly tempted to sulk about it.  
Further I was greatly tempted to talk to close friends about how I had been cheated.  
Further I was greatly tempted to tell those who asked who it was that had done this injustice to me.

Further I was willing to hurt his reputation by telling about the situation only from my perspective.  
I don't remember but I suspect I treated that man differently from that time on.  
And all for money.

I nearly allowed \$1,000 to separate me from a brother.

I think Paul is saying, some of the Corinthians valued the things of this life (money, position, prestige, possessions) more than they valued the unity of the church, more than they valued the reputation of Christ.

In verse 8 Paul says how defeated some of them already were:  
You've gone so far, Paul writes, that you would not only not allow yourself to be disadvantaged but you would even cheat and do wrong to others, and even to your own Christian brothers.

In verses 9 and 10 Paul says let me tell you what that kind of attitude looks like:  
READ 9-10.

Notice that greedy people are put in the same list with adulterers and homosexual offenders.

Paul writes that when we allow the things of this world, the money, the possessions to be more important to us than the Kingdom of God we look just like what we used to be.

And there is a warning here:

If your life is characterized by that kind of behavior, by those attitudes of greed and self-interest then there is reason to doubt whether you truly are a follower of Christ.

But Paul ends his warning with a positive call:

Verse 11 READ

That is what you were but you are different now - you are indwelled by the Spirit of God, you do have a different perspective - so live like it.

What did Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount?

"If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak also."

"But," someone objects, "that doesn't tell me what to do when I've been cheated!"

Yes, it does, we just don't like the answer.

We have a higher calling than just exercising our "rights", than just keeping our possessions.

When it comes to following Jesus, Paul says, I'd rather be cheated than participate in cheating another.

I'd rather be cheated than contribute to a division between me and my brother or sister in the Lord.

I'd rather be cheated than contribute to the cheapening of our testimony about a saving, transforming God.

I began by asking what do Christians do when their rights conflict?

What about the parents of that adopted baby?

What about the man who lost thousands of dollars in an unfilled promise?

What about the couple who paid so much more for a house than they should have?

How are such conflicts resolved?

God says the resolution begins with a change of attitude, a remembering of the values by which we now live.

We are a new people, God's people,  
living by a different standard,  
living with new priorities,  
living with different values -

And a relationship with God, with other Christians and even unbelievers is  
far more important to us than our rights or our money.